CREATING CINEMATIC CHARACTERS

Presenter:
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What Is Character?

While it seems intimidating, creating an unforgettable character begins with understanding what “character” means. Webster’s Dictionary defines character as “the aggregate of features and traits that form the individual nature of some person or thing.” However, this definition misses many key elements.

Historical period, professional occupation, world location, and cultural context also play a major role with influencing a particular character’s way of thinking, his/her speech patterns, and how he/she applies principles, ethics, or feelings. Audiences want to see a character whose actions reflect qualities, which they want to see in themselves.

On the flip side, a perfect character bores an audience. Without weaknesses, characters cease to be interesting. In terms of a character’s personality core, imperfection breeds perfection. When flaws, paradoxes, ironies, and hypocrisies juxtapose values, morals, and philosophies, then a complete character begins to materialize. All the while specific emotions, attitudes, and quirks set the character apart.

But a truly great character displays more than just a writer’s concrete understanding of that character’s physiology, sociology, and psychology. Strong characters have clear wants and/or objectives as well as substantial obstacles to stand in their way.

A character that has a goal and fights to achieve it compels the audience. Whether that personality is a serial killer or rock star, they must have a journey.

Edward Scissorhands wants to be loved, but he has knives for hands. Dorothy Gale wants to go back to Kansas, but she’s trapped in the “Merry Old Land of Oz.” And then there’s Nemo, he’s a fish, but the audience wants nothing more than to watch him make his way home.
Compelling Characters

A good story is driven by its characters. But if your characters are not compelling, the audience simply won’t care if a character achieves his or her objectives: destroying the Death Star, becoming a real boy, getting back to Kansas.

In order for us to care about a character, the writer must create a compelling character for whom we will hope and fear. This is accomplished essentially two ways:

(1) First, the character must have a clear GOAL; this is his or her objective, and depending upon whether the character is a protagonist or antagonist, we will hope/fear they accomplish the objective and hope/fear they will fail.

(2) Second, LIKABILITY becomes a key ingredient. When we like a character, we naturally begin to hope and fear for them. However, when a character is not likable, which is often the case with anti-heroes and villains, we at least need to be able to sympathize and/or empathize with them along the way.
When a heroic protagonist is created, he/she is usually likable from the beginning. In most genres, the hero who fights for good is introduced with charm, appeal, or magnetism. Moreover, if a character is likeable, sympathy and empathy follow close behind. However, when a character is not likeable, such is the case with anti-heroes or villains, empathy and sympathy are created in other ways.

Sympathy can occur when something awful happens, and it’s out of the character’s control. For example, if a young street thug robs a store and runs out only to be hit by a car, we will probably feel sorry for his injuries, despite his act of thievery.

Empathy, however, goes deeper by incorporating the audiences’ understanding.

In Monster, Charlize Theron’s character, Aileen, is a serial killing prostitute. She’s about as unlikable as they come. But when we learn of her past, and the horrendous rape and abuse she endured, we empathize with her situation. It doesn’t mean we condone her acts or feel pity for her, but at least we can fathom why she might commit such awful crimes.
Goals and Objectives

Caring for a character means nothing unless that character has a goal. We don’t care that she walks in a room, talks to a neighbor, or washes the dishes unless those actions affect her in achieving the objectives towards her goal.

If she is fighting to gain custody of her son, we will care that she washes the dishes because she needs to impress the custody lawyer, who is coming over for dinner.

Remember, creating a likable character who has a clear goal means nothing unless we hope and fear for them. If the protagonist is able to capture the audiences’ empathy, sympathy, and has an interesting journey to take us on, hope and fear will follow.

Forrest Gump is charming and kind (likability), has no control over his handicaps (sympathy) and his actions are forgiven by his innocence (empathy). He wants to win Jenny’s heart, and we both hope she will return his love yet fear that she won’t. And this audience connection takes place because we care about Forrest.
The Character Iceberg

Only a small part of an iceberg actually rises above water level; the rest is an unseen mountain below.

And when it comes to creating characters, the iceberg metaphor is no different. The tip of the “Character Iceberg” is what the audience sees and hears, but the abyss beneath is what the writer knows. And understanding this mass of ice under the surface water is exactly what makes for a complex and memorable character; dialogue and action should only hint to the subtext of the larger personality core within.

Take, for example, the following personality trait: the audience sees that the protagonist has obsessive compulsive tendencies as they watch her open, use, and discard a new toothbrush every morning, but the writer knows that her OCD stems from a deep seeded need for control, which was planted as a child when her parents forced her to scrub the family toilet with a toothbrush before breakfast.
Asking Questions

Developing an iceberg for a character begins with asking questions. Imagine a guy who plans to rob a bank. There are obvious questions to answer in order to develop the story.

*Why does he want to rob the bank?*; *Who will help him?*; *How will he plan the robbery?*; *What will he do with the money?*

All of those things, though, the audience will eventually see (the tip of the iceberg). Back story questions for the writer that will help develop a complex character could include:

*What was his upbringing like?*; *How did his father treat him?*; *Did he have a father?*; *Has he stolen before?*; *What is his past with the law?*; *Does he respect authority?*

The answers to all of these inquiries (the body of the iceberg) will produce a character with consistent actions that are motivated, and therefore make sense to the audience.

The audience sees the result, but not always the effect.
Revealing Information

Often, however, the effect or information regarding a character is revealed discreetly, and through a small action or reaction.

In *Almost Famous*, Penny Lane (Kate Hudson) rushes into the hotel room where Stillwater is partying. She recites a flight attendant introduction verbatim, adding a few French words here and there.

This tells us a lot. She has probably flown many times in her life and possibly to France. Only the writer really knows her exact airplane history, but what we can take from it is that she travels frequently… perhaps to get away from home.
Know Your Character

In the end, you must know your characters – down to their iceberg cores (back story, psychology, and personality) – because fleshed out characters won’t let you force them into implausible situations or unbelievable dialogue.

If you answer a myriad of questions, from something as basic as “what’s his hair color” to as specific as “what’s her handwriting like,” there is a higher likelihood that a more detailed, complex, and unique character will form.

As long as you listen to the inner voices of your characters, your writing should ring true.
The Three Stages to Character Development

There are three basic stages for creating a character.

Initial Idea

General Context

Specific Context

Through these stages, a writer will be able to create detailed, believable, and complex characters, applying what's "beneath the surface" to make them tick.
STAGE 1
Character Creation: The Initial Idea

Real life is full of characters, and no matter how ordinary a character may seem, that character still has a story. But what makes a story stick rarely rests on plot devices, theme, or situation. In the end, a story is only as good as it’s character.

Scarlett O’Hara, Forrest Gump, Hannibal Lector all began as a seed of an idea in a writer’s head, a seed that clearly blossomed into film icons. And that is the goal – to create a truly unforgettable character.

When looking at unforgettable characters in film and literature, the final product all begins with the seed of a personality; an idea of a being. There is no universal template to follow to create a character because writers can discover inspiration in a myriad of ways.
Using Your Family

Family is always a starting point. They are the people you spend day in and day out with and know sometimes better than you know yourself.

Many times family members offer the opportunity to observe the evolution of a person over time, where you can see the decisions they make and how events change or don’t change them as people.

A divorce, a career choice, your dad’s new corvette are all circumstances that could ignite a writer’s interest in exploring a character struggling with commitment, confidence, or perhaps a mid-life crisis.
Observing Strangers

Sometimes a seed of an idea can begin with a stranger.

More often than not, we’re surrounded by intricate people and personalities who we know nothing about. The man who sits next to you on the subway, your fellow 6am Starbucks addict, your neighbor who lives alone with her cats; all are potential characters with a compelling story.

The question “why?” can often be the match that ignites a writer’s character creation. Why does the man on the subway wear a probation ankle bracelet? Why does the woman behind you at Starbucks always order ten orders of skinny lattes and one black coffee? Why does your neighbor have a wedding ring on if she lives alone?

All these questions lead to one thing: a character for a potential story.
Creating a Composite

A character doesn’t have to evolve from one particular person. Often, a character can be a composite of many different people or experiences.

A girl you work with always wears her hair in braids and this reminds you of your mother when she was young. Your mother was a hippie and the girl you work with also possesses a sense of free spirit. The two personalities combined could provide a character inspiration.

Some of the best writing comes from writing what you know, and a writer often knows himself or herself best. There may be an element within the writer that he or she wants to explore, possibly a particular personality trait or paradox, so the writer simply plugs that trait into a different character in a different world.

Maybe the writer wants to examine the effects of a family member’s death, but instead of making the protagonist a mirror of him/herself, the character is twenty years older and based off the writer’s college sociology professor. The combination of different inspirations can lead to a character with a vast spectrum of personality.
Symbols and Images

The beginning of a character, though, does not always start with a person. It can originate from a symbol or an image. A writer may view something that impacts him or her and leads then to a simple element of a potential character.

Take *American Beauty*, a film that uses the red rose frequently as one of Carol’s (Annette Benning) gardening obsessions. Screenwriter Alan Ball uses the image of the rose as a symbol for perfection, which his female protagonist consistently struggles for.
Summary: The Initial Idea

The creation of a complex, intelligent, captivating character begins with an idea, a seed of inspiration.

Whether it be from someone the writer knows extremely well, like a family member, a stranger who’s behavior they find fascinating or an image or symbol that ignites an interest, a personality must start somewhere.

Once the seed is planted, it’s up to the writer to begin adding on the layers to the character they’ve chosen to bring to life.
Once a writer has the initial idea for a character, the process of developing that character into a complex, real personality begins.

The starting point is always research.

The general context of the character involves filling in all the facts about the where, when, why, and how this person exists in the world of your story.
In the first stage of general research, it’s always a good idea to begin with what you already know. Personal experiences and observations can be a launching pad for exploring the character’s circumstances.

Perhaps your hometown can serve as the setting, specific details serving to enhance that world. You know the way the air smells, when the sun shines, and how the locals interact.

Using details such as these will help you create more dynamic characters. Observing the people you interact with everyday, their physicality, emotions and humor will also help you to write unique, vibrant voices for your supporting characters.

If your protagonist has three best friends, why not use your own as seeds of inspiration? Understanding the people you surround your character with will only help you to develop truthful, motivated, and believable reactions and actions for them within the story.
General Context: Second Step

There are four basic areas that are crucial in the foundation of the general research of character creation:

- Cultural Context
- Story Location
- Professional Occupation
- Historical Period
Cultural Context

Culture encompasses such essentials as *ethnic background, social conditions, religious upbringing,* and *educational experience.*

Growing up in a Greek family, where laughs are boisterous and hugs are never in short supply, is much different than in an Indian family where lips are sealed and you keep your hands to yourself. Characters’ actions will be greatly affected by how they were raised.

If your main character is faced with the death of a loved one, knowing their religion is key; do they turn to God or reject their faith? Education also affects intelligence and this in turn affects how the character acts or reacts to a given situation. Do they have a college degree or drop out of High School?
Story Location

Location is significant because there are specific rules understood within each particular world.

If your character lives in New York, it's important to be specific; do they live in Harlem or the Upper East Side? Or if they’re from L.A., do they shop on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills to be seen by the paparazzi or kick it with fellow hipsters at Hollywood’s Bourgeois Pig?

When you know the details of the world, you’re on the right track to creating a more distinctive character.
Time Period

If your character is living in London during 1960, she may be partying with the Rolling Stones and experimenting with psychedelic drugs, or if in 1942, he may be in boot camp, preparing to join the Allies for the War in the Pacific.

Time period affects everything from hygiene to speech to manners within society. Knowing the year, the month, even a specific historical day will help inform and specify your character’s behavior.

Choosing to place your 15 year-old protagonist in 1953 Dallas, Texas proves immensely different than in 1954, after the desegregation of the school system. If he’s the high school star quarterback, it’s important to know whether or not he’ll be facing racial issues on top of the already competitive world of high school sports. Even if your character isn’t aware of what’s going on in the world around him or her, the writer must be.
Personal Occupation

Most every person has worked *some* kind of job in their life and has a specific worth ethic.

If the character has worked in the restaurant service industry for a decade, he will most likely have unique attitudes toward food, hospitality, and will probably treat her waiter or waitress with reverence when going out for a meal. Take, for example, Justin Long and Ryan Reynolds in *Waiting* (2005).

Trust fund babies, on the other hand, whether or not the audience realizes that this is their main character’s background or not, will have a *much* different attitude towards getting their hands dirty and working to the grind.

Even though the most important part of developing a character is choosing his or her *objective*, many times a *goal can be a certain career or dream job* for the future.
Summary: General Context

The writer’s knowledge of their character’s culture, location, time period, and occupation is the foundation on which the character navigates his or her story. Culture affects greatly how the writer creates the voice of the character, their accent, humor, and interactions with others.

The character’s education will in turn inform how they speak, their grammar, vocabulary, and vocal rhythms. Truthful dialogue cannot be created without deciding exactly how your characters communicate. But before dialogue can even be written, the writer must use all the research they have gathered to form an understanding of how the character thinks.

The character’s past and present will influence their values, concerns, morals and emotions – all of which are crucial tools a writer must employ in order to take their character on a truthful, motivated journey towards his or her main objective.
STAGE 3
Character Creation: Specific Context

Once a writer has completed the general context of their character, knowing culture, location, time period and occupation, they must begin to explore specificity within these elements.

This requires the next level of research, which again, involves drawing from your own life observations and then your imagination to develop unique, intricate attributes for your character.
Specific Context: First Step

Use your own life experiences and observations, but instead of exploring your character on the macro scale, you must now identify the micro details. Begin by basing details (from physical attributes to personality traits) on someone you know or combine details from a number of people to create a composite character. Perhaps your mother has a laugh or your best friend a unique tick that will find a home within your character.

It’s important to note, however, that what you know goes far beyond just the people in your life. What you know is your knowledge base. Maybe you’re a surfer, and the Malibu coast is your home away from home. Your intimate understanding of the surf culture in Southern California is part of your knowledge base, which can add to the attitudes (positive, negative, or indifferent) that your protagonist may have about surfing.

Moreover, what you know often comes from what you’re exposed to. Imagine you’ve set you’re protagonist in the 1880s as a cowboy in the Wild West. He most likely has a sturdy build, beard, long, unkempt hair, with a fondness for whiskey. Images from historical books, literature, art or even other films you’ve seen are all resources that may influence how you mold your character.
Specific Context: Second Step

In the second stage of specific research, the writer must complete and clarify the character's specific attributes, which can be broken up into two basic areas:

- Physical Description
- Personality Core
Physical Description

The appearance of your character must include everything from facial qualities to mannerisms.

– Is your character tall, short, a one-armed man?
– What about size? Weight?
– Posture? How does she carry her herself? With laborious tenacity or erotic sensuality?
– How does he feel about his body? Confident? Insecure?
– Is she a minority who feels out of place with both people of her ethnicity and people who are different?

Physicality is important, as it can affect a character’s occupation, lifestyle, and identity.
Personality Core

The personality core, however, is much more complex and will fill up a large portion of the body of the character iceberg. The six basic areas include:

Strengths and Weaknesses

Complexities

Emotions

Attitudes

Values

Extras: Unique Qualities or Quirks
A character that is defined by only strengths or only weaknesses will result as one-dimensional and uninteresting.

Creating characters with both strengths and weaknesses, however, make them believable and real. Even superheroes are defined by both.

Superman is “more powerful than a locomotive,” yet he is powerless when exposed to Kryptonite, Storm can change the weather at will, but she suffers from claustrophobia, and venom negates Spiderman’s spider sense.

Sometimes a particular character trait works as both a strength and a weakness. The Incredible Hulk’s temper is clearly his greatest and worst attribute.
Complexities

Conflict doesn’t always have to arise between characters; often it simply festers from a multitude of complexities within. We all possess ironies, paradoxes and hypocrisies, and a writer should never ignore these qualities to maintain character believability.

Exploring these qualities will unlock doors that lead to your character’s fears, desires, and deepest seeds of denial, often allowing for readers to sympathize or empathize even when they don’t condone the character’s actions.

In *American Beauty* Colonel Frank Fitts (Chris Cooper) does everything in his power to teach his son how to be a man: be strong, disciplined and heterosexual. To our surprise, at the end of the film, we learn that he is in fact gay. The paradox within Fitts is both bewildering and understandable, given his strict military background.
Emotions

The way a character *feels* is crucial knowledge a writer must have, allowing him or her to create motivated and rooted actions for the story.

A wife and husband may have a discussion about taxes, but in order for the scene to go anywhere, the writer must know how each character feels about taxes, money, and financial security, etc.

Emotions also allow for *subtext*, or what a character is *not* saying. People rarely say exactly what they mean and knowing a character’s underlying emotions can allow for the artifice of realistic and believable dialogue with complex layers.
Attitudes

Understanding a character’s attitude toward him/herself, toward others, and the surrounding circumstances is also essential.

If your character is an alcoholic preacher living in Harlem during the 1920s, knowing his attitude towards prohibition and racial inequality will be vital to specify.

Moreover, clarifying two characters’ feelings toward one another before they enter a scene together will be a launching pad for their interaction.
Values

The decision a writer makes in previous stages of research regarding the character’s upbringing, religion, and culture will be extremely helpful in establishing his or her values.

Knowing what a character stands for, from specific morals, concerns, philosophies, and belief systems, also helps to clarify actions and objectives in any given situation.

The medieval Robin Hood, for example, steals from the rich to give to the poor, but his actions to obtain that objective stems from a deep moral belief in the value of ethical justice.

This same value was echoed centuries later in Martin Luther King Jr.’s Letters From a Birmingham Jail, where King declared that, “one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.”
Extra Unique Qualities & Quirks

The icing on the cake often comes when the writer tosses in those unique qualities and quirks into the mix. What makes a character memorable?

Maybe it’s a wink, a repetitive tick or even a word all their own. Juno constantly carries around a super-size slurpee while Napoleon Dynamite fills his notebooks by doodling ligers.

Giving your character some incredibly specific quirky and unique qualities helps make them all that much more memorable.
All the specific work a writer does regarding character creation helps to make the development of the story that much easier. It’s clear how to navigate a character through the plot, because you know exactly how he or she will feel about everything around him or her as well as what will inform the decisions he or she will make.

Believable and realistic dialogue will flow easily because everything from vocabulary and speech patterns to the emotional motivations and subtext underneath will be clear in the writer’s mind.

Understanding the specific physicality of a character will also allow the writer to distinguish how he or she moves about in the world, how others view them, and how they view themselves.

The work devoted to research and development of character, whether a writer goes about it internally or externally, will equal the quality of the creation – the more specific, the greater the opportunity for creating a truly complex, compelling, and unforgettable character.
Character Questionnaire:

Historical Context & Location

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND LOCATION

1. When date was your character born?

2. How long is their life span? Between what dates?

3. What is a social and political event that occurred the year your character was born? During their childhood?

4. What is the political landscape like during your character’s life span?

5. What are five significant historical occurrences that happened during your character’s life? Accomplishments, failures, changes?

6. Where does your character live?

7. What are the weather and seasons like?

8. How many people live in their city or town?

9. Describe the landscape where your character lives.

10. What is their living situation? House, apartment, shack, no home at all?
OCCUPATION AND LIFESTYLE

1. What does your character do for a living? How do they see their profession? What do they like about it? Dislike?

2. What social groups and activities does your character attend? What role do they like to play? What role do they actually play, usually?

3. What are their hobbies and interests?

4. What did they want to be as a child? Did they accomplish this, or change their mind? How?

5. What is their income?

6. What is their dream job? Or if they are doing it, what are their goals within the job?


8. Did they graduate? High School? College? Do they have a PHD? A GED?

9. How does their education and intelligence – or lack thereof - reflect in their speech pattern, vocabulary, and pronunciations?

10. What was their favorite subject in school? Least favorite?

11. Were they a good student? Bad? Mediocre? What about their grades like?

12. What was their attitude towards education? How did they treat teachers vise versa? What about mentors? Adversaries?
**CULTURE AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS**

1. What type of discipline was your character subjected to at home? Strict? Lenient?

2. Were they overprotected as a child? Sheltered?

3. What was the economic status of their family?

4. Is your character street-smart, book-smart, intelligent, intellectual, and slow-witted?

5. Who is your character’s mate? How do they relate to him or her? How did they make their choice?

6. What were the most deeply impressive political or social, national or international, events that they experienced?

7. What is their religious upbringing?

8. What is their ethnicity?

9. Where is their family from? How does this affect their traditions and values?

10. What is their diet like?
Character Questionnaire: Physicality

PHYSICALITY


2. How do they relate to their appearance? How do they wear their clothing? Style? Quality?

3. Is your character tall? Short? What about size? Weight? Posture? How do they feel about their physical body?


6. What are the prevailing facial expressions? Sour? Cheerful? Dominating?
Character Questionnaire: Weaknesses & Strengths

WEAKNESSES AND STRENGTHS

1. What are your character’s weaknesses? Hubris? Pride? Controlling?

2. What does your character lust for?

3. What are their guilty pleasures?

4. When does your character lose control? In what situations? What triggers them?

5. Has your character ever hurt someone because of an internal weakness?

6. Has your character ever saved someone? What qualities innate qualities aided in the accomplishment? How did he or she do it and why?
Character Questionnaire: Complexities

1. What were your character’s deepest disillusionments? In life? What are they now?
2. Are they holding on to something in the past? Can he or she forgive?
4. Do they always rationalize errors? How do they accept disasters and failures?
5. Do they like to suffer? Like to see other people suffering?
6. How is your character’s imagination? Daydreaming a lot? Worried most of the time? Living in memories?
8. What do they like to ridicule? What do they find stupid?
9. How is their sense of humor? Do they have one?
11. What does your character want most? What do they need really badly, compulsively? What are they willing to do, to sacrifice, to obtain?
12. Does your character have any secrets? If so, are they holding them back?
Character Questionnaire:

Emotions & Attitudes

**EMOTIONS AND ATTITUDES**

1. How does your character think of their father? What do they hate and love about him? What influence - literal or imagined - did the father have?

2. Their mother? How do they think of her? What do they hate? Love? What influence - literal or imagined - did the mother have?


4. Did they feel rejection or affection as a child?

5. How do they see themselves: as smart, as intelligent, and uneducated?

6. Did they like school? Teachers? Schoolmates?

7. What are your character's manners like? What is their type of hero? Whom do they hate?

8. Who are their friends? Lovers? 'Type' or 'ideal' partner?

9. What do they want from a partner? What do they think and feel of sex?

10. Does your character have children? How do they feel about their parental role? About the children? How do the children relate?


12. Do they want to project an image of a younger, older, more important person? Does they want to be visible or invisible?
Character Questionnaire:

Values

VALUES

1. How does your character feel about religion?

2. What about political beliefs?

3. How badly do they want to obtain their life objectives? How do they pursue them?

4. What is his or her moral code?

5. What are their concerns about the modern world?

6. What about specific philosophies or belief systems?
Character Questionnaire:
Extra Unique Qualities & Quirks

EXTRA UNIQUE QUALITIES AND QUIRKS


2. What did they find abroad, and what did they remember?

3. What are your character’s pet peeves?

4. Who is their celebrity crush? Idols? Obsessions?

5. What kind of music does your character like? Movies?