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Keys to Characterisation

By **Aspire2write**

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Far too many inexperienced writers create flat, stereotypical characters: the brave fireman, the damsel in distress, the strict schoolmistress. The best characters are those who evoke emotions within the reader - fear, admiration, affection, laughter, horror... If the writer fails to make us care about the characters, no matter how ingenious the plot, we will toss the story aside without a second thought.

Every character should be unique. There are no two people in this world exactly the same. Each of us has an individual personality; everything we do derives from the governing aspects of that personality. The following factors contribute to our uniqueness: Names Appearance Possessions / props Speech Body language Habits Behaviour Background Major traits

These factors are best used in combination. For example, Charlie's broken spectacles combine with his habit of tripping over things. Natasha's boasting photographs of her new house combine with her loud voice that demands to be heard. A character who displays only one of these factors is nothing short of mundane.

Let's look at these issues more closely.

1) Names

Everyone needs a name. Names identify who we are; they can be associated with status, be notorious, unusual, or nondescript. Some beginning writers struggle over naming their characters. Names often hold symbolic association. Pip in Great Expectations is like a seed growing through childhood to adulthood. Lemuel Gulliver is 'gullible' in his travels through Lillput, Laputa and beyond. A character should not be given the first name that pops into your head. It requires more thought than that.

2) Appearance

Keys to Characterisation

We do not remember every detail of someone's appearance, but hone in to something that differentiates them from others. In Harry Potter, Ron Weasley's distinguishable feature is his red hair. In Edmond Rostand's play *Cyrano de Bergerac*, the title character has a large nose. Appearance can be used to reveal personality moreover. For example, someone with dirty fingernails, besides being unclean, is far from a perfectionist; they are neither fussy nor obsessive. The relationship between appearance and reality has always fascinated authors. Appearances can be used to deceive after all. Frankenstein's monster is inhumanly ugly and yet his natural impulses are benevolent. Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray* is stunningly beautiful in everything but his soul, his reality, which is as foul as the rotting canvas hidden out of sight.

3) Possessions and props

Appearance ties in closely with personal possessions (or props). Everyone has possessions, including their homes, clothes, books, and cars. Even a homeless beggar views the street corner on which he

sleeps as his own. Let's look at more examples. Margaret never leaves the house without her bulging handbag. Charlie wears a pair of broken spectacles fastened together with sticky tape. Natasha goes nowhere without a photograph album containing pictures of her new five-bedroom house. Such concrete objects reveal aspects of character. Margaret carries her handbag, stuffed with everything she could ever need, because she feels insecure without it. Charlie is so clumsy that he doesn't bother to buy a new pair of spectacles for he will only sit on them again. Natasha's photographs scream out, "I am a shameless show-off!"

4) Speech

Speech evokes personality, both what is said, the content, and the way in which it is said, the manner. Nick is arrogant; his speech is long, loud, and self-interested. Emma's occasional social shyness, on the other hand, is mirrored in her short speeches. Sometimes she only utters a monosyllable in reply to a prying question. Content and manner, moreover, reflect social class. A university lecturer will use different language than a pub barmaid (even if talking about the same subject.) Also note that people have their own set of speech idioms: Nick waffles, "etc, etc" at the end of each sentence; Emma utters, "don't you think" to engage her listener's approval.

5) Body language

Body language falls into two categories: voluntary and involuntary. We shake our head when we mean to say "no," for example; we smile when we mean to be friendly. Voluntary body language, conversely, may be used to deceive. Sophie laughs loudly at her boss's jokes even though they bore her to tears. Involuntary gestures are difficult to feign, however, as we tend not to realise we are making them. Sally rubs her left earlobe when she is nervous. Daniel folds his arms across his chest when he feels defensive.

6) Habits

No one is perfect; we all have habits (sometimes very irritating habits!) Mike blinks his eyes

Keys to Characterisation

excessively. Anne clears her throat every five minutes. Adam picks invisible bits of fluff off his jacket sleeves obsessively. Aunt Hettie pushes her 50 year old false teeth in place, each time they slip from her gums, with a tongue as red as a slab of raw liver. Yuk! Habits can be revolting, irritating, amusing or endearing. Whatever they are, they make characters memorable.

7) Behaviour

Most of us have behavioural patterns such as working long hours, over-eating, spending too much money, heavy drinking, or taking an evening walk at 8:30 precisely. Behaviour under stress reveals a great deal about a character's personality. Alan's wife dies unexpectedly, and yet he continues his usual daily routines – he is pretending that nothing has changed, that she will be home for dinner as usual. Even under extreme stress, however, behaviour should remain consistent. For example, Sue never drinks alcohol. It would be out of character for her to turn to alcohol when she loses her job. Instead she turns to something that is consistent with her previous behaviour - her voluntary work at the local hospital perhaps. Even the most spontaneous of individuals is consistent in his/her spontaneity.

8) Background

No one just 'exists' as they are. We become what we are because of our background and past experiences. Our history shapes our thoughts, actions and motivations. Sam's mother died when she was eleven years old. As an adult she is far more independent than her friend Jane who was mollycoddled by a protective mother. Luke is scared of animals because, as a small child, a stray dog viciously attacked him. Daniel is overly ambitious because his older brother ridiculed him. Background is especially important when creating believable 'villains'. Very few people are innately evil. Serial killers crave power over another person's life; it makes them feel important to dictate who can and cannot live. Why do they seek this perverse power? Maybe they were abused and beaten as helpless children. That does not justify their crimes in our minds, but it justifies them in their minds. But how do we explain why not all abused children grow up to be abusers? Some grow up to be excellent parents. Clearly, background alone doesn't make a person what they are. It is their major psychological trait, because it dictates how they interpret their background, which makes them what they are.

9) Major trait

All characters have a major trait that dictates their personality and motivates their actions. Greed. Fear. Kindness. Guilt. Envy. Ambition. Worry. Creativity. Obsession. Kate is ruled by kindness and always puts others first. Steve is ruled by arrogance and always puts himself first. A ruling trait reveals itself in action and speech. How would arrogant Steve act in a crowded street? He would forge ahead single-mindedly, pushing everyone out of his way. How would Kate act in the same situation? She would allow herself to be pushed aside by the likes of Steve. Major trait affects every aspect of a person's life. Kate never moved away to university with her friends, although she was bright enough to, because she felt it her duty to stay at home with her widowed mother. No one is all-perfect however. Kate worries excessively, despite her kind-heartedness, about anything and everything. No one is all-imperfect either. Steve has a wonderful sense of humour when he is not being arrogant. Even your most beloved heroes and heroines have faults and weaknesses.

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Taking A Vacation To The Florida Keys With Your Family Is Fun

By Kyle Greatbatch

If you are looking for some of the most beautiful and enjoyable spots in the world, you must cast your net to Florida Keys. This exotic location stretches from the South of the mainland, and in reality Florida Keys is a chain of many enchanting Islands.

Geographically, the Florida Keys consists of five major groups of Islands which are Islamorada, Marathon, Lower Keys, and Key West. All these areas are collectively known as Key Largo.

If you are game in this adventure, then the journey commences from Miami, which is only a short distance from the city of Key Largo. This city provides a more relaxed atmosphere, and is a welcomed relief away from the hustle and bustle of daily life. Florida Keys is just completely different from any one you've ever known.

But your stay should not be restricted to just the Key Largo, you need to explore the complete "keys" which is about 160 miles from Miami. However, every mile you cover takes you close to paradise. No place can really compare to Florida Keys in the world.

Hawaii and the Bahamas have been hyped as the best tropical resorts, but I make bold to say that nothing can be farther from the truth. Florida Keys as a vacation spot offer practically everything you might need; a good night life, and if you like secluded beaches, they don't come much better than those at Islamorada or Marathon Islands. And talking of costs, Florida Keys provides a wide range of lodgings and private homes for rent.

For those with luxurious tastes, the Florida Keys boasts of several five-star lodgings that can match even the requirements of kings. Folks who prefer austere accommodations, there are several rustic lodgings in Florida Keys. However, it is needles to remind you that the best places outdoor in Florida Keys remain its lovely beaches. The coast line is very vast because the Island is bordered on the east

Keys to Characterisation

by the Atlantic Ocean and on the western tip by the Gulf of Mexico.

Sporting facilities and activities abound in the Florida Keys for adventurous people. Fishing, diving, and swimming are the most common activities, probably due to the pristine waters of the Florida Keys.

Besides sporting activities, there are other interesting sights in Florida Keys. Each community in this Island seems to have its cultural events that families can enjoy. Several artists and artisans domiciled in the Island have also made Florida Keys a renowned place. Thus no matter what your interest is, there is always something for everyone.

The variety of experiences that abounds is the best thing about Florida Keys, strictly from a vacationer's point of view. And judging by the influx of holiday makers into the Island, one would think the whole area is on vacation throughout the year. This independence in Florida Keys that surely comes from being very far from the big cities, which probably explains why residents of Florida Keys refer to their Island as the 51st state in the Union.

When you visit Florida Keys, the only problem you might encounter is the dilemma of whether to return back home! Because Florida Keys is a very magical place.

Article written by Kyle Greatbatch

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