

## Start Your Story with Character

by Chazda Albright -

<http://greatstorybook.com/how-to-write-a-story-part-1-why-start-with-the-character/>

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*Story informs certain things about your character, while character drives what has to happen in the story. It's a seamless cycle, round and round – so where do you as the creator of story start?*

**Start with what matters *most*: character. Here's how, step-by-step.**

**I can't count the number of times a writer has disagreed with me on this point, but I stick fast to it. Without character to drive the plot, you do not have a story.**

### **The Process of Creating Story: Keeping it simple**

Most books about creating illustrated storybooks tend to focus more on [how to market your work](#) rather than how to construct it properly. Most instructionals don't even tell you how to format the manuscript.

When you're starting out on this soulful quest, you find yourself wondering, "Is it really necessary – or

even a good idea – to look first at [what's on the market?](#)” For anyone wanting to create something worthwhile, this kind of advice can come across as disheartening or even distasteful. If you want to tell a great story, where should you begin and why?

If you want to “make great art” as Neil Gaiman would inspire us to do, don’t concern yourself overly much with how you might compete on the market. Instead, focus on where your passion takes you.

I don’t mean that you shouldn’t research the market. If you want to understand how to improve your technique it is important to be well versed in your field of interest. Artists know about other artists. Know your niche. Never stop learning. Be the autodidact.

If you want to be in the market for illustrated storybooks, you need to know that market. You should research what’s out there and know what’s moving.

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If you want to study how to write a story that is visually driven, you can’t go wrong by studying film. Learn [how to storyboard](#). Branch outside of Children’s Illustrated Books - or whatever it is you want to create - and see what’s being done in other professions. When you do, you’ll find a lot of overlap.

Everyone can benefit by sharing their processes and knowledge, sometimes in the most unexpected and surprising ways.

## An Organic Creative Process

When we write or draw or do anything creative, we are all of the experiences we ever had wrapped up and then put back out there again in our own way. We have “schools of thought” and “learned processes” and this is ultimately how we learn how to unwrap what’s in us and present in some other way.

We learn by doing, and doing again and again until we get it right. Then we go back and figure out what we got right.

While my process is organic and changes slightly as I progress from one project to the next, it’s a culmination of many years of experimenting with a procedure for how to get the mess out of my head and onto paper so that all the right words are in the right place.

I freely share my process here, but if you’re interested in more indepth lessons, personal meetings with careful guidance and editorial advice - someone to walk you through the entire process from idea to finished book - you can join one of my writing classes.

[Send me an email](#) to let me know you’re interested and I’ll put you on the waiting list.

## Devil in the Details

When working on any kind of verbal and/or visual project, it's very easy to get caught up in the details, to forget certain key things you need to include, and to lose track or even get entirely derailed in the midst of putting words on paper.

I've learned to keep extensive notes on every aspect of the writing and ideas-generation process and to file the information in a certain way so that nothing gets forgotten: so nothing can slip away into the margins and get lost forever, resulting in my either putting the project on hold for a good long time or just shoving it away in a drawer forever.

To keep this from happening, I've whittled the process down to two core bits, what is basically a two-part method of structuring the story-making process. It goes like this:

1. Create the character.
2. Establish the plot.
3. Write it.
4. Re-write it.
5. Send it to a friend for edits.
6. Re-write it.
7. Re-write it.

In a project file, there are these two large categories (character and storyline), and within those there are sub-files for each character and all the major plot points, and the information for each of those sub-files is organized so that I can find what I need quickly.

## Why Start with the Character?

Many people say that if you want to write a story, you should start with the plot. Some would argue that you should always start with a concept or mood. I strongly feel that you should start with The Thing, the actual reason we read any story or watch any film at all: namely, the character.

The main character, or protagonist, of your story is [the most important thing](#) about any kind of story. [Genres don't change much](#). Plots rarely surprise us because no story plot is really new.

The specifics of what happens are what changes, and those specifics sit squarely on the shoulders of your protagonist and those other characters who support him or her.

## How to be ORIGINAL

To be sure your story is original, the big trick then is to create an original, unique character who tackles certain situations in their own way – it's this “own way of doing things” that gets and keeps our attention, and makes us care. Otherwise, it's just another incident in another story, be it missing the school bus one too many times, losing an important letter or lying to a friend.

**If we don't know who, we can't know why, and then we are left with no reason to care.**

I'm sure you've read a book or watched a movie and at one point decided to just put it aside unfinished because you were bored. Chances are good that it's because you had no reason whatsoever to care about the characters. If you *had* cared, you would have finished the book or the movie - no matter what - just because you *had* to know what would happen next.

**When we ask, “What happened next?” What we really mean is, “What did the character do next?”**

This absolutely applies to illustrated storybooks. Children often repeat rhyming lines from stories that were read to them. They also repeat [any dialogue](#) that impacted them the most, especially when it's something an evil queen said. Why? Character!

**Creating an interesting character ultimately means creating one that is multi-faceted, a character of depth, a character who *feels real* even though it isn't. But how do we do that? This is a kind of magic, the best there is.**

## Creating A Real Character

Creating a character that feels real is perhaps the most challenging thing a writer can do, because it means putting a great deal of thought into details about the character that *might never actually be needed in the telling* of the actual story.

**If the character is to feel real, feel as though it has many layers, *then we need to establish more about the character than is on the page.***

We as the writer should know everything about that character – which means we need to know much more about the character than the readers do.

You cannot fake this. Readers figure it out if you try to hint or allude to something about a character that doesn't actually exist (meaning you never decided what that thing is) and then of course you never follow-up on it, let it sort of disappear into the margins.

It isn't fair to cheat your readers like that, and doing a thorough job of establishing character before you get into the story writing isn't difficult – if you know how.

## The Complete Character Creator

The information that I bring together for any kind of character is expansive, but doing so means that I end up with a complete character and that everything about that character's life is all in one place, fully detailed and organized. That way, I don't have to shuffle and scrounge through boxes and shelves and drawers to find that little bit of information I just can't remember (what was the name of the hotel where her teddy disappeared?).

**If everything is together, you know you only need to look in one place, and you'll be able to find what you need in less than two minutes.**

As an editor, I've run into situations where I could clearly see when the writer had neglected to keep files on their protagonist. Specifics about characters get switched around and confused, name places or even character names change because the writer either forgot the character's name or changed their mind about what it should be and forgot to edit the beginning.

You would be amazed at how easily this kind of mistake can happen.

It's the "no-brainers" that trip us the most because they are so obvious, we breeze right past them, never finding the obvious until someone else points out our mistake.

**There is no such thing as a no-brainer in writing. Everything is critical.**

Imaginative writers in particular can make massive mistakes because quite often they don't keep good files on all the creative details they've come up with for their characters.

**You can get my Complete Character Creator Worksheet right here.**

**Click here to get the CCC!**

You can transcribe ideas to your worksheets or just tape the notes right onto the worksheet.

## **Character Profile, step-by-step**

**You can use this to build *any* kind of character for *any* story.**

### **The Basic Steps:**

These workbook pages, what I call the Complete Character Creator, or CCC, is meant to help you work step-by-step through the process of establishing a thorough and well-organized file for each character.

Even if you don't think of yourself as artistic, I do recommend drawing a picture of the characters and adding those to the file so that you'll also have a clear visual in your mind. Draw and then label the drawing. If the eyes are stern looking and cold, label them that way. This can really help solidify in your mind certain things about the character (especially if you are writing a novel).

### **First: form, demographic, and genre**

The first part of the CCC is about certain aspects of storytelling you might not generally think of as a part of character development. Story Form, Reader Demographic, and Genre.

**The Story Form** is essentially this: In what form will the story be told? Specifically, is this character going to be in a board book, a pop-up book, novel, graphic novel- what? Once you've told your story, it can always be adapted to other forms (like film or another type of book form), but that is irrelevant at this point. If the character is going to be first established in a graphic novel, that informs you as the writer

certain things about how that character should unfold.

**Reader Demographic:** In the worksheet, I already provide spaces for you to determine the age group in the step above. It might seem borderline redundant to now prompt an age demographic, but the purpose is different. Here you narrow more specifically who the demographic will be - now with an eye on how this will be marketed to readers. Why consider this part of the character development? Because the target readership will need a certain voice from your character, and that helps determine how your character speaks.

Do I recommend using a real person you know as your reader demographic? Absolutely. Heart to heart, it's a kind of personal letter told in story form.

Should you ever write with yourself (or a past version of yourself) as the reader demographic? Some would say flat-out no. Actually, more like this: "NO!" I'm not entirely sure that it's possible to cut yourself out entirely from the demographic because ultimately, this is what you want to read from yourself. But I would be loath to make myself the sole Reader Avatar because that is just... insular. I don't want to write just for myself, so I cannot be the demographic.

**Genre:** The [genre of your story](#) will directly affect the characters you create, so this too is one of the earliest steps in creating character. The type of character one finds in a Myth is wildly different from the type of character you find in a Fairytale. Thor is a mythical character, the god of thunder. Snow White is a fairytale character, a princess in hiding who must be revived with a magic kiss.

## Second: Character Statistics

Now we get to the basics of your character, starting first with determining what level of importance the character has in the story. For example, is it the main protagonist or a supporting character – or something else? This is where you determine that, along with the character's full name, including any titles. If your story has many characters, or if you happen to be working on more than one project, it's vital to keep a file on each character, and to list every single detail that you can. Starting with name.

Sometimes what you do at this early point is listing. You list their physical attributes (including whether they are human or something else), nationality, and ancestral background. You might not think this could ever be important in a book for kids, but think about it. Even toy characters typically have a family history or background.

Many book publishers are looking for characters of a particular nationality or even more specifically characters that hail from a certain part of the world. So forget about trying to appeal to a wide readership. Specific and particular is much better, and ultimately, much more interesting in creating depth to your story.

You also need to establish the character's age – whatever it is during the time of the story that's being told, and then note their birth date and date of death. "Date of death?" You might well ask. Yes. Decide this before you get started on the first book and you won't have to come up with some quick fix as you scramble for the sequel and discover that there's a major problem with your timeline.

It isn't that the character has to die in the story, but as the writer it's useful to know where to draw a finishing line. You'll know the character's lifeline by the time you've completed all the steps in creating character. If your character is immortal (like Mickey Mouse, or Superman), then determine that. It defines your character and will absolutely affect the way you write that character.

Included amongst these sort of typical character statistics are those attributes that are essential to their personality. Things like beliefs and hobbies or favorite things to say. We all have a favorite food and drink. Ticks and quirks should also be noted. Does the character have a limp? A lisp? Decide now. This is not something you want to have unfold half way through the story.

It's something we should really know right away, and when you get inspired to add that sort of detail, be sure to add it to the character file to make sure it fits in with all the other details you've established for them. If not, you might want to reconsider this add-on before going back to page one and looking for ways to insert this new information.

You can do this, the changing your mind. Just be cautious and thorough. Double-check with your notes to make sure it actually works. I remember one situation where I was reading a manuscript for a friend and she ended up with a character who was a professional swimmer with only one leg. Oddly, this didn't seem to be all that big a deal in the story, there was nothing to overcome really.

So I asked her about it and it turned out that she first had a one-legged character and then in a later draft decided to make the character a swimmer. So the professional swimmer detail was for the writer an incidental add-on. You can't do this. If any detail should become incidental to the story, scrap it.

### **Real life can have incidental fluff but story has to be on purpose.**

When we write down incidental fluff it gives the reader the feeling that they're hanging, left with something that is not wrapped-up, or left unexplained.

### **Third: Beliefs and Theme**

This step is perhaps deceptively simple. You must pick the two things in life that are most important to your character. It's important to note this before you start writing the story, because how you answer this will drive the story. Why? Because how you – or rather, how the character you're creating – would answer this question informs us of who they are more than any other thing you will decide about them.

If you are delineating this for the main protagonist, these two things that you choose become the themes of the story. So it's very important. In the worksheets, I've included a fair-sized list of options. It will give you a very good idea of how to approach this question and it may well inspire you to come up with something else.

### **Fourth: The 33 Steps**

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The last part of establishing character is to write their lifeline, their big moments, all of the events that define them, from birth to death. You can have as many steps in their lifeline as you want, but the traditional number is 33.

This is the most time consuming step to creating a complete character, but just have fun with it. Where were they born and how? What was it like? How you approach this is entirely up to you. There are no limits at all except those you set upon yourself. And by this point you've already done that, because you've decided already what genre this character resides in and so that will dictate the type of anecdote you tell about their birth.

It's worth noting too that you may well create anecdotes about the character that never make it to the pages of the actual story. Is this a problem? No. This file of rich character information is for you, to help you open up your creativity in fleshing-out a great character. Too, this character file would be priceless information for the actor who might portray your character on stage or on film.

There is no such thing as an over-active imagination. What there is, however, is an imagination that goes on completely unorganized with messy but invaluable notes kept in boxes and drawers. Get your notes together and into a format you can keep and make sense of. It can improve your creative workflow by making it easier and less stressful, and ultimately, it will improve the quality of your writing.

Go get your CCC worksheet. It's free.

**[Click here to get the CCC!](#)**

**Keep creating, no matter what.**

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