

The Ultimate Character Questionnaire

One of the first things our Writing a Novel students look at is character. In this character checklist, you'll go beyond the surface and into the kind of character detail that will enrich your story and keep a reader gripped.

First, head inwards

As Richard Skinner, Director of our Fiction Programme, says, when it comes to creating a character, ‘one ruse is to start from the “outside in”’. You can begin by listing the simplest biographical details of your character – age, date and place of birth, occupation. Their height, their distinguishing features. But as you explore the further details that come from these basic facts – their daily routine, their personal relationships, their views – your character will take on a new dimension.

So:

What’s their star sign? Do they care?

Did they vote in the last election? Who for?

What’s their most visited website?

What do they eat for breakfast?

What would they choose for their last meal?

What is the one thing that can happen in the morning to make your character's day? And what's the one thing that can ruin it?

What do they buy/do if they want to treat themselves at the end of a hard day?

What's their favourite song? Film? Book?

*Who is the first person they would call if they received good news?
And what about if the news was bad?*

*Who was the last person they had an argument with?
What was it about?*

Who are they most jealous of?

Who would they list as their 'In Case of Emergency' contact?

Now look back

When explaining object relations theory, the tutor on our Getting Into Character course, psychotherapist Arabel Charlaff, describes an internal relational map that we all develop as a child in order to navigate the world and how we understand it; how to behave and what to expect from others around us. This internal map and the ‘objects’ we base our relationships on – a supportive mother or an unreliable friend for example – will depend entirely on our early experiences and will not always reflect the world as we actually find it.

No matter where your character is in their life when your novel opens – or how much of their backstory you intend to share with the reader – it’s important that you understand how their experiences before this point have shaped them as a person.

What is your character’s earliest memory?

What was their favourite toy as a child?

Who was their hero when they were young?

And who is it now?

If your character was asked to describe their family life in three words, what would they choose?

Who was their best friend as a child? Did that change?

When is the first time they can remember feeling that someone had let them down?

When is the first time they can remember feeling that someone had protected them from harm?

When is the first time they can remember feeling that someone was proud of them?

Who was their first romantic love?

*When looking for a partner, would they say they have a type?
What is it?*

Time to play a game of ‘What Would Your Character Do?’

Your character finds a fifty pound note on the floor outside a train station. What do they do with it?

They’re the first person on the scene of an accident; how do they react?

They witness someone shoplifting in a major supermarket – do they take action?

They overhear gossip about someone they work with; gossip that could have potentially negative consequences for that colleague – and possibly positive ones for themselves. Do they make use of it?

They're overlooked for a promotion – how do they react?

Their significant other admits to having feelings for someone else; what's the first thing they do?

They wake up to discover that for some reason – trains cancelled because of snow; a flood in the office; a power-cut across the city – they can't go to work or run the errands they'd planned today. What do they do with their unexpected day off?

They help a witch or wizard in trouble and are granted a single wish in return. What would they choose?

The same witch has an alternative offer: your character has the chance to experience a single day from their past again. Which day would they pick?

Let desire drive – and head for change

Our helpful magical friend has brought us to an important point: desire. Or, as Richard puts it, ‘the difference between what a character has and what they want.’ Think about what motivates your character, what you’d describe as their goals. While you can use outside forces to drive your plot – the things that happen to your character – the things they want will always form the most compelling engine for a narrative, especially if it’s difficult for them to achieve that goal.

When your character was a child, what did they say they wanted to be when they grew up?

What is the best present they’ve ever received?

What is their darkest secret? The one they'd most hate someone to find out?

Would they rather be rich or happy – and what does either term mean to them?

What is their worst nightmare?

If they won a million pounds, what's the first thing they'd do with the money?

And if they won a hundred?

Where in the world would they live if they had no commitments and an unlimited budget?

Where do they see themselves in one year? Five? Ten?

If you asked them today what the most important thing in their life is, what would they say? Would the answer have been different if you'd asked them a year ago?

What next?

Beginning your novel, you should know who your character is, and how that relates to who they have been. You should understand what drives them and why they behave the way they do. The important thing to consider now is who they will be when you leave them – because that's really the most interesting journey to take your reader on.

Want more tools, structure and support to help you complete your novel?

Our flagship [Writing a Novel](#) course returns this autumn.

To find out more [visit the website](#). The deadline for applications is 4th September*.

*Online/Daytime course application deadline is 11th September.

About the course

[Writing a Novel](#) is Faber Academy's flagship course, with over 150 of our alumni going on to secure publication deals. With a London and online version available, the course offers a practical alternative to a creative writing MA and has helped authors such as S J Watson, Rachel Joyce, Gail Honeyman, Alice Feeney and Joanna Cannon launch their careers.
