

10 Pillars of Characterisation: Building Believable Personalities

Introduction

In this lesson, we'll explore the ten fundamental pillars of characterisation that help create well-rounded, believable personalities in your writing. By understanding and implementing these pillars, you'll be able to craft characters that resonate with readers and bring your stories to life.

Narrative Outline

1. Physical Attributes
2. Background and History
3. Personality Traits
4. Motivations and Desires
5. Fears and Flaws
6. Skills and Abilities
7. Relationships and Interactions
8. Beliefs and Values
9. Speech Patterns and Mannerisms
10. Growth and Change

Breakdown

****1. Physical Attributes****

****Elements:****

- Appearance
- Body language
- Physical quirks or distinguishing features

****Exemplars:****

1. "Evelyn's fiery red hair seemed to have a life of its own, untameable curls escaping her bun like rebellion personified. Her emerald eyes, sharp and alert, missed nothing, while a smattering of freckles across her nose hinted at a mischievous nature."

2. "Marcus moved with the fluid grace of a dancer, each step purposeful and light. But his left hand, gnarled and scarred from an old injury, betrayed a history of hardship that his elegant bearing tried to hide."

3. "Despite her diminutive stature, Amira commanded attention. Her chin was always tilted slightly upward, shoulders back, as if daring the world to underestimate her. A streak of prematurely grey hair stood out against her dark locks, a badge of hard-earned wisdom."

****2. Background and History****

****Elements:****

- Childhood experiences
- Cultural influences
- Significant life events

****Exemplars:****

1. "Growing up in a family of academics, Raj had felt the weight of expectations from an early age. Books were his companions, libraries his playground. But it was a chance encounter with a street magician at age ten that sparked a lifelong fascination with illusions, much to his parents' dismay."
2. "Lena's earliest memories were of the smell of grease and the sound of engines. Raised in her father's auto shop, she learned to change oil before she could read. The loss of her mother at age seven only strengthened the bond between father and daughter, their shared passion for cars a language of love neither needed to translate."
3. "As a child of diplomats, Sebastien had called a dozen countries home before he turned eighteen. He was fluent in five languages but sometimes felt he belonged to none. The constant uprooting had taught him to adapt quickly, to observe keenly, but also to keep people at arm's length."

****3. Personality Traits****

****Elements:****

- Core characteristics
- Temperament
- Habits and quirks

****Exemplars:****

1. "Olivia's optimism was infectious, her laughter a balm to troubled souls. She approached each day as an adventure waiting to unfold, finding joy in the smallest details. But this sunny disposition masked a deep-seated fear of confrontation, leading her to avoid conflict at all costs."
2. "Meticulous to a fault, Adrian's life was a study in order and precision. His apartment was immaculate, his schedule planned to the minute. This rigid control extended to his emotions, kept under tight rein. Only in his art did he allow chaos to reign, his paintings a riot of colour and passion that belied his controlled exterior."
3. "Zoe was a whirlwind of energy and ideas, her mind leaping from topic to topic with dizzying speed. Her enthusiasm was matched only by her impatience, leading to a trail of half-finished projects and abandoned hobbies. But when something truly captured her interest, her focus became laser-sharp, allowing her to achieve the seemingly impossible."

****4. Motivations and Desires****

****Elements:****

- Long-term goals
- Immediate wants
- Driving forces

****Exemplars:****

1. "Every decision Jack made was in service of his ultimate goal: to summit Everest. From his diet to his job choice to his relationships, everything was evaluated through the lens of whether it brought him closer to or further from that snow-capped peak."
2. "On the surface, Mia's desire for success in the corporate world seemed straightforward. But deeper down, it was driven by a need to prove her worth to the father who had always favoured her brother, a relentless pursuit of validation disguised as ambition."
3. "For Elena, the motivation was simple yet profound: to create a better life for her daughter than she had. Every extra shift, every missed social event, every sacrifice was made with the image of her child's future success in mind."

****5. Fears and Flaws****

****Elements:****

- Phobias
- Insecurities
- Character weaknesses

****Exemplars:****

1. "Despite his imposing physical presence, Thor's fear of small spaces was paralyzing. The thought of elevators made him break out in a cold sweat, and he'd take the stairs ten floors up rather than face that enclosed box."
2. "Ava's perfectionism was both her greatest strength and her most crippling flaw. It drove her to excel but also kept her from taking risks, the fear of failure a constant whisper in her ear."
3. "Chan's inability to trust others stemmed from a childhood betrayal. This made him an excellent detective, his scepticism an asset on the job. But in his personal life, it left him isolated, unable to form deep connections."

****6. Skills and Abilities****

****Elements:****

- Talents and expertise

- Learned skills
- Natural aptitudes

****Exemplars:****

1. "Lydia's fingers flew over the keyboard, lines of code appearing as if by magic. She spoke the language of computers more fluently than she did her mother tongue, finding an order and logic in programming that eluded her in human interactions."
2. "Years of training had honed Marcus's body into a weapon. He moved with lethal grace, each action efficient and purposeful. But it was his ability to read people, to anticipate their moves, that truly set him apart as a fighter."
3. "Emilia had a way with words that bordered on the supernatural. She could soothe angry customers, persuade reluctant clients, and inspire unmotivated employees with just a few well-chosen phrases. This silver tongue had propelled her from a small-town girl to a top PR executive."

****7. Relationships and Interactions****

****Elements:****

- Family dynamics
- Friendships
- Romantic entanglements
- Professional relationships

****Exemplars:****

1. "To the world, Dr. Yamamoto was a brilliant but cold scientist. Only his daughter saw his softer side, expressed through small gestures: a favourite meal prepared after a tough day at school, a proud smile at her science fair victory."
2. "Alex's friendship with Jessie was a study in contrasts. Where Alex was cautious and reserved, Jessie was bold and outspoken. Their dynamic was one of balance, each drawing out qualities in the other that they admired but struggled to embody themselves."
3. "In the courtroom, Imani and Parker were fierce adversaries, their legal battles legendary. Outside, they shared a deep respect and a standing weekly squash game, their competitive natures finding harmony in this ritual."

****8. Beliefs and Values****

****Elements:****

- Moral code
- Religious or spiritual beliefs
- Political ideologies

- Personal philosophies

****Exemplars:****

1. "Raja's dedication to non-violence was more than just a belief; it was the core of his being. Even in the face of personal danger, he refused to raise a hand against another, his unwavering pacifism both admired and questioned by those around him."
2. "For Cynthia, science was her religion. She put her faith in data and empirical evidence, viewing the world through a lens of scepticism and rational inquiry. This often put her at odds with her deeply spiritual family, creating a rift she struggled to bridge."
3. "Gabriel's sense of justice was black and white, with no room for shades of grey. This made him an effective prosecutor but often caused conflict in his personal life, where others found him rigid and uncompromising."

****9. Speech Patterns and Mannerisms****

****Elements:****

- Verbal tics
- Accent or dialect
- Body language
- Habitual gestures

****Exemplars:****

1. "Eliza's Oxford education was evident in her crisp pronunciation and expansive vocabulary. But in moments of stress, her childhood cockney accent would slip through, a reminder of the world she'd left behind."
2. "Nervous energy radiated from Finn in constant motion. He could never sit still, always fidgeting with something - pen, paper clip, phone - his restless hands a physical manifestation of his active mind."
3. "Mae punctuated her speech with grand gestures, her hands painting pictures in the air as she talked. Combined with her habit of peppering her sentences with 'darling' and 'sweetie,' it gave her an air of a 1940s film star."

****10. Growth and Change****

****Elements:****

- Character arcs
- Responses to challenges
- Learning from experiences

****Exemplars:****

1. "The loss of his job was a wake-up call for Peter. Once focused solely on climbing the corporate ladder, he now found himself reevaluating his priorities, rediscovering passions long forgotten in his single-minded pursuit of success."
2. "Each setback in her quest for Olympic gold only fuelled Aisha's determination. Where once she might have been discouraged by failure, she now saw each defeat as a lesson, refining her technique and mental fortitude."
3. "The birth of his daughter transformed Marcus from a carefree bachelor to a devoted father. He traded late nights at the bar for early mornings in the park, finding a depth of love and purpose he never knew he was capable of."

Vocabulary List

1. Characterisation - the creation and development of characters in a narrative
2. Archetype - a very typical example of a certain person or thing
3. Motivation - the reason or reasons one has for acting or behaving in a particular way
4. Flaw - a feature that mars the perfection of something; a fault or defect
5. Mannerism - a habitual gesture or way of speaking or behaving
6. Backstory - a history or background created for a fictional character
7. Dialect - a particular form of a language specific to a region or social group
8. Introspection - the examination or observation of one's own mental and emotional processes
9. Idiosyncrasy - a mode of behaviour or way of thought peculiar to an individual
10. Dynamic - (of a character) changing or developing
11. Static - (of a character) showing little or no change
12. Foil - a character who contrasts with another character to highlight particular qualities
13. Epiphany - a moment of sudden revelation or insight
14. Disposition - a person's inherent qualities of mind and character
15. Nuance - a subtle difference in or shade of meaning, expression, or sound
16. Persona - the aspect of someone's character that is presented to or perceived by others
17. Trait - a distinguishing quality or characteristic
18. Temperament - a person's nature, especially as it permanently affects their behaviour
19. Quirk - a peculiar behavioural habit
20. Verisimilitude - the appearance of being true or real

Writing Prompt

Choose three pillars from the ten we've discussed (e.g., Physical Attributes, Fears and Flaws, and Speech Patterns and Mannerisms) and use them to create a character. Write a short scene (300-500 words) that showcases these aspects of your character. The scene should:

Exemplar Response

****A Stitch in Time****

(Using Physical Attributes, Fears and Flaws, and Speech Patterns and Mannerisms)

The antique shop's bell tinkled as Madeline Thorne entered, ducking slightly to avoid the low doorframe. At six-foot-two, she was used to this dance, her lanky frame forever at odds with a world built for shorter folk. She unconsciously ran a hand through her close-cropped silver hair, a nervous habit that had outlasted the longer styles of her youth.

"Ah, Ms. Thorne! Right on time, as always," Mr. Fitch called from behind the counter. His eyes twinkled with amusement as they always did when he made that particular pun.

Madeline's lips quirked in a half-smile. "Punctuality is the politeness of queens, Mr. Fitch," she replied, her crisp British accent at odds with the sleepy Southern town she now called home. "Though I dare say, in my case, it's less about manners and more about..." she trailed off, her long fingers tapping an anxious rhythm against her thigh.

"Your timepieces, of course," Mr. Fitch nodded knowingly. "Speaking of which, I've got something special for you today."

Madeline's eyes lit up, the green as bright and sharp as new leaves in spring. She moved towards the counter with an eager grace that belied her height, reminding Mr. Fitch of a giraffe he'd once seen at a zoo – all elegance until it stumbled over its own legs.

"Oh?" she asked, trying and failing to keep the excitement from her voice. "Do tell, my good man. Don't keep a lady in suspense."

Mr. Fitch grinned, enjoying the familiar cadence of their weekly interaction. He reached beneath the counter and produced an ornate wooden box. "Feast your eyes on this beauty," he said, opening the lid with a flourish.

Madeline leaned in, her breath catching in her throat. Inside lay a pocket watch, its gold case gleaming softly in the shop's dim light. "Good heavens," she whispered, "is that a Breguet?"

"Indeed it is," Mr. Fitch confirmed. "A genuine 1780 model. Thought you might like to take a crack at restoring it."

Madeline's long fingers hovered over the watch, trembling slightly. She wanted nothing more than to pick it up, to feel its weight, to listen to its tick (or lack thereof). But a familiar fear gripped her, rooting her hands in place.

"I... I don't know if I should," she stammered, her usual eloquence deserting her. "What if I damage it? These hands aren't as steady as they once were, you know. Tempus fugit and all that rot."

Mr. Fitch's expression softened. He'd known Madeline for years, had watched her restore countless timepieces with a skill that bordered on magical. But he'd also seen how each passing year seemed to chip away at her confidence, her fear of time's ravages manifesting in a reluctance to take on more challenging projects.

"Madeline," he said gently, dropping the formality of 'Ms. Thorne', "you're the finest horologist I've ever met. This watch has been silent for decades. Who better to breathe life back into it than you?"

She looked up, surprise flickering across her features at the use of her first name. For a moment, Mr. Fitch saw a glimpse of the young, confident woman she must have been – before time and doubt had left their marks.

"Well," Madeline said, squaring her shoulders, "when you put it like that, how can a lady refuse?" Her voice regained some of its usual crispness as she carefully lifted the watch from its velvet nest. "I suppose it's high time I stopped watching the clock and started turning it back, what?"

As her fingers curled around the Breguet, feeling its quiet potential, Madeline felt something shift inside her. Perhaps, she mused, it wasn't too late for her to rediscover her own rhythm, to wind up her courage and begin ticking forward again.

"Right then," she said, more to herself than to Mr. Fitch. "Let's see what stories this old fellow has to tell, shall we?"