

Mike's Fiction©

Give Your Characters Some Character

Some writers claim to have an intuitive sense of the characters they employ in stories—that they always know what the character will do or say in a given situation. Not me. I have to create a document before I start writing that physically describes each major character and, more importantly, lists their key personality attributes and their



background. We will call this the character profile. I refer to this document while writing the story to ensure I am enabling the reader to be aware of pertinent facts about a character and that the character acts in ways consistent with his profile. In fact, since I also use an outline for each scene, I try to work these things in at that stage of the process.

To get the most out of this segment of my tutorial, I suggest you read my story, *Wading in Brooklyn*. Here is an excerpt from the character profiles I used for Marvin, the protagonist, and Jacob, his friend:

Physical description - Marvin's age is mid-70s; height is about 5' 8"; weight is 155 lbs with skinny legs and a paunch

Background – a widower; retired from a brake shoe company; has a daughter who has moved to L.A. who sends a Christmas card

Nuances – a trusting sort; curious about what he sees; follows rather than leads; easily influenced; caring about people; tends to idolize those he admires; likes to be around people and tends to live through them

Physical description – Jacob's age is late sixties; height is 6'; weight is 170; face is long and square; picture of good health

Background – never married; reputation as a ladies man, retired now; was an office manager for a telemarketing firm

Nuances – likes to talk, especially wax philosophical and give advice; is frugal; an excellent chess player; smart and observant; likes to dominate the scene; a careful dresser

I have read short stories that don't physically describe the major characters, and that bugs me. In order to bring a character to life, I believe that the reader should have some idea of what he looks like. Don't overdue it; just a snippet generally will do, and it does not have to be placed at the beginning of the story. Let the reader use his imagination to fill in the blanks. Work in the description unobtrusively; make it a part of the story's action and not a stand-alone segment. Well into *Wading in Brooklyn*, I worked in this brief description of Marvin into an action sequence of an encounter with an older woman:

She turns to Marvin, who feels the heat of Jacob's glare, and stands too, but slowly, giving his not-so-limber five-foot-nine frame plenty of warning.

By this point in the story, the other character, Jacob, has already been described and it is clear that both Marvin and Jacob are older gentlemen. So it is not necessary to cite his specific age. The brief description tells the reader that Marvin is short and that his body is showing its age. Earlier, on the same page, I found an opportunity to note that Marvin had gray hair.

The first paragraph below is a portion of the description of Jacob on page one following some dialogue spoken by Jacob, and the second and third paragraphs appear further into the story:

“His long, thin face never flinches, and without lifting his eyes from the chessboard, he flings the rubber ball backhand to the street.

“But that’s what dedication is—work. You gotta work at something to be good at it. Take women, for example. Do you think they’re just naturally attracted to me?”

Marvin eyes Jacob’s pressed blue shirt and his full head of white hair. Even at eighty-two, he fits the part of the lifelong bachelor.

Note that I changed my mind as I wrote and made Jacob substantially older than I indicated in his character profile. Also, note that these descriptions are brief and integrated into the story; in the first case, as part of an action, and in the second, into dialogue.

If a character’s background or “back story” is relevant to the story, as it often is, you need to find a way to inform the reader while integrating the information seamlessly into the story flow. Don’t make the mistake of placing the back story at the very beginning. It is a misguided notion that the reader must know everything in a linear fashion. If you do that, your story will read “clunky” and the reader will recognize it as amateurish writing. In *Wading in Brooklyn*, some of Marvin’s background story is necessary to show his personality. On the bottom third of page two and continuing on the following page is a dialogue between Marvin and Jacob about a past girlfriend of Marvin’s. This dialogue provides a hint of Marvin’s tendency to hero worship, then become disillusioned. On page five, there is another segment where Marvin is so taken with Jacob that he wonders whether he should share his experiences with his father as a child, which chronicles another instance of hero worship and disillusionment. As you read these two examples, I hope you agree they are set up seamlessly and the reader would not be conscious of the fact he was being “educated” about Marvin.



The third paragraph of page four is more back story, mostly of Jacob. It takes the form of Marvin thinking after being prompted by something Jacob said. The reader learns that Jacob was a successful entrepreneur, which Marvin greatly admires, particularly in comparison to his own working life spent in a brake shoe factory. This is another case in which I changed Jacob’s back story concerning his career from a manager to an entrepreneur. I felt it better suited his “hero” role in the story. Again, this segment is

worked seamlessly into the flow of the story. Dialogues can be very useful ways to convey information the reader needs to know while disguising the process.

I believe that the physical description of the major characters and their back stories are fairly easily executed dimensions of character development. The harder part is to show their personalities as part of the story. (Notice I use the term ‘show’ and not ‘tell’.) This takes more thought, because you are not simply informing the reader of some fact or memory, but asking the reader to interpret something a character does or says in the story. In Marvin’s case, the uncertain way he plays chess leads the reader to conclude he is not a leader, nor decisive. The story provides more than one instance where Marvin admires Jacob, and as the story unfolds, the process intensifies. In fact, I may have been a bit heavy-handed in showing Marvin’s tendency toward hero worship.



Sometimes omission can inform the reader about a character. The fact that Marvin never reflects on anything positive he accomplished in his own life shows the reader that he lives more through other people than himself.

Jacob’s self-confidence is in evidence from the beginning of the story when he doesn’t hesitate to throw the errant ball back into the street. His tendency to dominate and wax philosophical is also well demonstrated as he gives Marvin advice on everything from his chess game to his love life, and in particular, on page four, where he offers a key insight about the pitfalls of hero worship (which, ironically, Marvin fails to relate to himself). And, of course, the reader learns that Jacob is not perfect, as he refuses to talk to the boy that Joey Beans mistreated.

Some stories are plot-driven, like *Pigs Get Fed*, and others are more about the characters themselves, like *Wading in Brooklyn*, where the plot is subservient in its simplicity. In the latter case, character development becomes the most important element of the story.

A way of thinking about character development is to break it down to four key components: First, the physical characteristics of the character; second, the elements of a back story you will need to show who a character is; third, a list of the predominant personality traits of the character (good and bad); and fourth, this information must appear in the story seamlessly and unobtrusively as a natural part of the story flow. Of the four components, the fourth is clearly the most challenging.

The first three components of character development are put together before you write the story. If you are like me, you will list more information than will actually be needed in the story. Use your judgment as you write as to what is important to show and what is not. Most of the time, less is better and makes for a faster, less ponderous story. And finally, never be afraid to change your mind concerning a character trait or some other element of a character. The process of writing invariably brings clarity.