Character Tagging

I write to give myself strength. I write to be the characters that I am not. I write to explore all the things I'm afraid of.

— Joss Whedon

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

—Vanna Bonta

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 leading or 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.

Character tagging can often add drama, tension, suspense, or even humor to the scene.

A few character tag name examples:

Baldy	A clean-shaved and baldheaded character
Barbie	A female character with a model-like figure
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/face
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 POVC in focus. He is evading the 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, with 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 raised 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 POVC 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, 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 soldier's name but calls him Medals.

Picture this:

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

Goal:

I want to introduce the character Lucia in the story and give her a tag/nickname.

Example:

John sat at his table, cutting his steak, and caught movement from the entrance.

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 kept their distance. They called her the Black Widow but never to her face.

► I used John to describe Lucia and how he learned of her nickname. Going forward in the story, Lucia 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, and suspense, or add humor to the scene. Use your judgment.