About The Character

The real story is not the plot, but how the characters unfold by it.

—Vanna Bonta

"When writing a novel a writer should create living people; people not characters. A character is a caricature."

—Ernest Hemingway

The primary focus of any narrative are the characters, and the secondary focus is the plot. A great story will flop if the characters are vague or ill-defined.

As the saying goes, put the horse before the cart. This means you can't write an intriguing character if you know nothing about the character. Create a character profile and identify the type of character.

Character topics:

Create a Character Profile
Types of Characters
Anchoring The Character
Describing The Character
Limit The Character's Name
Character Tagging

Create a Character Profile

Do you need a character profile for each character in your novel? The answer is no, but it helps. At a minimum, make a descriptive profile for the protagonist and the antagonist. And while you're doing that, create one for the supporting characters.

Do you need a detailed character profile? The answer is no, but the more information you have, the easier it will be to create an interesting, captivating character.

Pretend you are a psychiatrist and the protagonist of your novel is your patient. You ask questions and dig deep into your patient's past to understand why he or she speaks, behaves, and thinks the way she or he does. Your goal is to learn your patient's weaknesses, strengths, successes, failures, dreams, desires, and innermost secrets.

How does a character profile help?
- Helps create realistic characters your reader will believe in and relate to
- Makes for faster writing and saves time
- Prevents plot gaps with character details
- References and compares with other characters
- Helps with increasing drama, tension, or humor.
- Uncovers motivations and inner conflicts

The Four Basic Character Profile Categories
- Physical Appearance
- History/Backstory
- Personality and Traits
- Goals and Motivations

The following character profile list is far from complete, but this should jump-start your imagination.

Physical Appearance	
Body description:	Height, weight, shape, unusual physical markings, complexion, ethnic identification, male or female.
Facial description:	Complexion, nose, eyebrows, ears, lips, wrinkles, the color of hair and eyes, hairstyle, smile, frown.
Kinetic movement:	The way the character walks, sits, gestures, and uses his or her body language.

History/Backstory

Who is the character? Is he poor, middle-class, or rich? Who are his parents? Did he have a good relationship with his parents, siblings, and or friends?

What are the character's phobias, hopes, desires, dreams, accomplishments, and failures? Dig into his religious and political beliefs or his hobbies, past times, and personal interests. What are the key/major events in the character's past? (Bullied in school, the death of a loved one, military experience, accidents, family abuse, assaults, etc.)

When was the character born? When did he leave home, go to college, join the military, or get in trouble with the law?

Where is the character from and where has he or she lived? Where is he going?

Why did the character go to college, join the military, or get in trouble with the law? Why did he or she become a lawyer, pilot, cop, doctor, or a street bum?

How did the character get where he or she is? How did he or she manage life's challenges?

Personality and Traits

Is the character stubborn, impulsive, passive, or hot-tempered? Is he or

she shy, jolly, or outgoing? Optimist or pessimist?

Is the character a leader or a follower? Is he or she happy or depressed with life?

Does the character have a deep, high-pitched, or raspy voice? Does he or she speak loudly, softly, or stutter or a chatterbox?

Goals and Motivations

Why does the character want to achieve his or her goal and what was the reason or motivation?

What drives (motivates) the character to do what he or she does?

What are the character's short- and long-term goals and why?

Why do the character's goals change over time? (Most do.)

What is the character willing to do to achieve his goal?

How will the character achieve his goal?

Types of Characters

Review the different character types in your story. Most stories have many characters. Each character plays a role in the narrative. Besides the characters' profiles, write the role the character plays.

The Protagonist
All stories have a main character, also called the protagonist. The protagonist is the character that defines and drives the plot of the story. Meaning without the protagonist, the story flops.

The Antagonist
Not all stories have a villain or an antagonist. But the ones that do, the antagonists, are the central cause of the story's conflict. Keep in mind

that the antagonist in a story can be an animal, like a bear, lion, or a monster. The antagonist could also be something abstract, like a ghost or a violent storm.

Secondary Main Character/s

Some stories have multiple main characters. Like the protagonist, a secondary main character can define and drive the plot of the story. Secondary characters can also complement and support the protagonist by providing information the protagonist may not know or have access to.

The Mentor

Some stories have a mentor. A mentor could be the protagonist's partner, such as an FBI agent, police detective, teacher, coach, brother, father, friend, medical assistant, etc. The mentor guides, teaches, shows, and helps the protagonist a way to avoid or get out of trouble.

The Sidekick

A sidekick character is subordinate to the protagonist. A sidekick's job is to support the protagonist but not like a mentor. Most times, the sidekick wants to be an equal or a mentor, but ends up causing problems for the protagonist.

Barney Fife, the fictional character in The Andy Griffith Show, is an example of a sidekick.

Side Characters

Side characters, also called supporting characters, often have fully developed personalities, long interactions with the protagonist, and perhaps even deep backstories. However, they seldom decide or change throughout the story.

Bystander Characters

Bystander characters do not need a character profile. These characters are backdrops and serve as beats in a scene. Think of them as the mailman delivering mail, the cop in a street walking the beat, the waitress in a restaurant, etc...

Suspect Characters

Suspect characters are common in police, crime, mystery, and thriller stories, and require a distinct profile. They are essential characters that drive the story's plot. Suspect characters should show motives and opportunity, and appear guilty of something.

Anchoring The Character

Anchoring the protagonist at the start of the novel or story is one of the most important pieces of advice, regardless of which viewpoint you use. This is even more crucial for Deep POV. You need to embed the character's image and personality into the reader's head as soon as possible.

The goal is to introduce the character to the reader. This can take several paragraphs or chapters. This is where having a character's profile comes in handy.

When introducing a character in a story, you do not need a detailed description and/or a comprehensive backstory. Provide enough information to help the reader complete the picture and do it within a reasonable time. Meaning: Keep it tight. When introducing a character, provide some physical, backstory, trait, and goal description. Do not spread the information throughout the chapter or in another chapter.

Describing The Character

Is describing the character easy? Maybe? The tricky part is not to write the character's description, so it sounds like a shopping list or an information dump. And it's even harder to write the character's description, so it reads interesting, or humorous, and adds drama and suspense to the narrative.

The character looking at a mirror or a reflecting is a no-no. The big question is how to accomplish that.

Introduce a character using:
   • Inner thought
   • Backstory
   • Dialogue

Depending on your character and story (plot), you can use one or a combination of the three methods.

Tips:

When you introduce a new character, always provide a description.

Keep the basic character description tight. Do not scatter the information throughout a chapter or two.

Provide enough description to get the reader's imagination going.

Trust the reader to complete the picture.

Showing what the character is doing can also clue the readers of the character's age and or physical appearance.

Example Profile:	
Character:	Sheriff Henry Crow, forty-four years old. He does not take shit from anyone. Crow doesn't speak much, but when he does, people had better listen.
Body:	Around six feet, solid, broad shoulders, around 200lbs

Facial:	Dark brown eyes, long black hair with a few strands of white. Has a wide nose with high cheekbones. He has a scar that starts from behind the left ear and comes across his cheek to his lips. And has some scarring on his lower neck and chest.
Family:	His mother was Mexican and his father was a Pueblo Indian. He is married and lives with his wife, Barbara. The daughter, Dulce, lives in Colorado Springs.
History:	He is a World War I combat veteran. During his brief tour of combat, he'd seen enough death, destruction, and misery to last several lifetimes. He doesn't want to live in a large city. He preferred a peaceful town, and Socorro, New Mexico was that.

Picture This:

The scene takes place in Socorro, New Mexico, in 1943. Kenneth Hinckley, a senior FBI agent, and his rookie partner, Jerry Brown, visit Sheriff Henry Crow, the small-town lawman. They enter the small building.

Agent Hinckley is the character in focus. Meaning: everything Hinckley sees, feels, thinks, or does is from his perspective.

Purpose:

Here I want to introduce the character, Sheriff Henry Crow, into the story.

Example:

He and his partner marched up to the desk.

But the woman continued pecking on the typewriter.

"Excuse me." Hinckley tapped on the desk.

The woman didn't look up, and continued punching keys.

"Excuse me." Hinckley put steel in his voice.

The woman finished typing and looked up. "He's been waiting

for you two."

"Hah? Who?"

"Sheriff Henry Crow." She shot her right thumb over her shoulder. "He's in his office waiting."

He and Jerry paraded to the open door.

Hinckley knocked on the door jamb and eyed the office. Stone-faced Crow, in his early forties, sat behind a metal gray desk staring at them. Not good.

"Yeah, come in." Crow dropped the pen on the desk.

Hinckley and his partner entered.

Crow didn't stand. Even behind the desk, Hinckley could tell the sheriff was at least six feet, maybe taller. The man had broad shoulders and looked built solid, like a rock. No, more like a thick tree trunk. The man's light reddish-brown skin tone, dark brown eyes, nose, and cheekbones hinted at a Pueblo or maybe an Apache Indian. Crow's long black tied-back hair showed white strands. And the thin scar that ran across the left cheek added impact to his cold, hard stare.

Hinckley swallowed hard. Shit. The Sheriff's ticked off. "Good morning, Sheriff, I'm FBI Special Agent Kennard Hinckley and this is my partner, Special Agent Jerry Brown. We're here to—"

"I was wondering when you boys would show up." Crow shuffled in his weathered leather chair. He leaned forward, cupped his hands, and stared at them. "In case you didn't know, it's common courtesy to visit the local cops before snooping around." He leaned back and folded his arms behind his head.

Hinckley removed his hat. Shit. If looks could kill, he and his partner would be in the morgue with an ID tag wrapped around their toes.

► Yes, this character introduction can be written a dozen

different ways, but you get the point. I used Agent Hinckley to describe the sheriff. The goal is to have fun with your writing.

Limit The Character's Name

This is a simple principle but one that goes a long way in a novel. The goal here is to cut down using the character's name. There is no set guideline. The more you use the character's name in a scene, the greater the distance it creates between the reader and the character.

In short, only use the character's name for clarity. Use he or she pronouns throughout the scene. And don't mix it around. This means do not refer to the character as the marine, the man, the woman, or the cop.

Note:

Watch for repeats. Avoid starting multiple sentences in a row using the "he, she, them" pronouns. Three repeats is a no-no, two repeats is acceptable, but no repeats is better.

Issue:

Cruz thanked the trucker and jumped off the rig at Jacinto City, a small municipality a few miles east of the heart of Houston. It was one of those mini-cities eaten up by a larger one. Cruz would not press his luck and figured he would spend the night and take a bus in the morning. Cruz walked south, looking for a motel. There were plenty of them, but not what Cruz was looking for. He walked another hour further away from the interstate. Cruz checked on two, but the motels required an ID and a credit card. So Cruz kept walking further. His left hip ached, his neck felt stiff, and his throat felt dry. Up ahead, music blared from a honky-tonk. The music had a nice two-step rhythm to it. The

steel guitar wailed, and no doubt they sold something cold to drink, so the ex-soldier headed for it.

► This paragraph reads fine (maybe). Notice the frequent mention of the character's name creates a greater distance. And using "the ex-soldier" near the end did not help. The reader will pause. (A speed bump.)

Fix:

Cruz thanked the trucker and jumped off the rig in Jacinto City, a small municipality a few miles east of the heart of Houston. It was one of those mini-cities eaten up by a larger one. He would not press his luck and figured he would spend the night and take a bus in the morning. Cruz walked south, looking for a motel. There were plenty of them, but not what he was looking for, and continued walking another hour further away from the interstate. He checked on two, but the motels required an ID and a credit card. So he kept walking further. His left hip ached, his neck felt stiff, and his throat felt dry. Up ahead, music blared from a honky-tonk. The music had a nice two-step rhythm to it. The steel guitar wailed, and no doubt they sold something cold to drink, so he headed for it.

► In this example, the first sentence tells the reader who is the character doing the seeing, walking, acting, and thinking in this scene. Notice how this reads more smoothly and reads better. There is no need to keep bringing up the character's name, and removing the noun "ex-soldier" made a difference.

Note:

Besides repeating pronouns, avoid start three consecutive sentences in a row with the same word. Any word. Two repeats is acceptable, but no repeats is even better. Watch for the ending word as well.

Character Tagging

Character tagging is a method used to identify a character that does not have a name. It can also be a nickname or an alias for a main character or a supporting character.

When there are multiple characters with no names, this method is useful. This helps the reader keep track of who is doing the talking, acting, or thinking. Character tagging can add a description and help the reader get a better visual.

Many times, character tagging can add drama, tension, suspense, or even humor to the scene.

A few character tag name examples:	
Baldy	a clean-shaved and baldheaded character
Bug Eyes	a character that has large bulging eyes
Dimples	a character with dimples
Pimples	a character with a severe case of acne
Scarface	a character with a large scar across the cheek
Shorty	a short character
Smiley	a character that smiles a lot
Twinkles	a character with beady or flashing eyes
Whiskers	a male character with the five o'clock shadow

Picture this:

Ex-Army Ranger Sam Cruz is the character in focus. He is hiding from bad guys and sneaks into an alley thinking he is safe.

Example:

Cruz stepped into the dark alley. Up ahead, something in the darkness moved. Three figures emerged.

Shit!

They were waiting for him. What now? Run or fight? But he

wasn't used to running and wasn't about to start now.

The three figures took a step forward. The one on the left was a short man, almost a midget, and he had a three-foot piece of chain draped over his shoulders. In the middle, the tall, slim guy tossed a Bowie knife from one hand to the other. And the one on the right was a fat dude with a baseball bat.

Here they come.

Shorty stepped forward, twirling the chain like a miniature version of Bruce Lee. Slim followed, doing figure eights with the blade. And Fatty did a few practice swings.

Showtime.

Cruz planted his feet, relaxed his shoulders, and brought up his hands.

► These three characters appear only once in the story, so there is no need to give them real names. Using character tags avoids naming them and helps enhance this scene.

Picture this:

Susan is the character in focus. She is chatting with friends and is looking for someone to hook up with.

Example:

Susan stopped talking. A soldier in Class A uniform, complete with ribbons and medals, stepped into the reception hall.

She smiled and ignored her friends. The handsome soldier wasn't wearing a wedding ring. Yes. She undid one button on her blouse, made her move, and swayed her hips straight for Medals.

► In this scene, Susan doesn't know the name of the soldier but calls him Medals.

Picture this:

John is the character in focus. He is an undercover cop looking to infiltrate the cartel.

Example:

John stopped sipping his drink.

Lucia Guzmán Benavides entered the restaurant, the drug lord's oldest daughter. He'd seen her before and heard all the stories. She was in her mid-thirties, with long black silky hair, slim, and with all the curves in the right places. She moved with grace. Her hips swayed just right. Not too much and not too little. Her full lips and captivating eyes would melt an iceberg.

John heard all the people who knew her and kept their distance. They called her the Black Widow but never to her face.

► In this scene, I introduce the character Lucia to the story and give her a tag/nickname. Going forward in the story, this character is called by her name or the Black Widow.

In Summary:

Not every character mentioned in a story needs a name. If the character is not part of the plot, it is better to use a description. (The mailman, the cop, the bad guy, the nurse, the stranger, etc.)

But sometimes character tagging will enhance the drama, tension, suspense, or humor of the scene. Use your judgment.