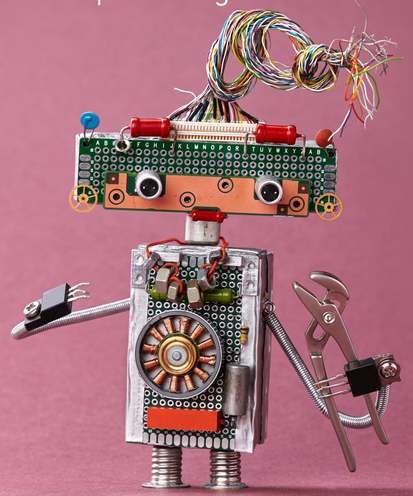
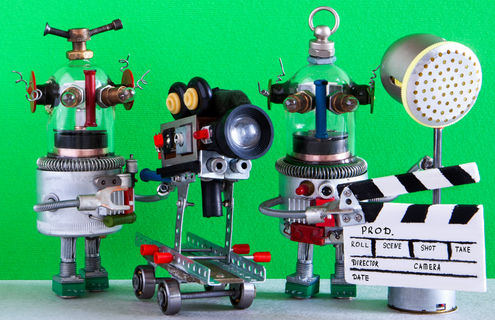
CREATING
{ compelling }
CHARACTERS
presented by Linda Fulkerson

what you will learn . . .

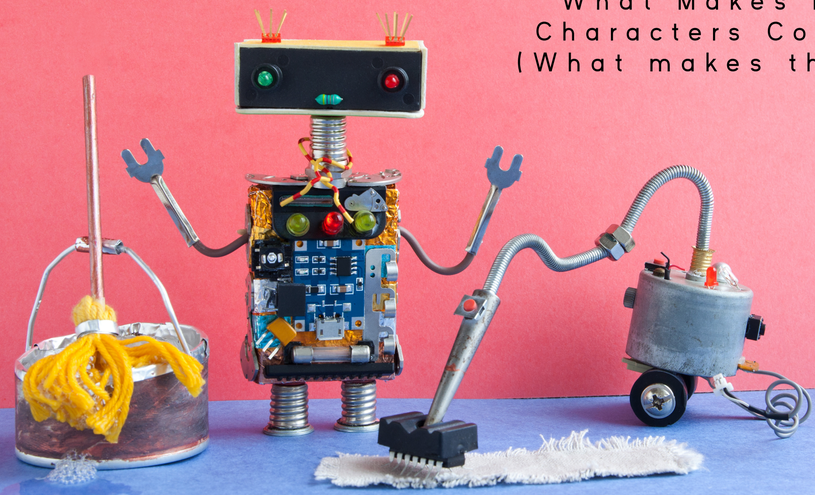
Importance of Creating Compelling Characters



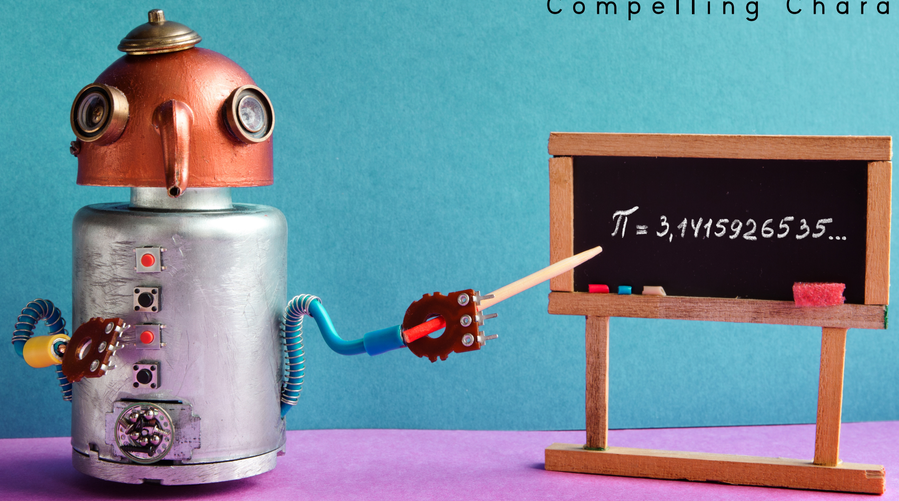
Examples of Compelling Characters from Books and Film



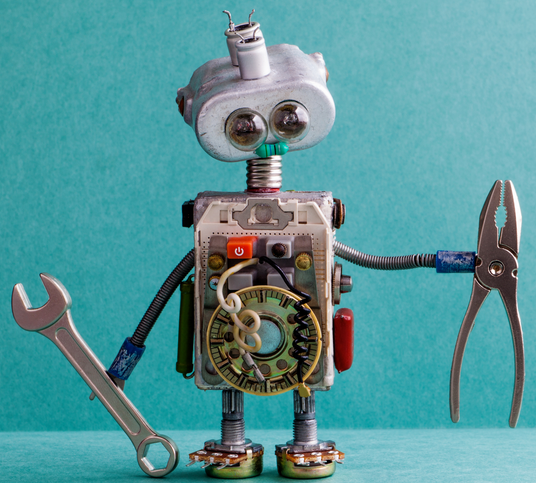
What Makes Fictional Characters Compelling? (What makes them work?)



How to Create Compelling Characters



Tools I Use



Questions & Answers

IMPORTANCE OF COMPELLING CHARACTERS

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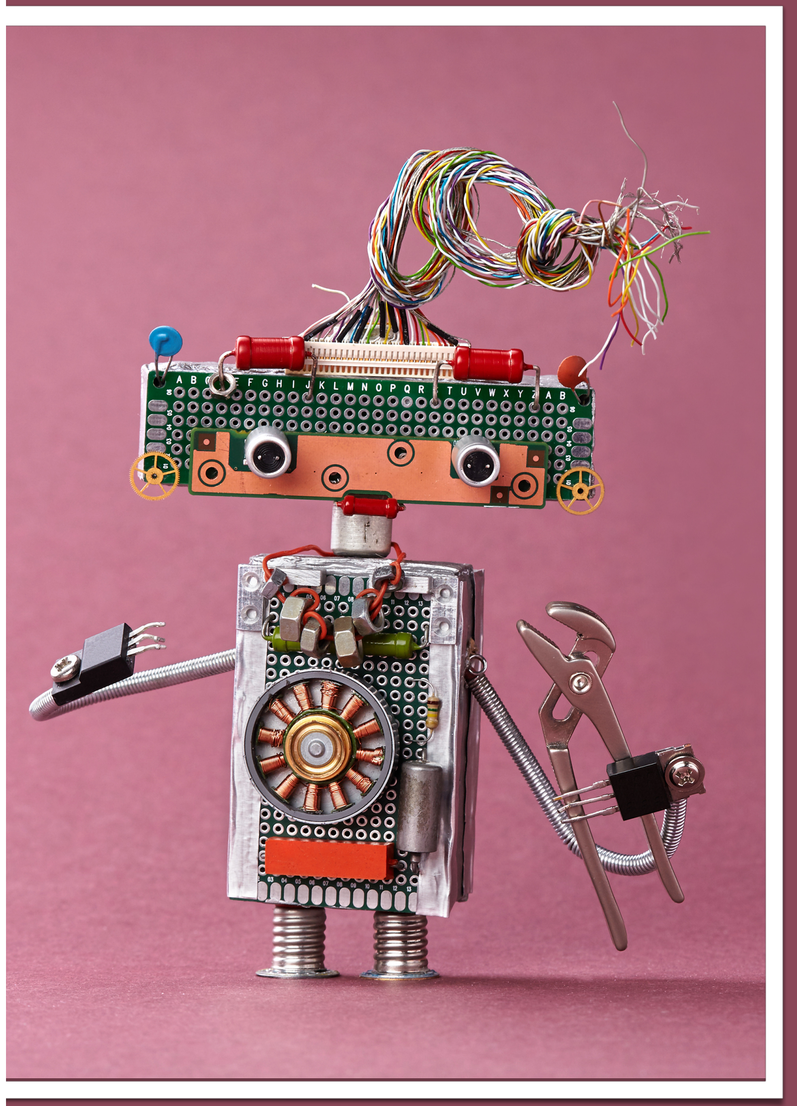
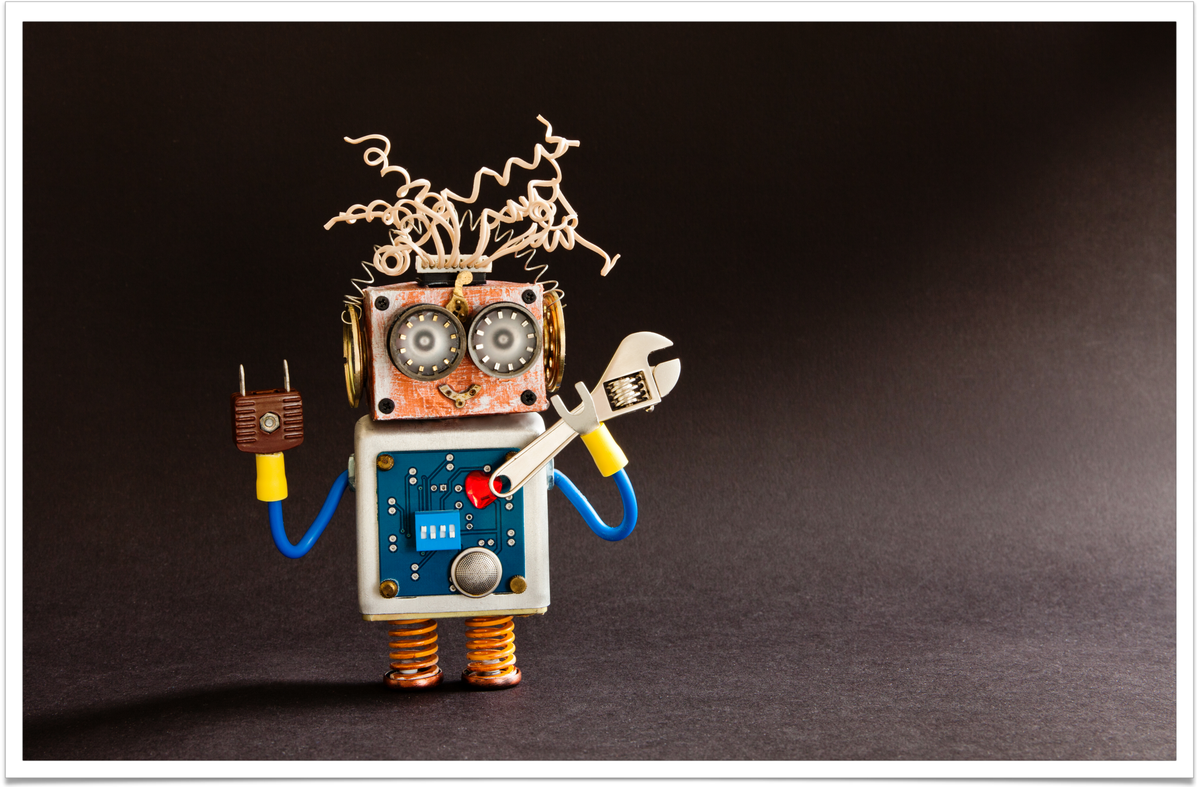


They are Influential

According to a study conducted by Durham University, fictional characters can influence readers in real life. Of more than 1500 readers surveyed, 19 percent stated the voices of fictional characters stayed with them after they had finished reading.

Some participants of the survey said the characters influenced the tone of their thoughts. One in seven said they heard the voices of the fictional characters as clearly as if they were in the room with them.

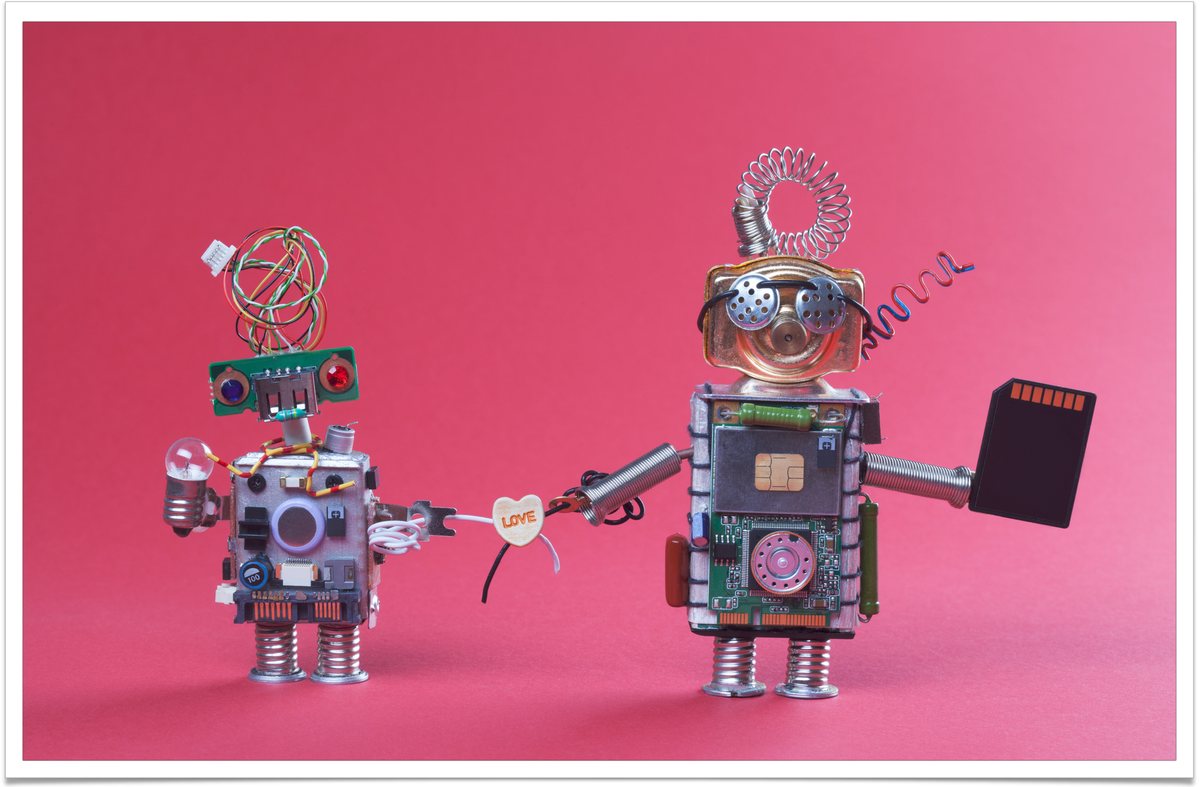


Think about fictional characters who have influenced your life. Who comes to mind?

They Engage our Emotions

Compelling characters keep readers engaged emotionally.

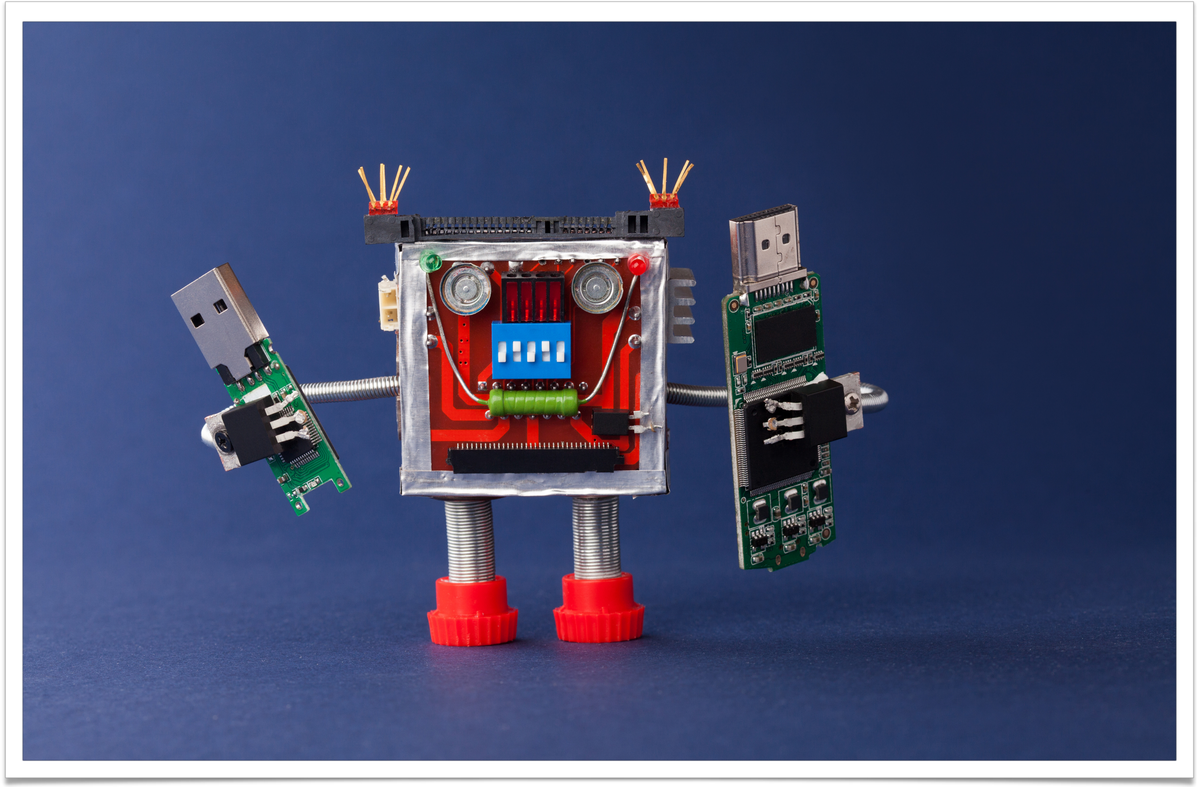
Readers have expressed experiencing emotions such as anticipation, curiosity, fascination, wonder, hope, fear, tension, anxiety, doubt, shock, dismay, joy, thrill, surprise, and sadness while reading.



Why do readers stop reading a book? The number one reason stated by readers: They lost interest in the protagonist.

They are Memorable

Some characteristics found in the most memorable characters include undeserved mistreatment (Harry Potter); undeserved misfortune (the Cratchit family); physical/mental/health/financial handicaps; fear of a secret being discovered; desperate need to achieve a specific goal; vulnerability; betrayal; exclusion/rejection; jeopardy; regret for past mistakes.



To keep your readers reading, you must strengthen the emotional bond between them and your characters.

EXAMPLES OF COMPELLING CHARACTERS

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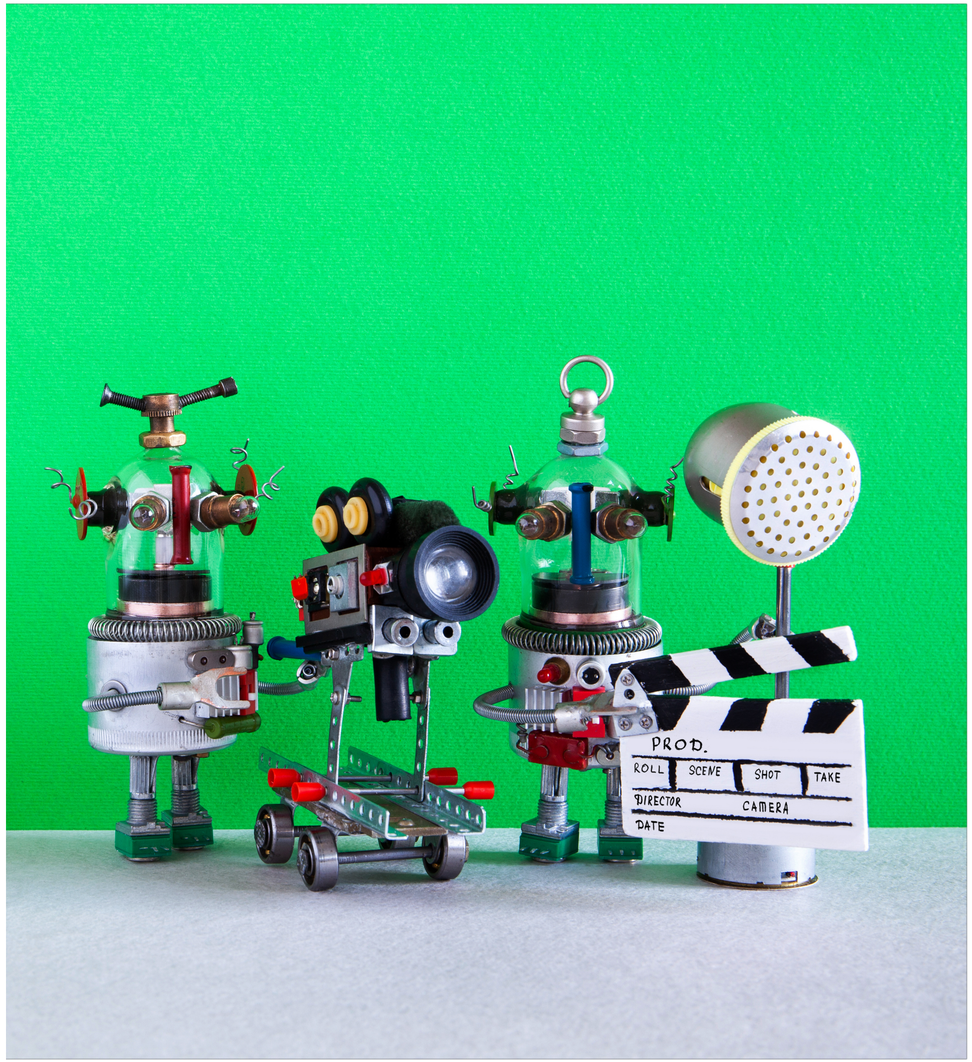


Aunt Polly

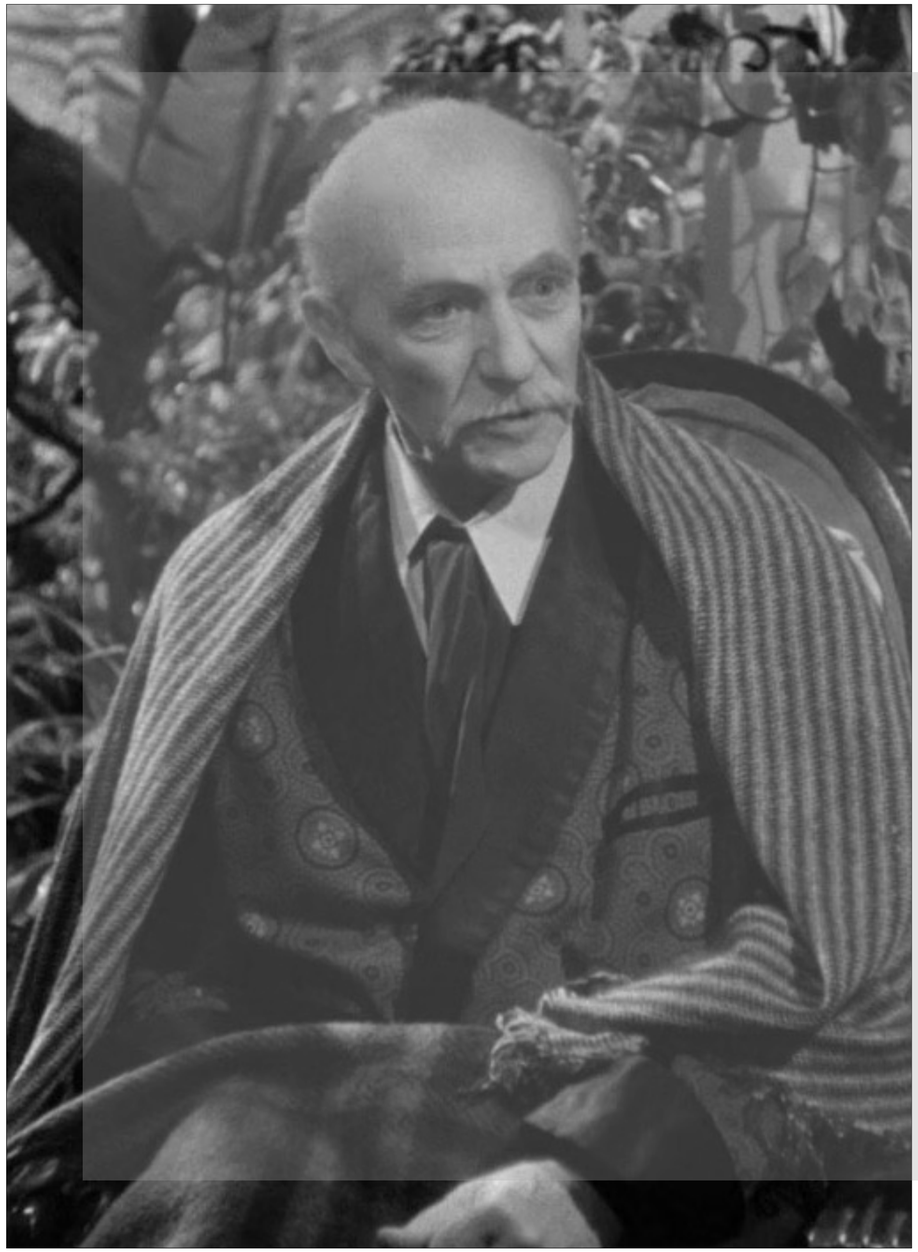
The old lady pulled her spectacles down and looked over them about the room; then she put them up and looked out under them. She seldom or never looked THROUGH them for so small a thing as a boy; they were her state pair, the pride of her heart, and were built for “style,” not service—she could have seen through a pair of stove-lids just as well.

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer
by Mark Twain

Gandalf

In his aged face under great snowy brows his eyes were set like coals that could suddenly burst into fire.

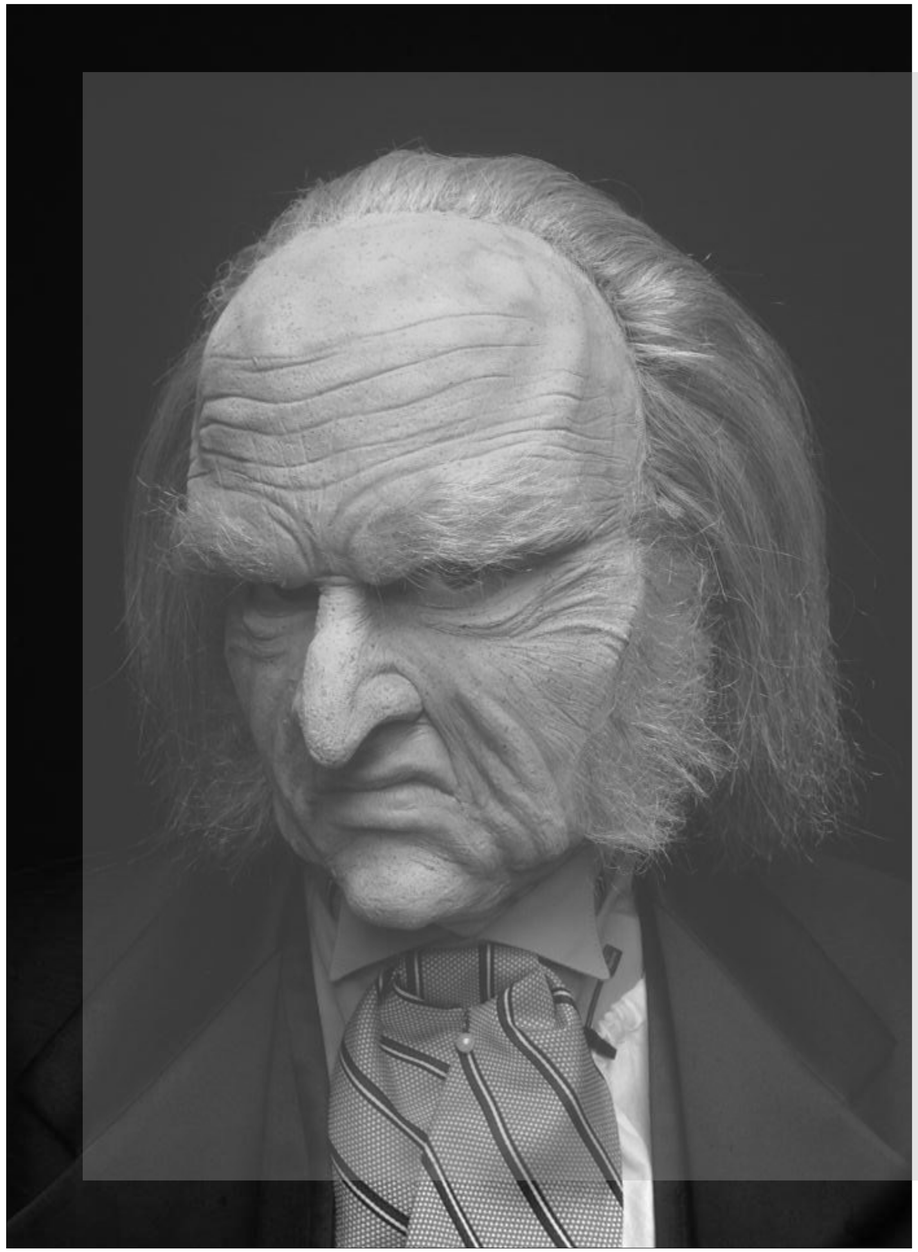
The Fellowship of the Ring
by J.R.R. Tolkien



General Sternwood

A few locks of dry white hair clung to his scalp, like wild flowers fighting for life on a bare rock.

The Big Sleep
by Raymond Chandler



Ebenezer Scrooge

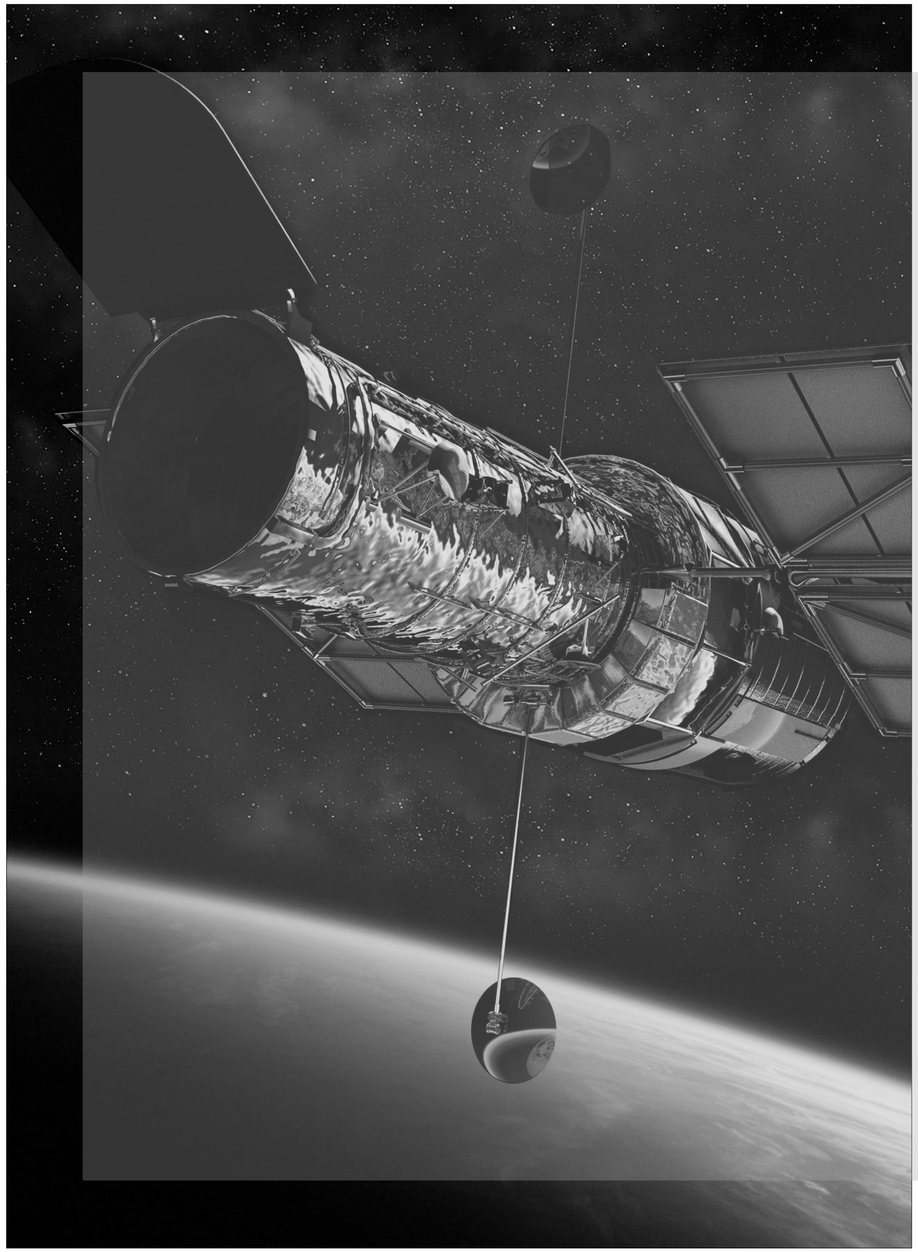
Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster.

A Christmas Carol
by Charles Dickens

Scarlett O’Hara

[she] was not beautiful, but men seldom realized it when caught by her charm …

Gone with the Wind
by Margaret Mitchell



Space

(reading from the Guide): “Space,” *it says*, “is big. Really big. You just won’t believe how vastly hugely mind-bogglingly big it is. I mean, you may think it’s a long way down the road to the chemist, but that’s just peanuts to space.

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy
by Douglas Adams

WHAT CHARACTERS NEED TO MAKE THEM COMPELLING

In other words, what makes characters work?

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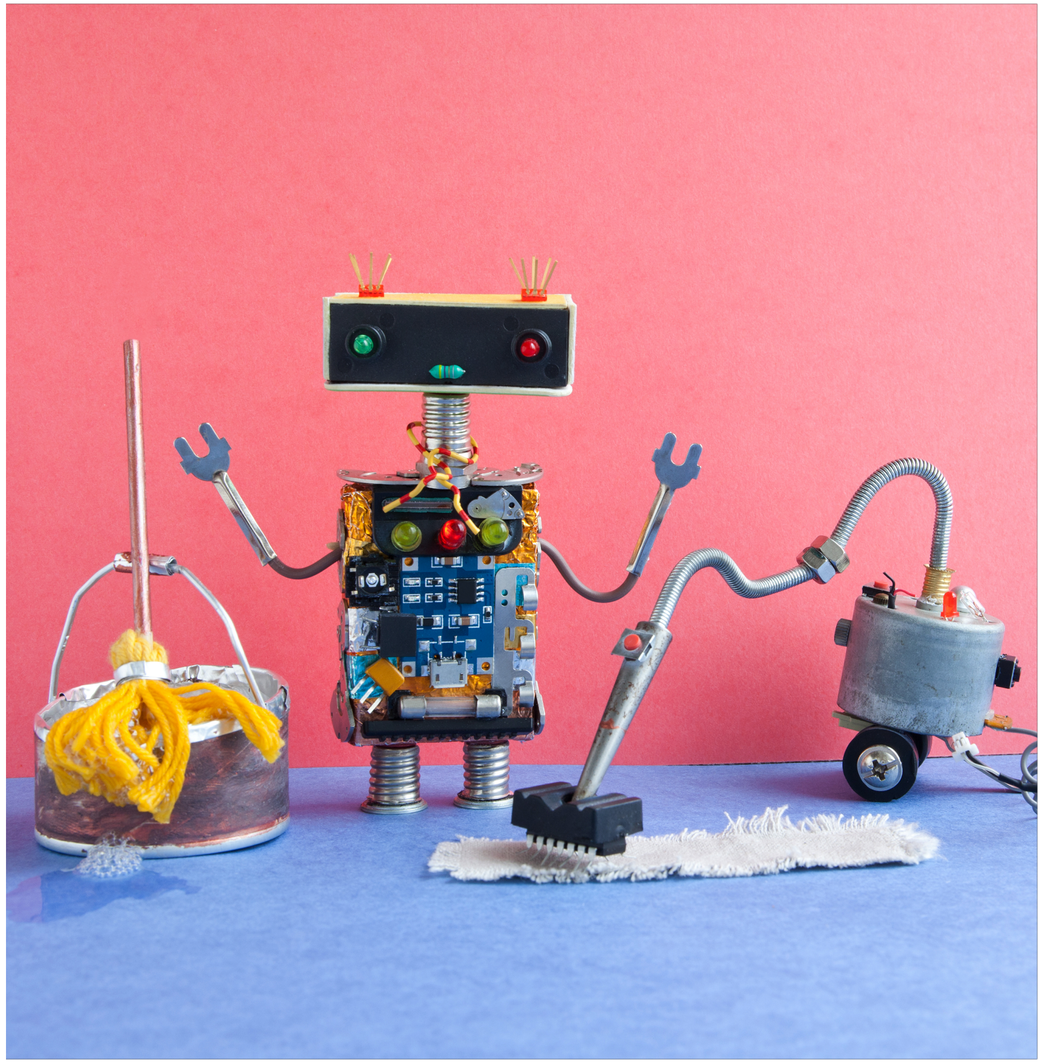


A Job

Each character in your story will have a purpose — a role in the story that only they can fill. Novels have many character roles — hero/heroine, antagonist, friends, mentors, victims, suspects, and others.

If you need a plumber, you interview plumbers. The best way to find the best character for the “jobs” in your story is to interview the applicants that will best fit the story roles you need to fill.

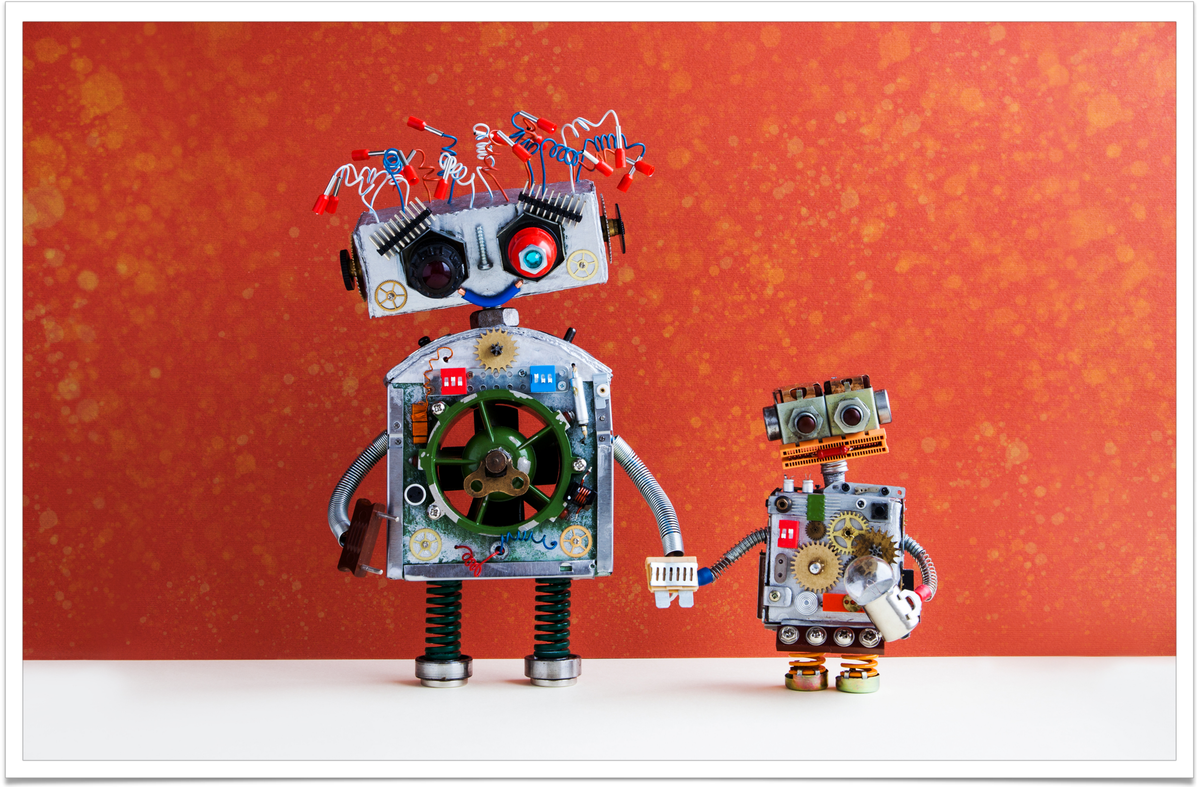
List the main character roles your story will need. Start interviewing some applicants.

Something to Care about

Give your characters something they care deeply about — and then threaten that person, place, or thing. This can create great conflict, move the plot, and provide opportunity for character growth.

What if a single man cares deeply about tidiness and order. (Think: Felix Unger)

Now, partner him with someone who infringes upon his neatness, such as a slob. Opposites may attract, but they also can create great conflict.



List some opposite traits you can include in your main characters that could create instant conflict.

A Story Goal

A character's goal will become the main source of conflict in your story. A story goal is different than a character's ambition or greatest dream. A goal is specific and attainable. The steps your character takes in hopes of reaching that goal will develop your story's plot.

Questions are a great way to discover your character's story goal.

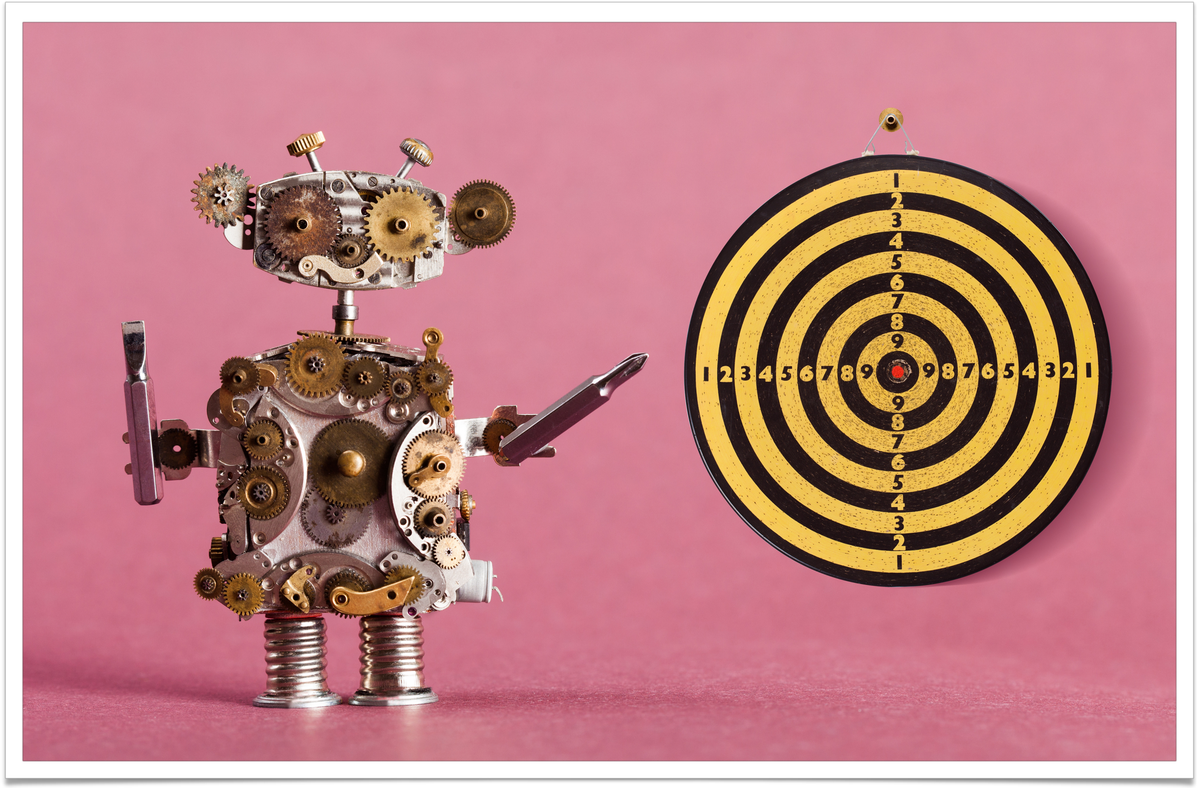
What is He/She dissatisfied with in life?

What does He/She believe would bring them true happiness? (Greatest Dream)

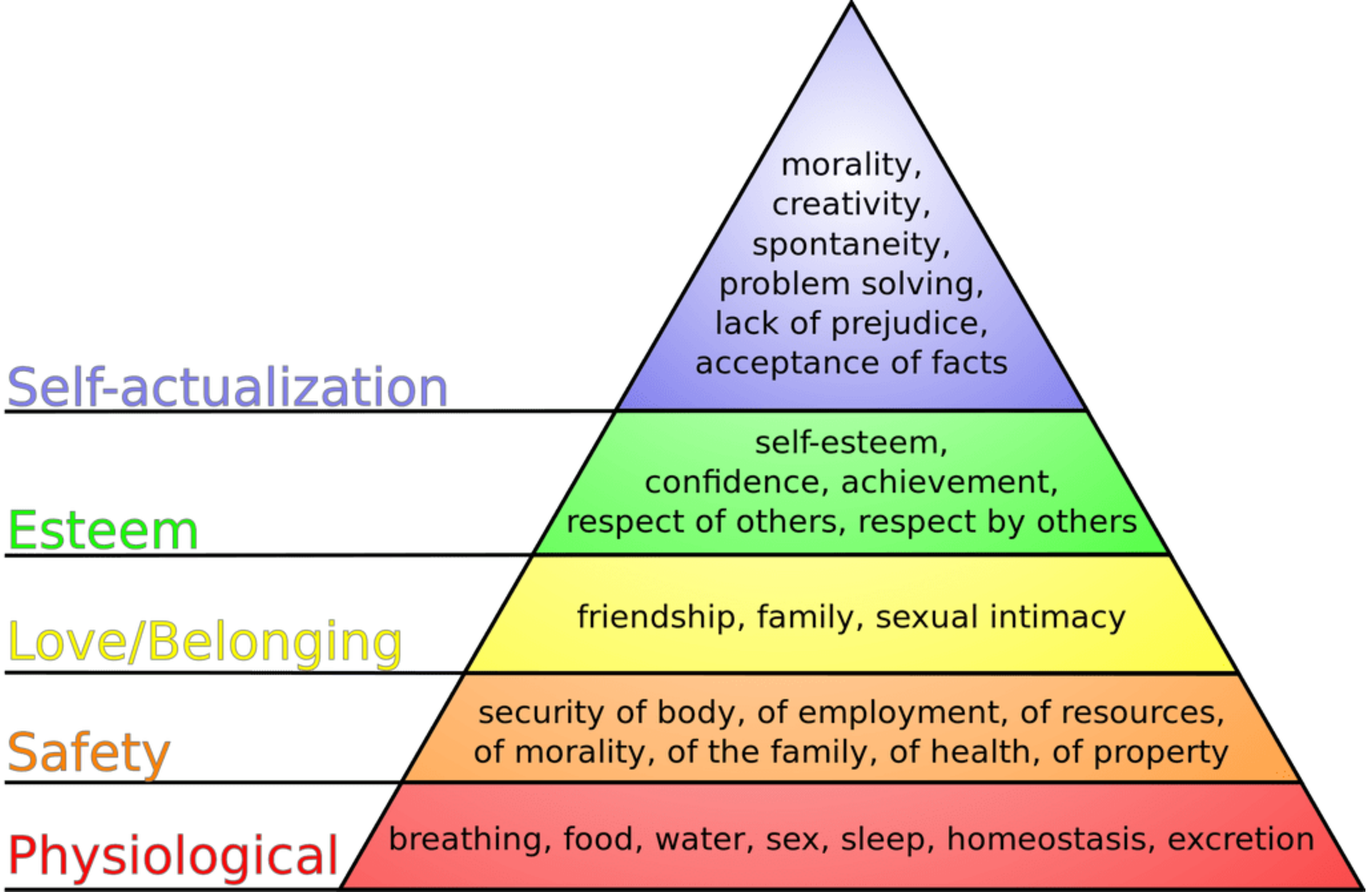
What specific step could my character take to achieve this dream? (Story Goal)

What has prevented Him/Her from taking this step already? (Initial conflict)

What would it take for my character to pursue this goal? (Inciting incident)



Character story goals usually fall within one of the five levels of Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs."


Self-actualization
morality, creativity, spontaneity, problem solving, lack of prejudice, acceptance of facts
Esteem
self-esteem, confidence, achievement, respect of others, respect by others
Love/Belonging
friendship, family, sexual intimacy
Safety
security of body, of employment, of resources, of morality, of the family, of health, of property
Physiological
breathing, food, water, sex, sleep, homeostasis, excretion

Examples of Story Goals

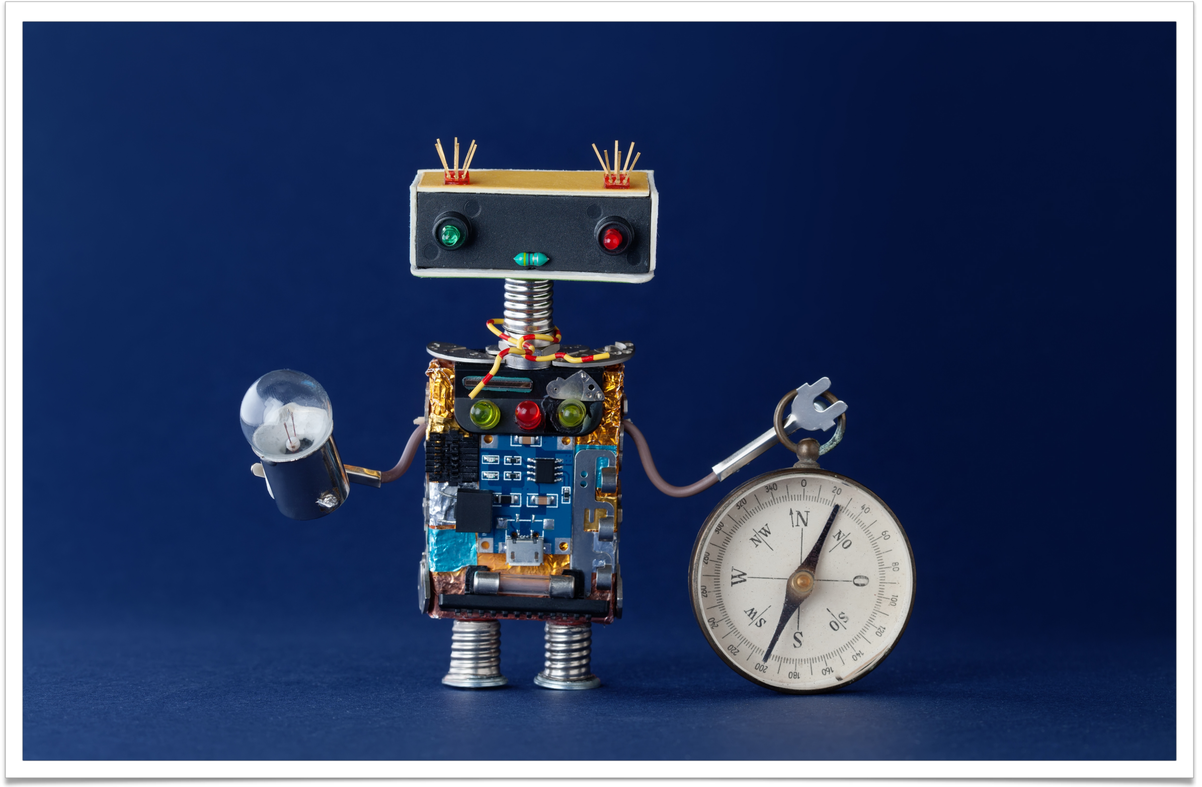
Physiological: Scarlet O'Hara in Gone with the Wind vows to never be hungry again.

Safety/Security: In Maze Runner, Alby and the other boys build a sustainable sanctuary to avoid the lethal Grievers.

Love/Belonging: Heathcliff's quest for vengeance stems from his desire to be loved in Wuthering Heights.

Esteem and Recognition: In The Pursuit of Happiness, Chris Gardner wants a job that won't just enable him and his son to survive - he desires to be a successful stockbroker.

Self-Actualization: Godfrey, of My Man Godfrey, abandons his social position to live as a hobo turned butler in order to find purpose in his entitled life.



Striving to reach a story goal sets the character out on a journey, or quest to attain the goal. The actions He/She takes toward reaching the goal is the story's plot.

Obstacles

Placing obstacles in your character's path not only creates conflict by preventing or delaying him/her from reaching his/her goal, the character's reaction to obstacles/conflict can be used as a device for revealing more layers of your character.

Types of obstacles:

Person vs. Person (Example: Hunger Games)

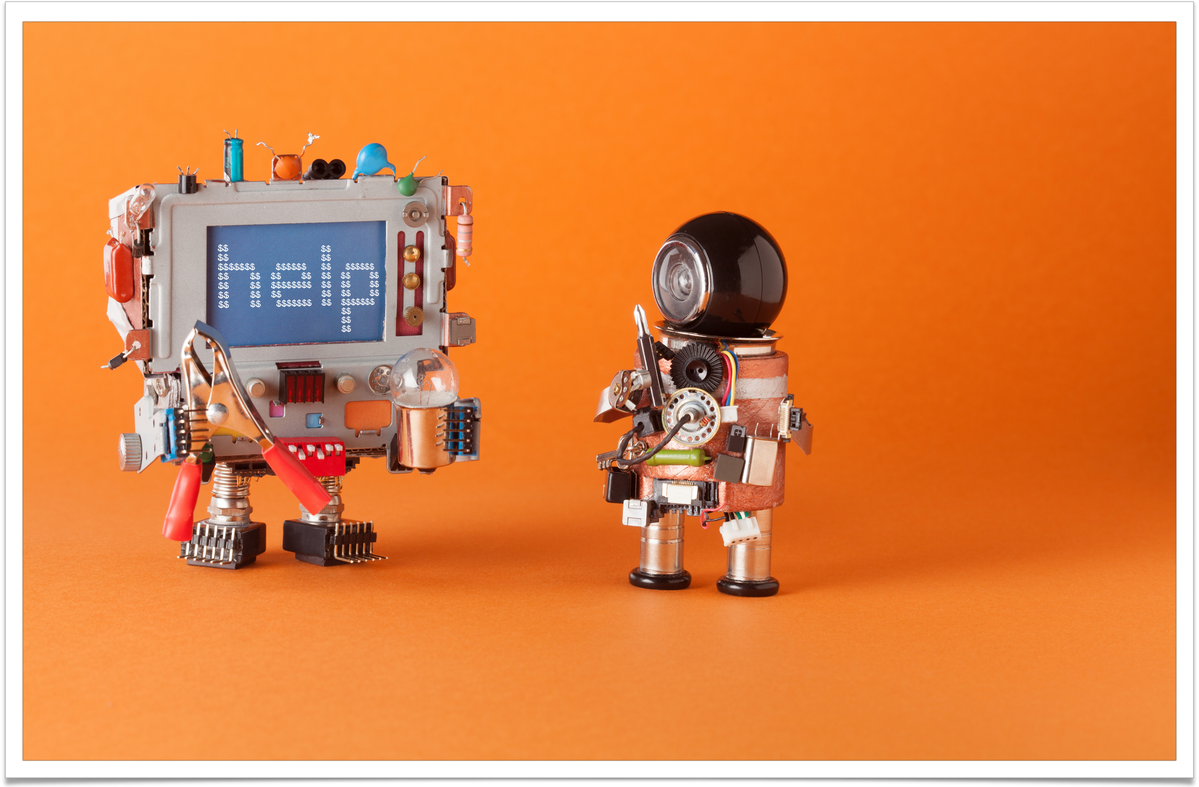
Person vs. Nature (Example: Robinson Crusoe)

Person vs. Self (The Picture of Dorian Gray)

Person vs. Society (Example: To Kill a Mockingbird)

Person vs. Supernatural (Example: War of the Worlds)

Person vs. Technology (Example: The Matrix)



Obstacles prevent your character from reaching his/her goals.

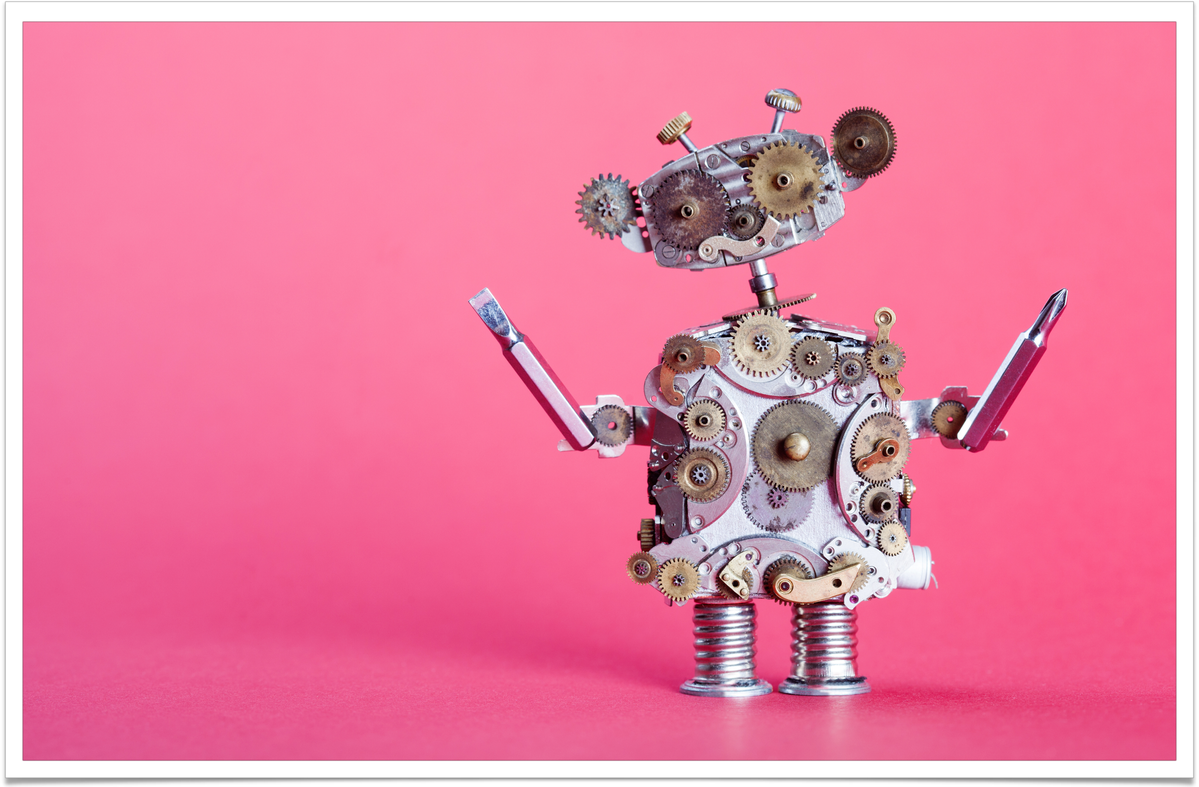
Endearing Qualities

Readers don't always have to like what a character does, but they do need to understand it. Readers don't like whiny, passive, or cruel characters.

Traits that endear readers to characters include persistence, courage, overcoming odds, being the underdog, kindness, ingenuity, loyalty, humor, spunk.

Hopefulness is another endearing quality. Think about Stanley Yelnats in the book/movie Holes. No matter the circumstances he faces, he is hopeful.

Including a "Pet the Dog" moment also helps endear readers to characters.



Readers love to cheer for characters they can relate to, characters that are likable.

Flaws

Nobody's perfect. Even Mary Poppins is only "practically perfect." Nobody's perfect. Even Mary Poppins is only "practically perfect." Flaws include bad habits, hot buttons, blind spots, or anything that can make your character more human — i.e. more relatable.

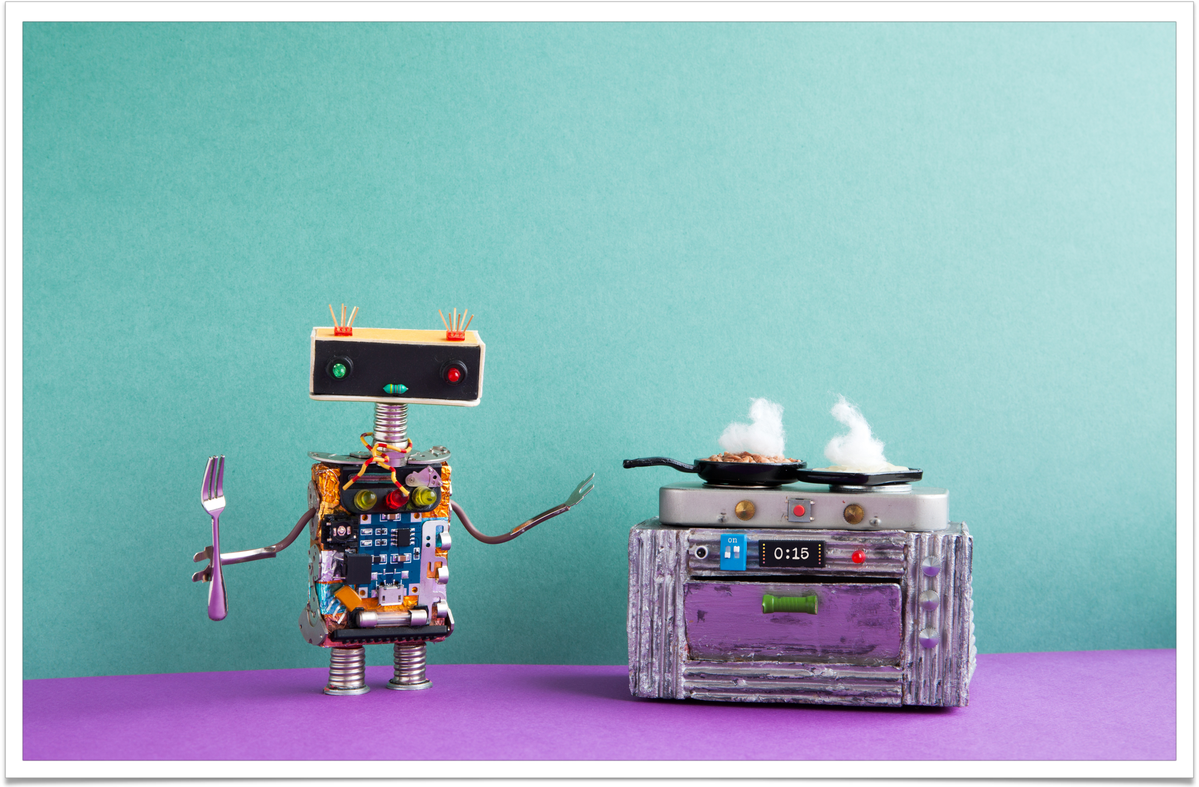
Caution: Don't make the manifestation of your character's flaw overwhelming or annoying.

Literary Agent (and best-selling author) Donald Maas suggests working out a way to demonstrate your character's flaw in the first five pages of your story.

Skills

If you spent an hour and 36 minutes of your life watching the movie, “Napoleon Dynamite,” you probably remember the scene where Napoleon bemoans the fact he has no skills. “I don’t even have any good skills. You know like nunchuck skills, bow hunting skills, computer hacking skills. Girls only want boyfriends who have great skills!” Readers also like characters who have great skills, talents, a superpower even.

When it comes to skills, MacGyver comes to mind. Sherlock Holmes had an uncanny skill for observing minute details.



What special skills or superpowers did some of your favorite characters possess?

A Secret

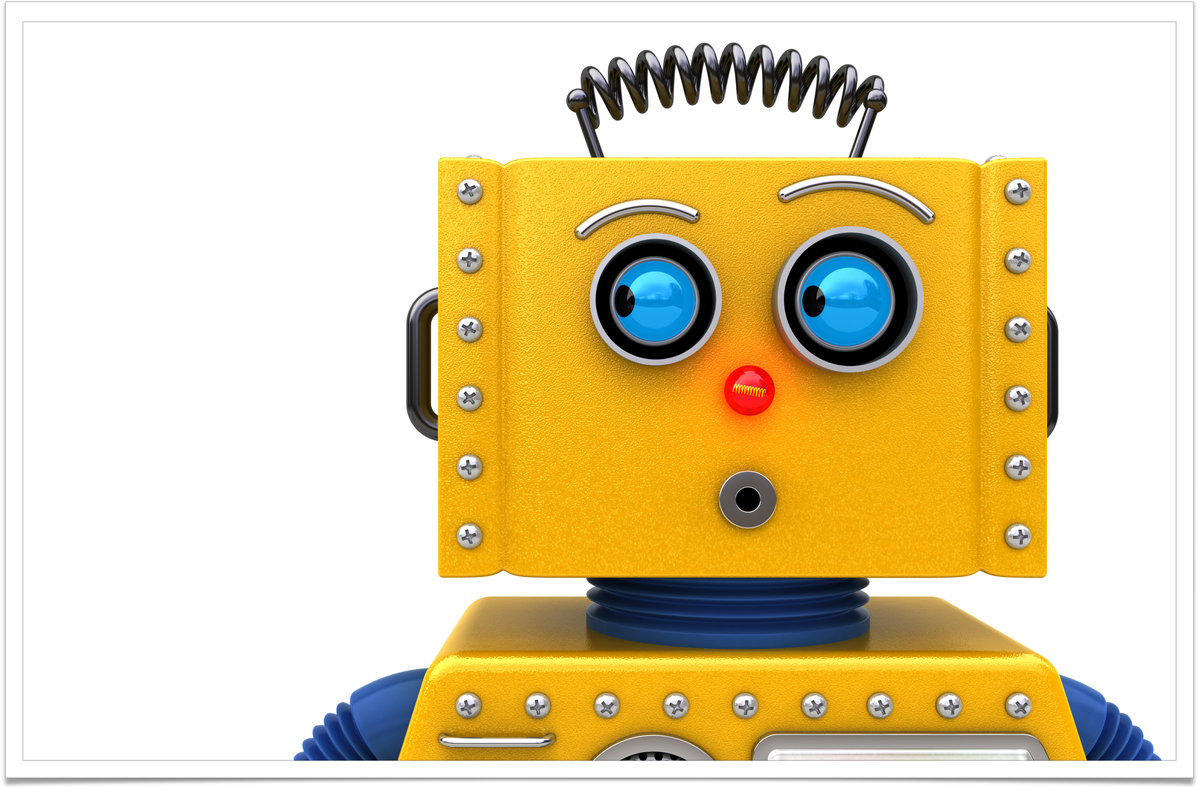
Compelling characters have something to hide — whether it's something they're ashamed of , some action they feel guilt about, someone they're running from, secrets kept out of necessity for survival, or even a secret dream/ desire. Some secrets stem from the character's emotional wound.

Examples of character secrets in fiction:

The Great Gatsby: Gatsby's real name/background

Sweet Home Alabama: Real name/background of Melanie Carmichael

The Count of Monte Cristo - the count keeps everything about him



People love secrets, and readers are no different.

Signs of Growth

The character's arc consists of three basic things:

The character's goal

The Lie - a deeply rooted misconception

The Truth - Self-improvement. The character will be able to do something at the end of the story that he/she was incapable of at the beginning.

Examples of positive character arcs:

Bilbo Baggins (The Hobbit)

Ebenezer Scrooge (A Christmas Carol)

Darth Vader (Star Wars)

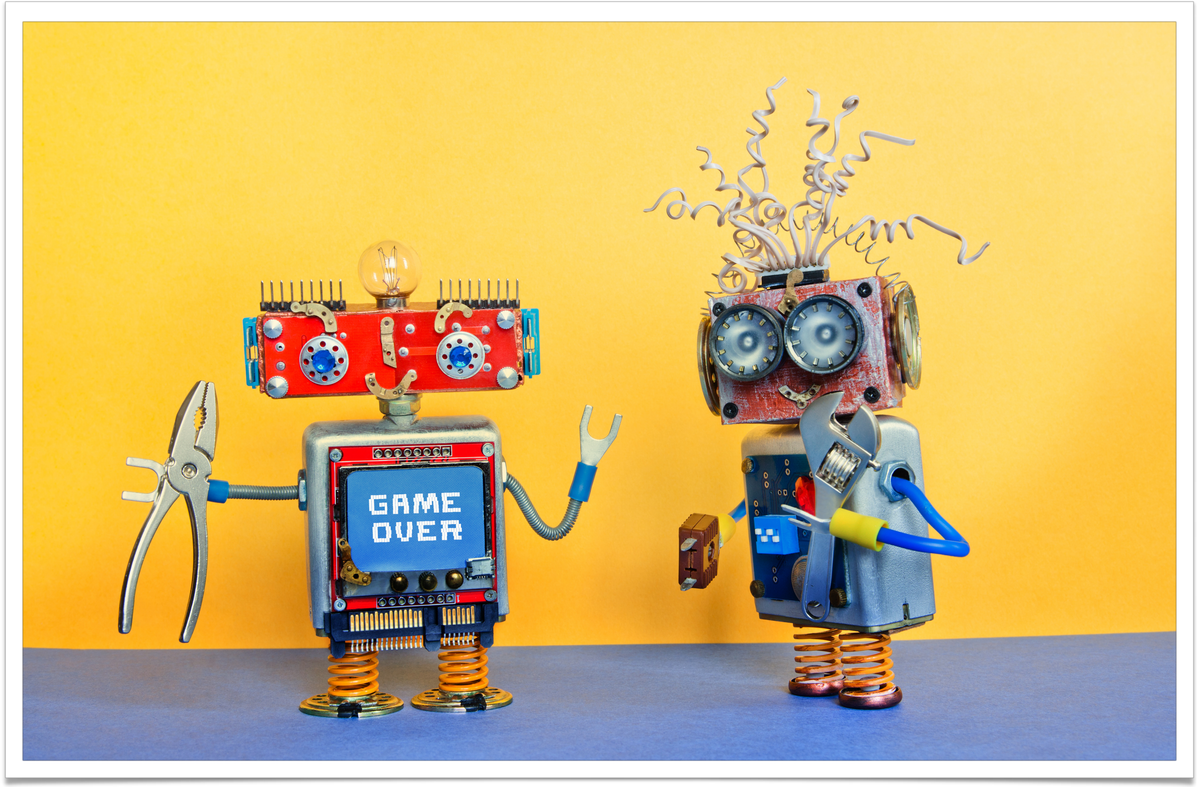
George Bailey (It's a Wonderful Life)

The character's arc is his/her transformation or internal journey that occurs as he/she responds to story events that affect him/her.

High Stakes

If the handsome prince fails to slay the dragon, the damsel in distress will remain in distress. If the prince doesn't care about the princess, then the stakes aren't that high. But if she's his true love, that makes it personal, and making the stakes personal engages the reader. Making it personal is one way to raise the stakes in your story.

Other ways to raise the stakes for your character include: Giving consequences to the character's choices. Granting them a small victory from a choice they made could be quickly followed up by a result that complicates things further for your character. You can also raise the stakes by giving your character a time limit to reach his/her goal ("ticking bomb").



Stakes are the consequences the character will face if he/she fails to reach his/her story goal.

HOW TO CREATE COMPELLING CHARACTERS

4

Creating Characters

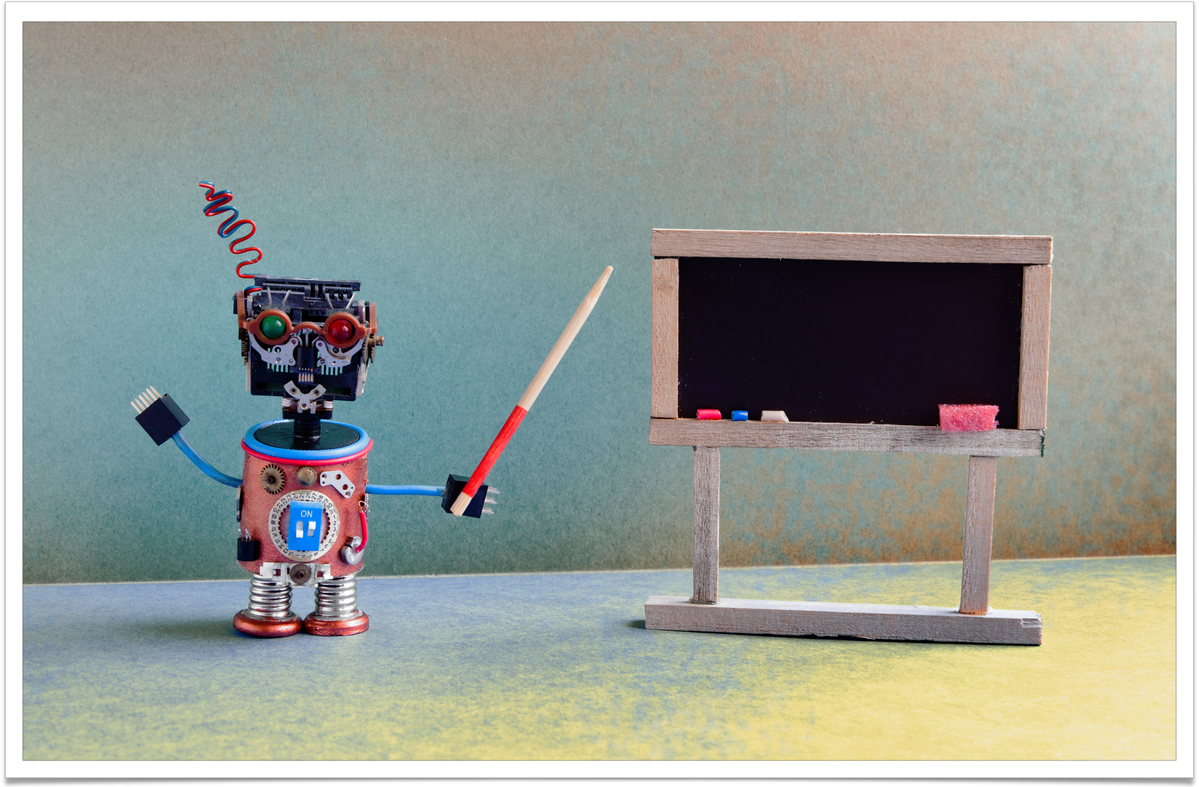
There are many ways to create compelling characters. I'll share with you three ways I've used. Typically, I use a combination of all three of these methods.

Three ways I have created characters:

The Story Equation

Master Character Template

Start from Scratch

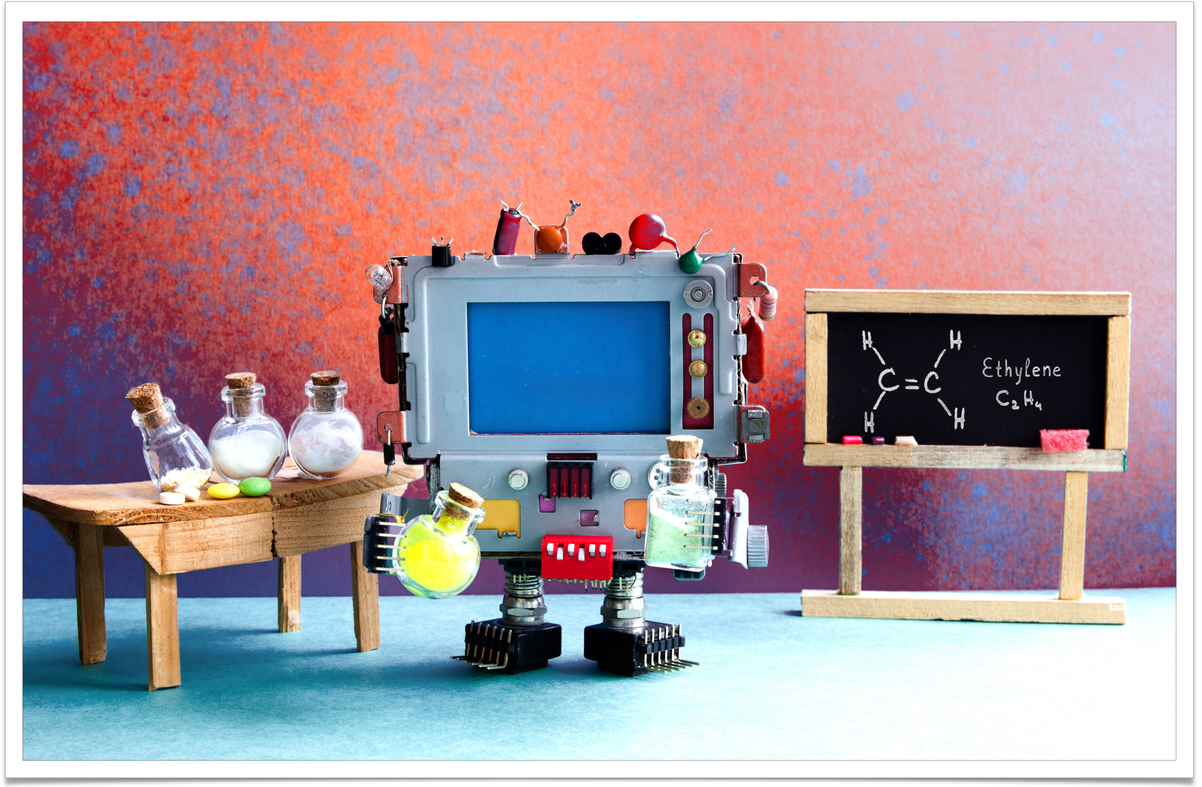


It doesn't matter which method you use - find what works best for you and your story.

The Story Equation

Step one of the Story Equation is the character's basic identity. Start with the basics: Name, Age, Occupation, and build from there — Greatest Dream, Values, Story Goal/Motivation/Obstacles/Stakes, Emotional/Spiritual Needs, Dark Secret, Strengths (Super Power)/ Weaknesses, etc. Also ask yourself, "What will my character be able to do at the end of the story that he/ she couldn't do at the beginning?"
The crux of the SEQ is the Dark Moment Story (DMS). Every character has a pivotal life event that shapes who they are when the story begins.

From the DMS, you will discover the character's Wound, Flaw, Lie, Fear, Want, and Why. Through in some competing values that can create Internal/External Conflict.



I highly suggest you take Susan May Warren's Story Equation course. You can find it online at novel.academy/p/theseq
The cost of the course is $27.

Dark Moment Story Example

What could make a successful CPA wind up as a homeless man, living on the city streets?

Wound: Love and Belonging are affected due to being legitimately incarcerated for a crime.

Lie: Feels he does't deserve happiness because he can never make up for what I did.

Flaw: Manifestation of his wound - withdrawing from family and society

Fear: His granddaughter will follow in his footsteps

Want: To reconcile with his granddaughter and be a family

Goal: To discover what happened to his granddaughter

Motivation (His Why?): He feels his granddaughter is in danger - he feels guilt that his past affects her future, so he wants to make it up to her.

Conflict: He can't find her on his own—he will have to let go of his isolation and reach out for help

Honest Abe is a character in my current Work in Progress - Forgotten Treasure.

Master Character Archetypes

Based upon mythical characters, archetypes are a good starting point for character creation.

Most of the archetypes include the following information:

Background of the character template is based upon

Summary of the character archetype

What this character archetype cares about

What this character archetype fears

What motivates this character archetype

How others view this character archetype

Tips for developing the character arc

Archetypes to pair this character with

Character Assets

Character Flaws

Villainous side of this archetype

Archetype examples from film/TV/Books/History

Start with one of the 45 templates included in Victoria Lynn Schmidt's book, and add your own tweaks.

Master Character Archetype Example

When I created Andrea “Andy” Warren, I started with “The Father’s Daughter” archetype, which is based upon the mythical goddess Athena.

The Father’s Daughter is self-sufficient and independent. She appears unemotional and struggles to relax in front of others. Driven by guilt due to her role in her father’s death, Andy longs to make him proud. She chooses a man’s profession and struggles with close female friendships. She’s a city girl, but the plot thrusts her into a rural setting.

Examples of other Father’s Daughter characters from books/TV/film:

Captain Kathryn Janeway - Star Trek Voyager

Murphy Brown - Murphy Brown

Margo Channing (Bette Davis) - All About Eve

Kinsey Millone - books by Sue Grafton

Clarice Starling - The Silence of the Lambs

Andrea "Andy" Warren is a sports photographer turned sleuth in my novel, DEAD BROKE. The Father's Daughter template works well for a woman who encounters tough circumstances, such as investigating a murder.

Starting from Scratch

There are many “start from scratch” methods out there. If this is how you choose to develop your characters, do a bit of research and find a way that works well for you. For this lesson, I’ve chosen the step-by-step plan outlined by the late master writing instructor Dwight Swain in his book Creating Characters: How to Build Story People.

Other tools you can use for Starting from Scratch:

Character worksheets

GMC by Debra Dixon

Writing the Breakout Novel Workbook by Donald Maass

How to Write a D*** Good Novel by James Frey

The Snowflake Method by Randy Ingermanson

Writing and Selling Your Mystery Novel by Hallie Ephron

Create a Character Clinic by Holly Lisle

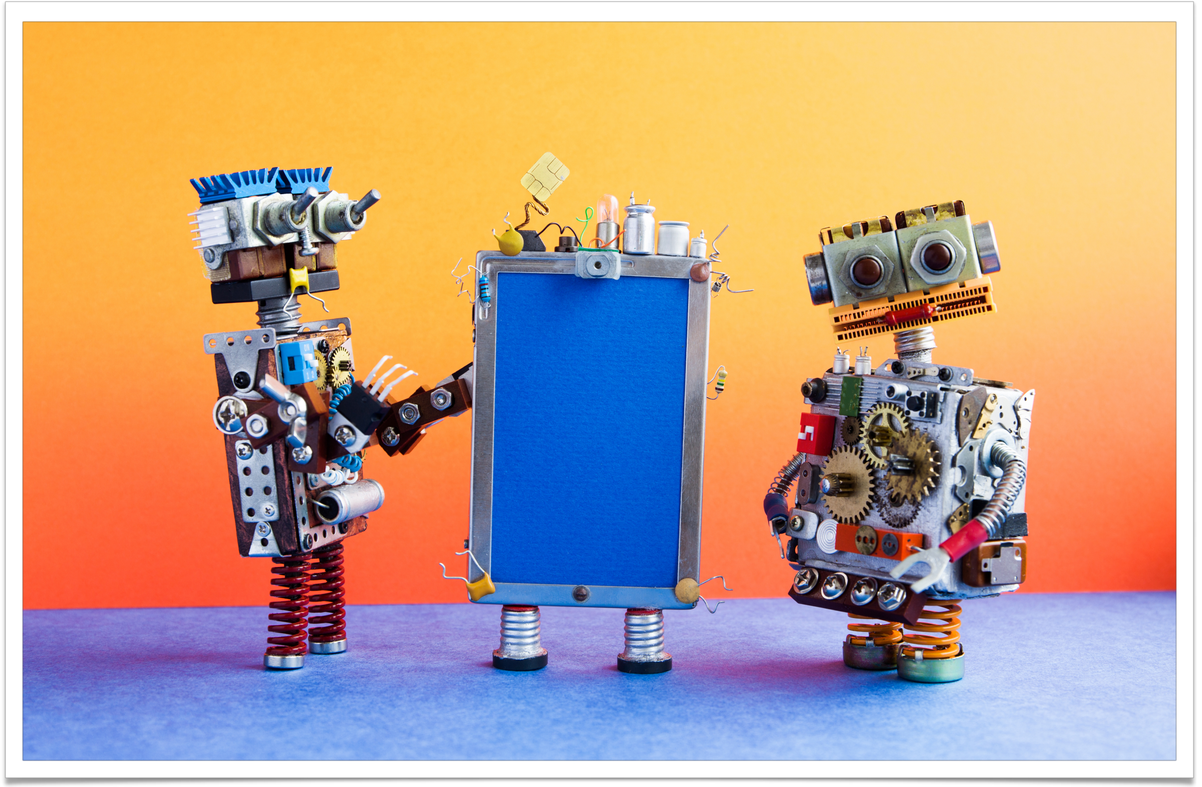
Plot versus Character by Jeff Gerke

Nobody wants to read a story with "carbon copy" characters that all look, act, and sound the same. Building your character from the ground up can help prevent this problem.

Brain Dump

Even though you may think you're starting with a blank screen, you probably have some sort of idea about your character. Begin by writing down everything you know about the character, even if you haven't begun to develop the character yet.

The heroine in my current WIP, Forgotten Treasure, was inspired by a stock photo I found while browsing for images for a client video trailer. I wanted to learn more about her and discover her story. I'd met a restaurant server named Jaci years ago and I liked the name, so I named the girl in the stock photo Jaci Wilcox. Then, I started brainstorming more details about her.



Something probably inspired you to write a character's story. What was it? A name you heard? A photo you saw? Take this germ of an idea and do some free writing.

-Jaci Wilcox -

Label Your Character

Your character isn't a John or Jane Doe. He or She has an identity.

Now it's time to get to know him/her.

Begin by selecting a few character labels:

Age, Gender, Vocation, Manner

A character's dominant impression is a simple phrase comprised of a vocational noun modified by an adjective describing his or her manner.

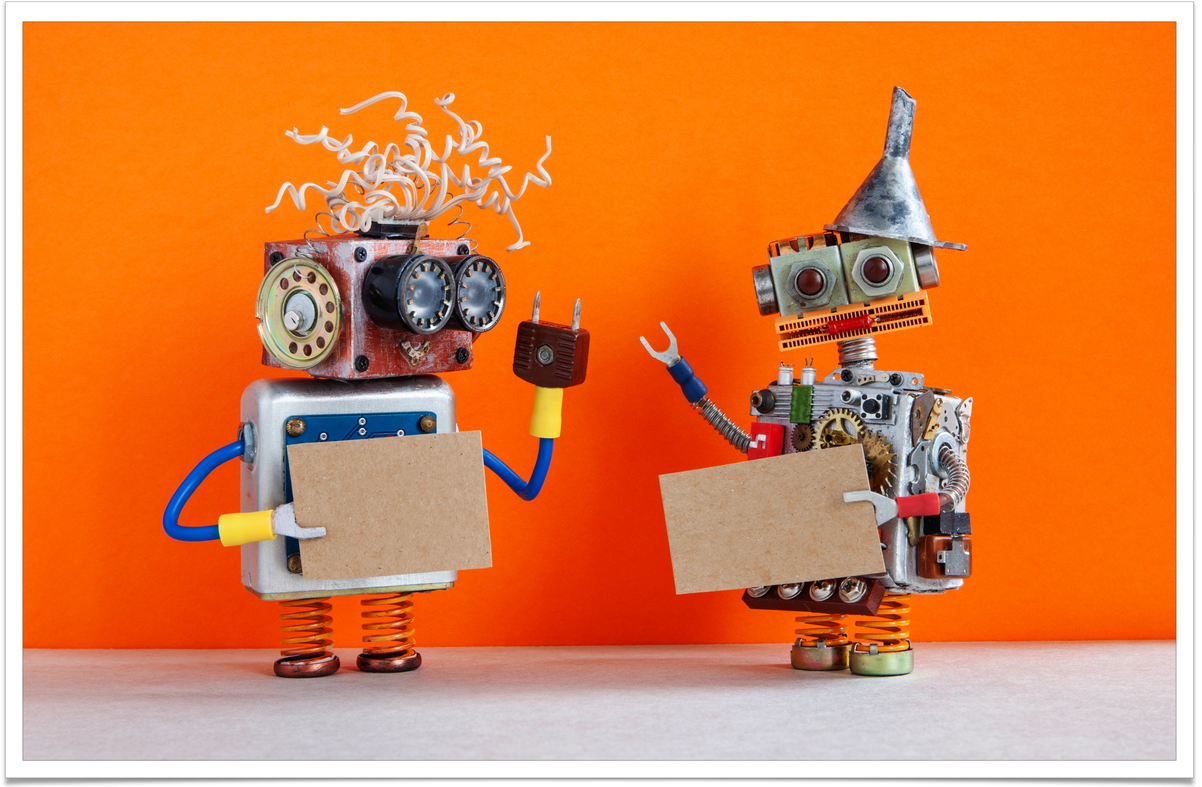
Examples of dominant impressions:

Pushy Salesman

Nosy Clerk

Surly Cop

Co-dependent Art Therapist (my character, Jaci Wilcox)



Labels give your reader clues to help him recognize each of your story people - Dwight Swain

Flesh Out Your Character

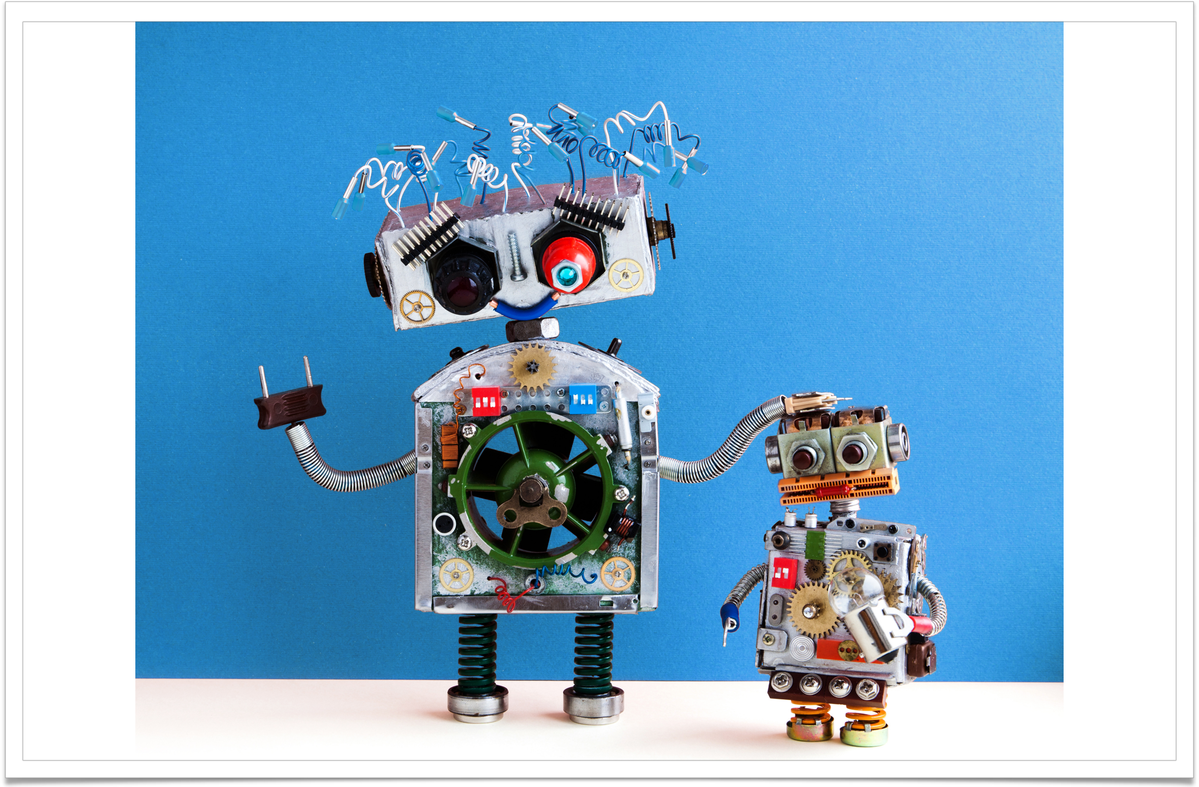
Provide your character with appropriate tags, traits, and relationships.

Tags include name, appearance, ability, speech, mannerisms, attitude, props, etc. See worksheet for a more complete list.

Traits are a character's habitual modes of response or patterns of behavior.

Relationships include how characters feel about and respond to other characters.

One way to "tag" a character is by using props. View the character props on the next slide and guess who they belong to.

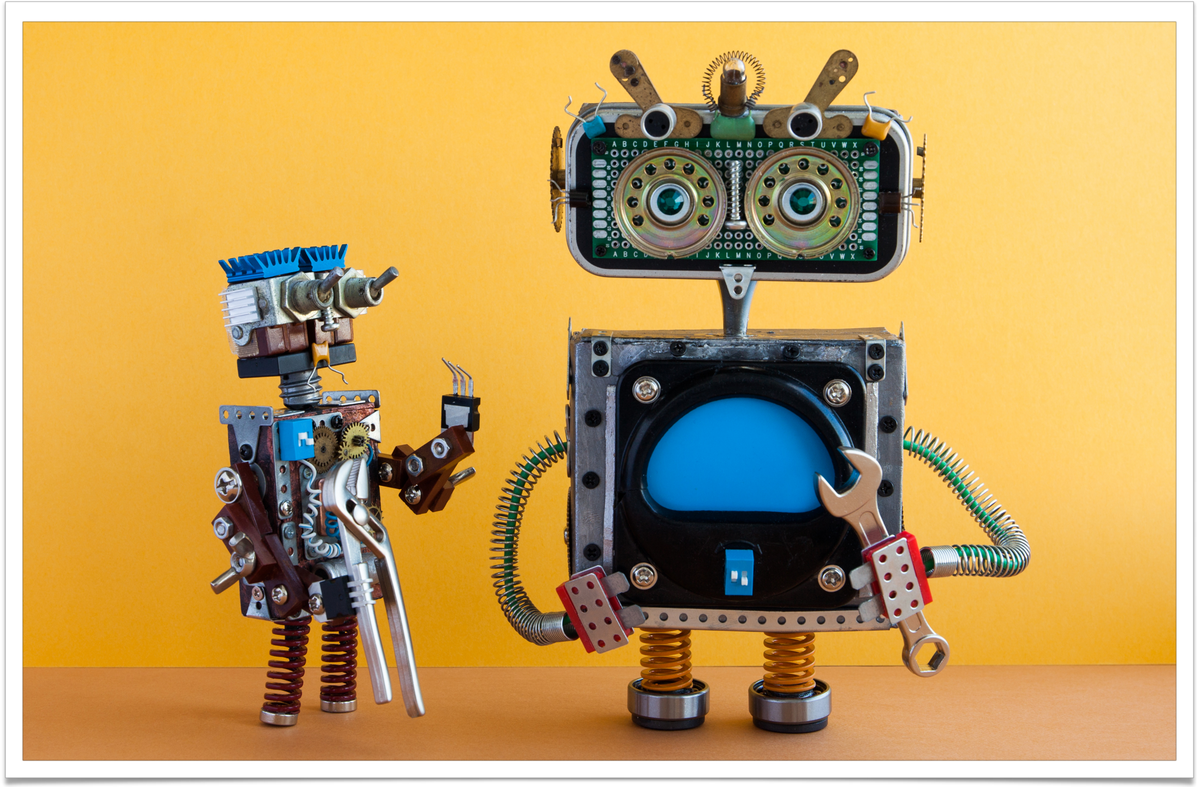


Tags enhance the character's unique identity.

Interview Your Character

Think about your last job interview. (It may have been a while.) Watch a good journalist interview a celebrity or other person. Notice the questions asked usually go beyond the surface — some interview questions are deep. That's the type of questions to ask your readers.

And don't forget the favorite question used by counselors to dig deeper — how did that make you feel? Whether your reader answers angry, afraid, or indifferent, the next question on your list should be "Why?"



Interviewing people is a great way to discover more about them. The same thing can be done to discover more about your characters.

Methods for Interviewing

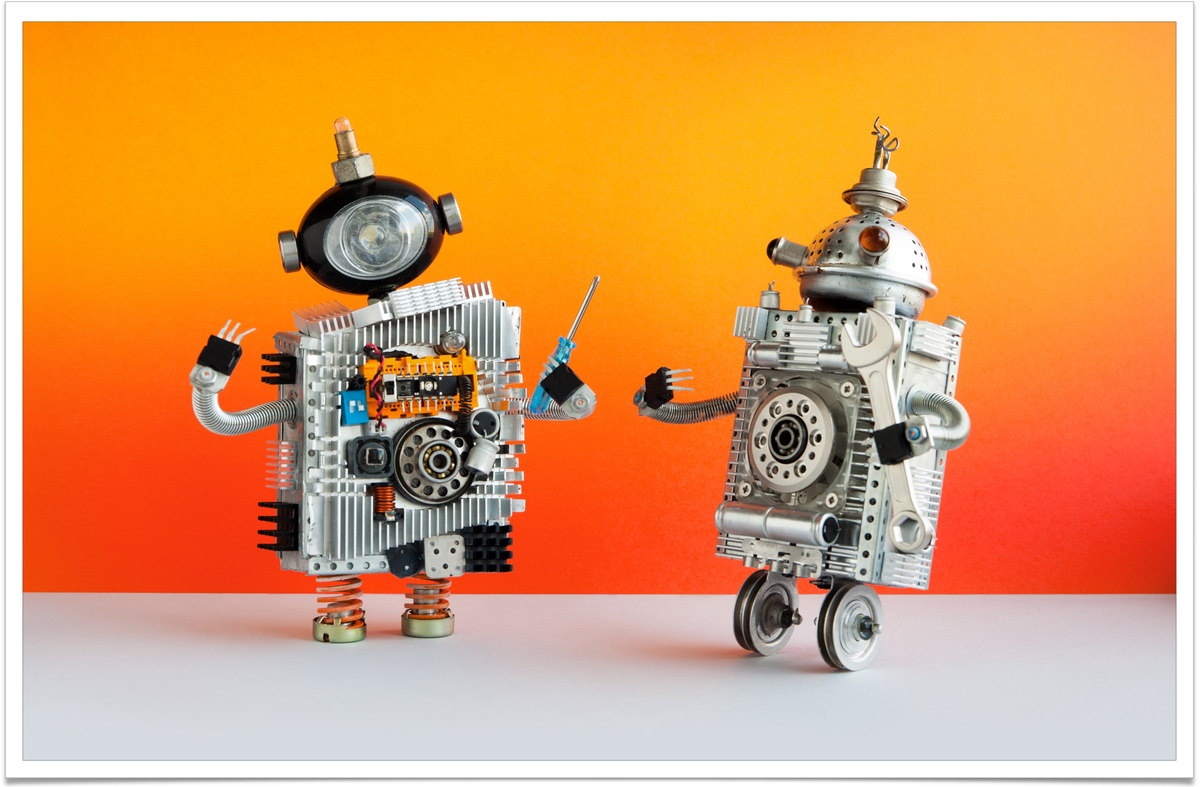
Here are four ways you can use to interview your characters:

1) Ask 20 Questions — think “detective-style” interview. Ask questions until you get to the bottom of things.

2) Basic inventory (just the facts, ma’am interview - works well with minor characters)

3) “Gloves-Off” Questions — deep, personal questions. Keep digging until you find a nugget. (See Brandilyn Collins’ book, Getting into Character for examples of how to conduct this type of interview)

4) Freestyle — more of a conversation than a formal interview. Pretend like you’re meeting a new friend for coffee. What would you ask him/her?



There are many ways to conduct an interview with your character. Find the way that works best for you.

Motivate Your Character

Characters need strong motivation. Which character will a reader care most about?

1) Rita , who takes a second job to help put her son through college?
2) Or Mary, who takes a second job to pay for cosmetic surgery?

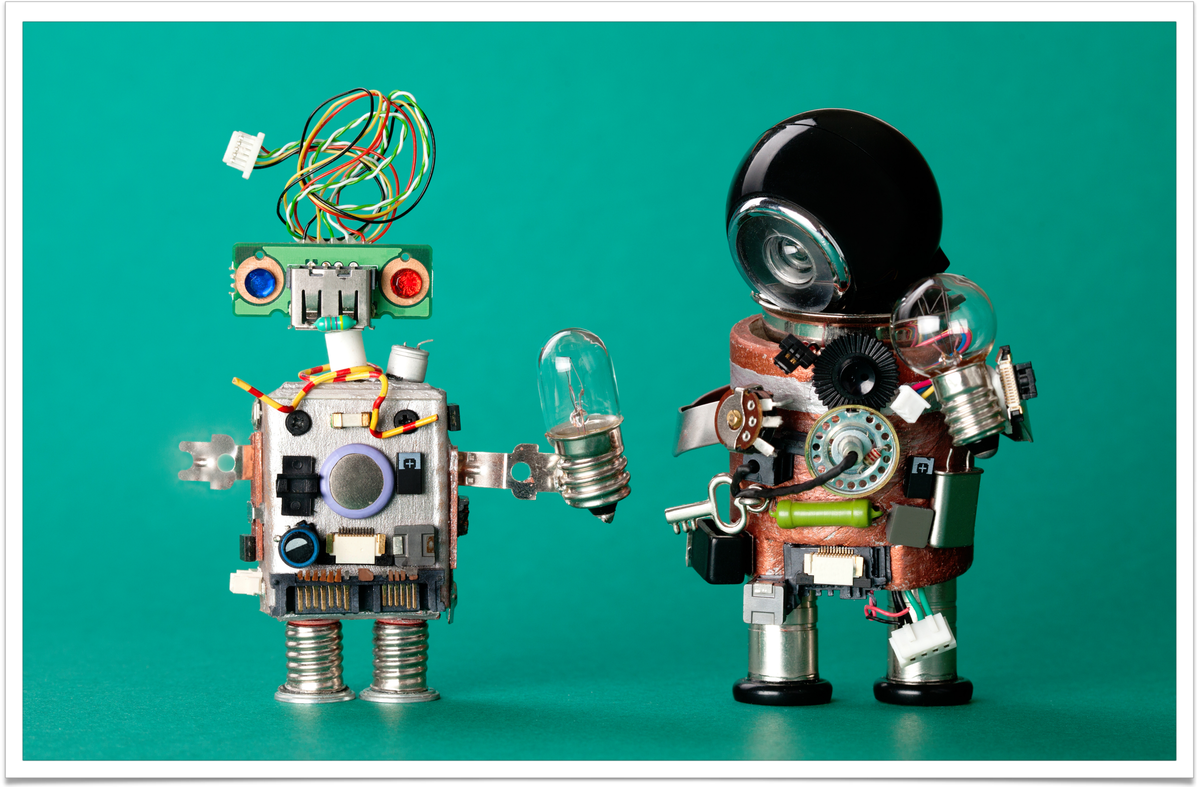
If you picked Rita, consider this:

Rita only needs the money because she blew through her son's college fund to feed her drug habit.

BUT …

Mary needs cosmetic surgery because her ex-husband pressed a hot iron into her face.

(found on novel-writing-help.com)



Every character wants SOMETHING. If readers not only support the character's goal, but the motivation behind it, they will cheer your character on throughout the story.

TOOLS I USE TO CREATE CHARACTERS

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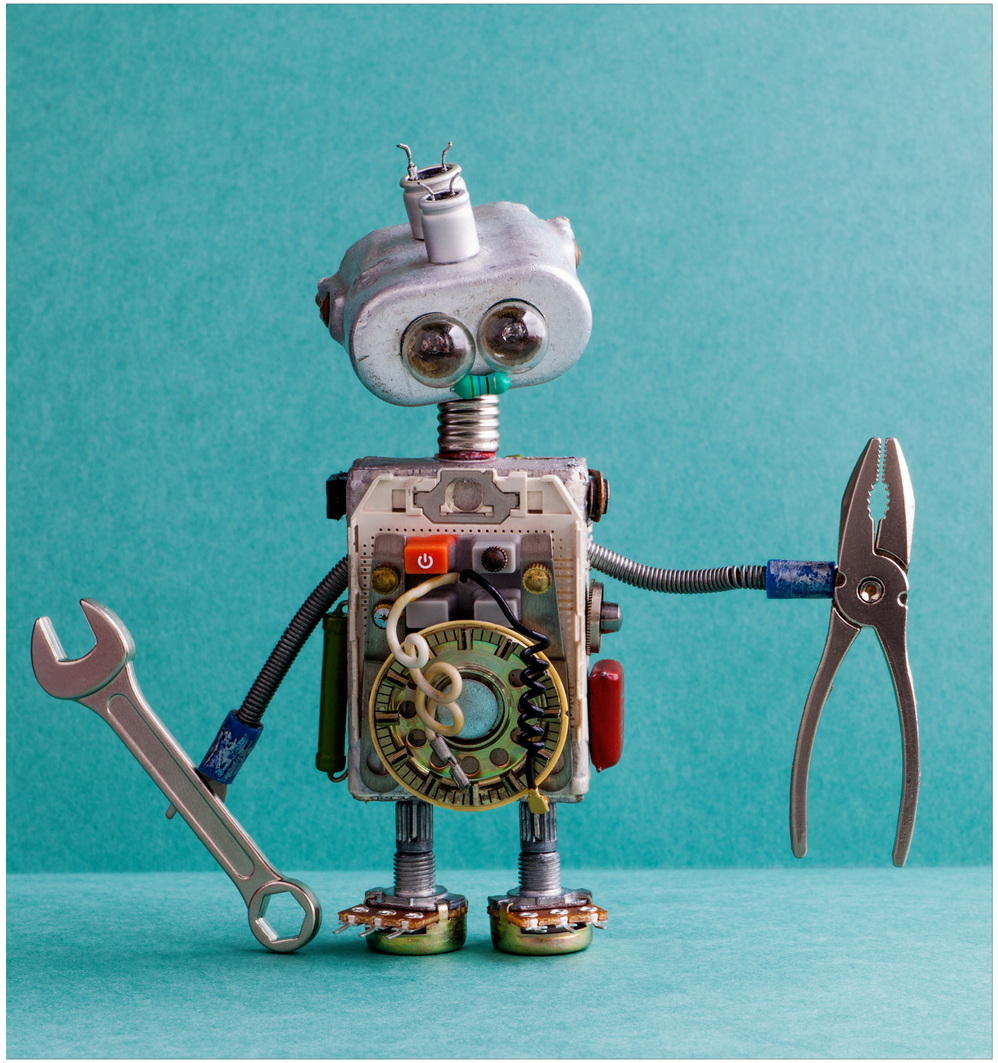

"The Story Equation is Pure Genius"
~ Randy Ingermanson, *Writing Fiction for Dummies*

THE STORY EQUATION

HOW TO PLOT & WRITE
A BRILLIANT STORY
FROM ONE POWERFUL QUESTION

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NATIONAL WRITING TEACHER, BEST-SELLING NOVELIST
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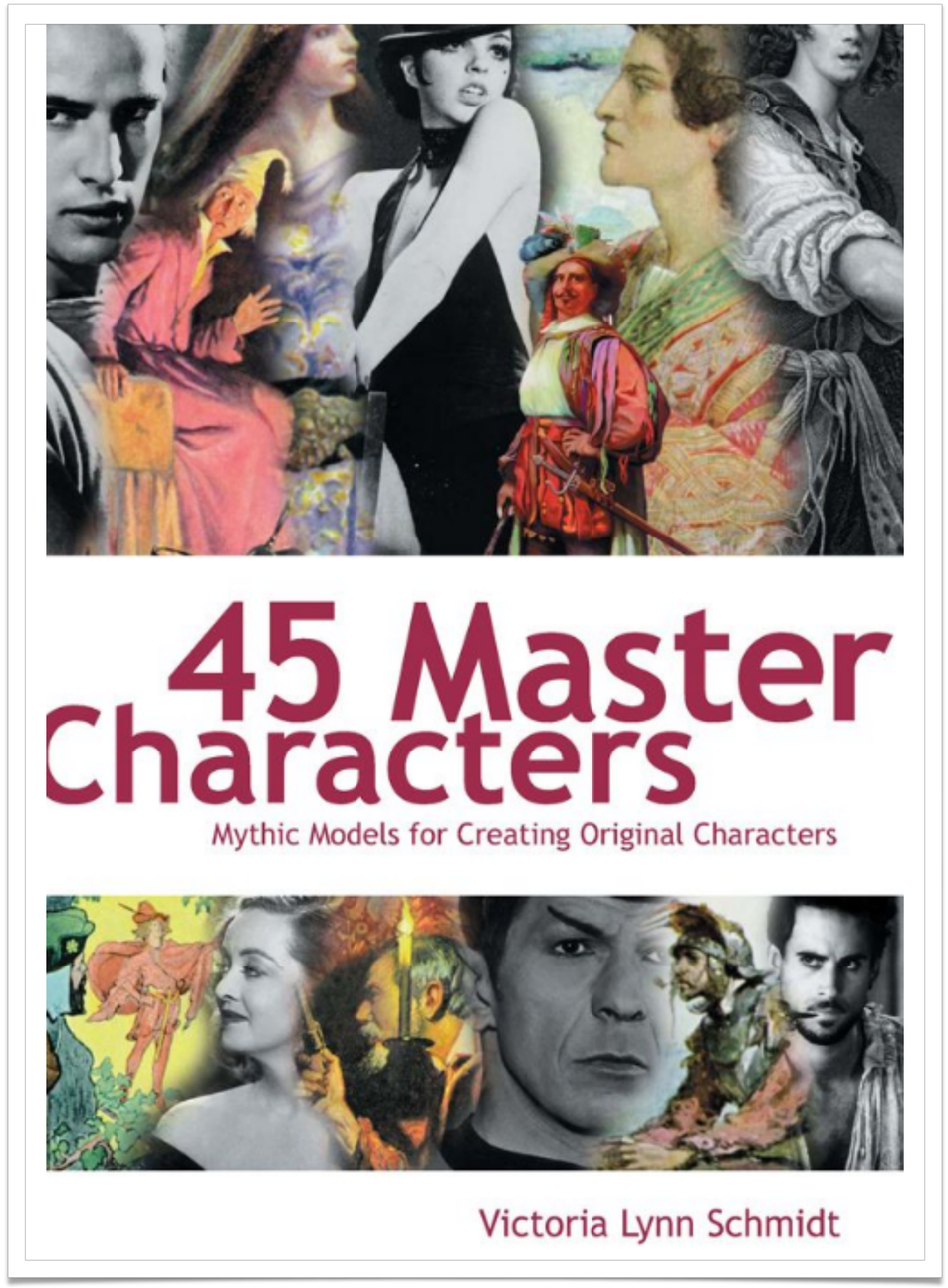

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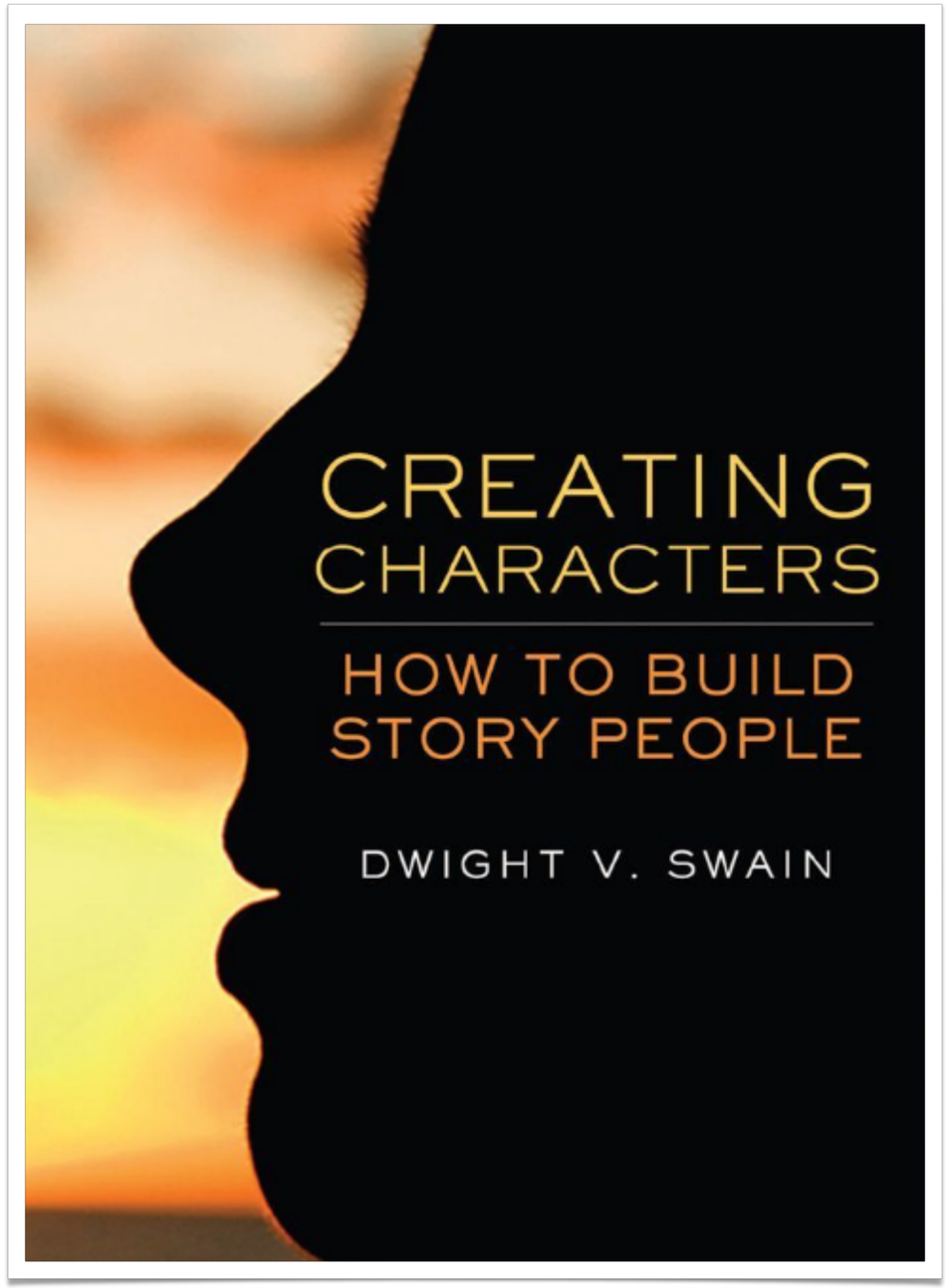
45 Master Characters

Mythic Models for Creating Original Characters



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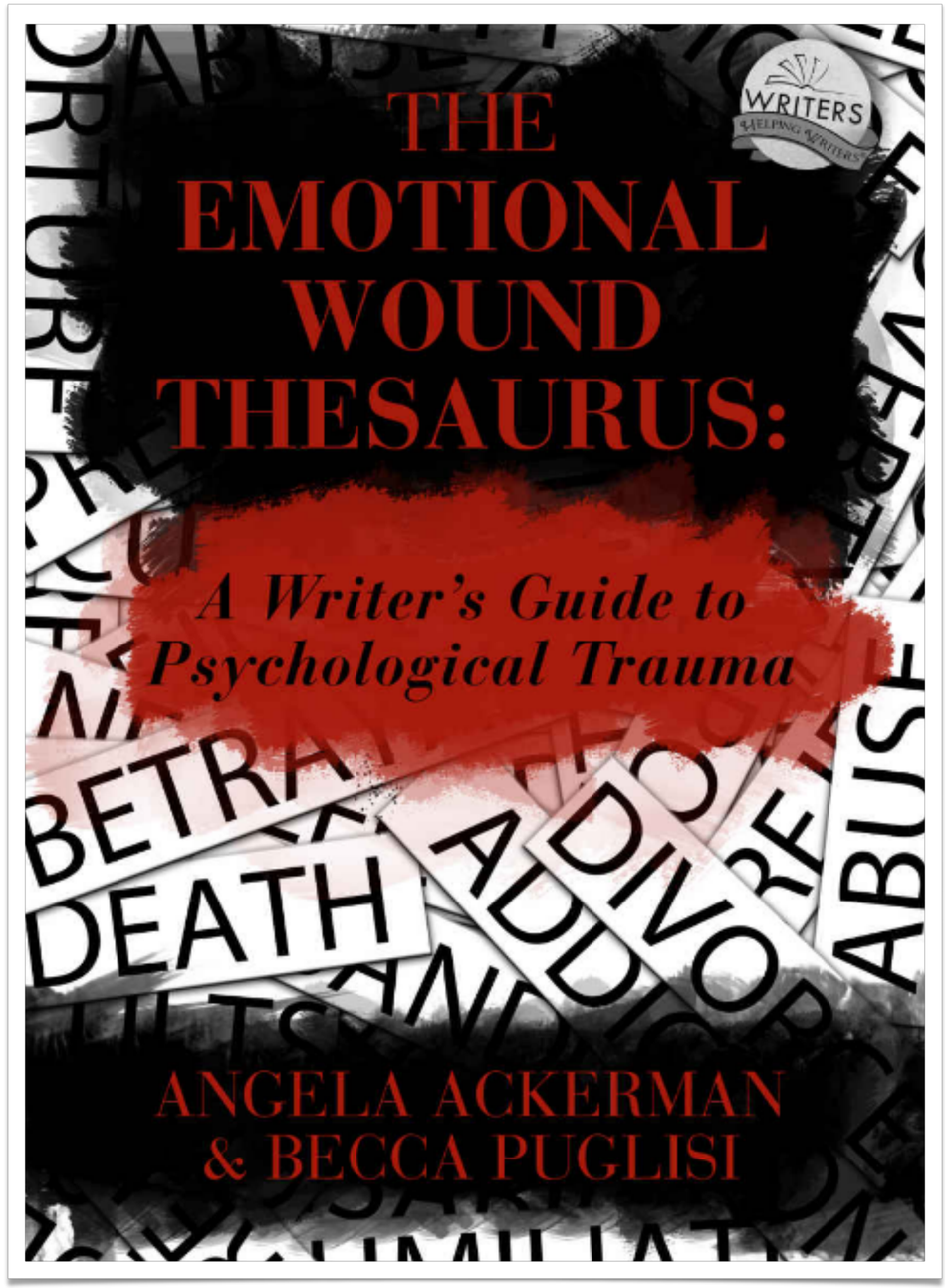
Creating Characters

How to Build Story People



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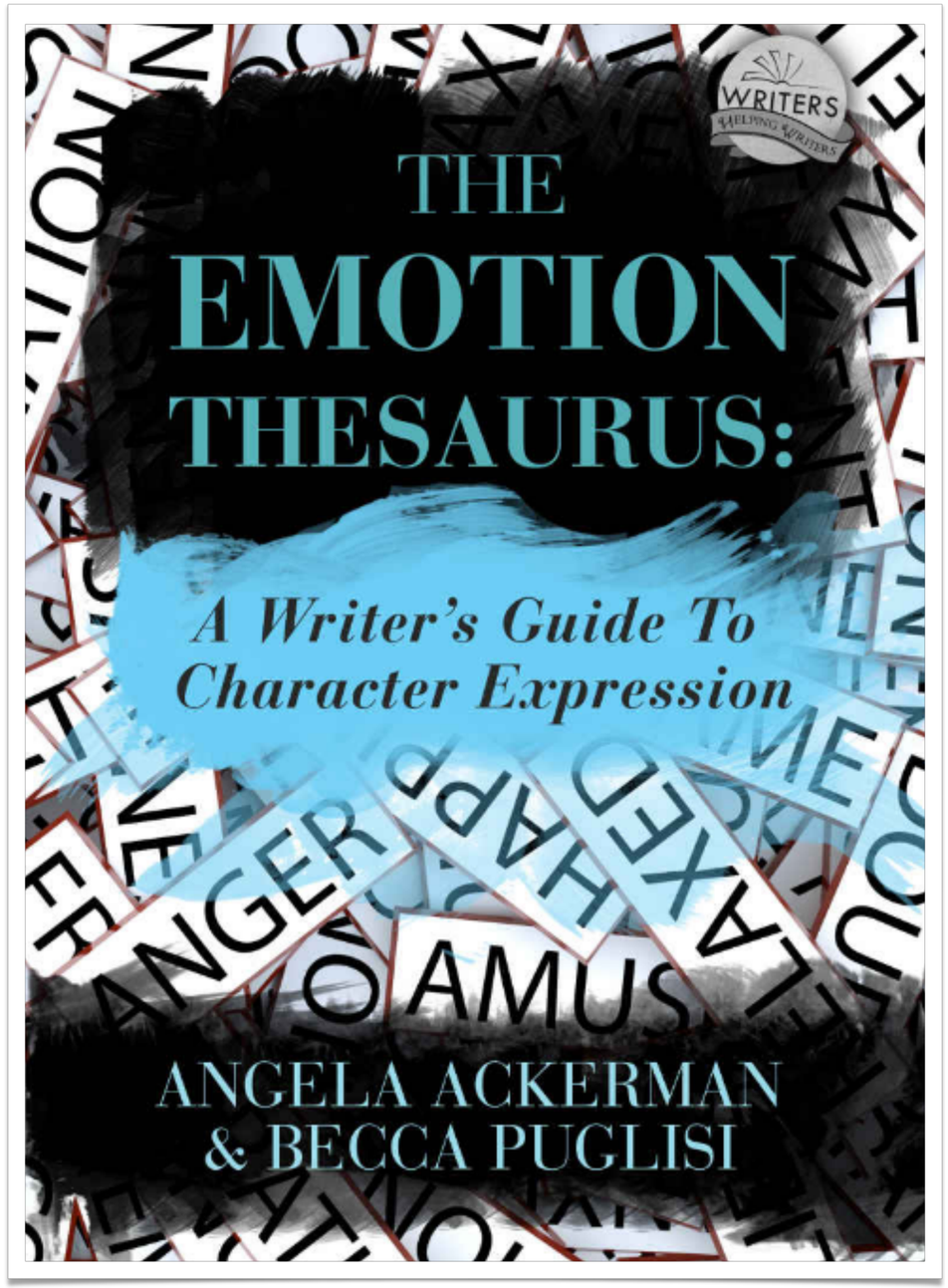
The Emotional Wound Thesaurus

A Writer's Guide to Psychological Trauma



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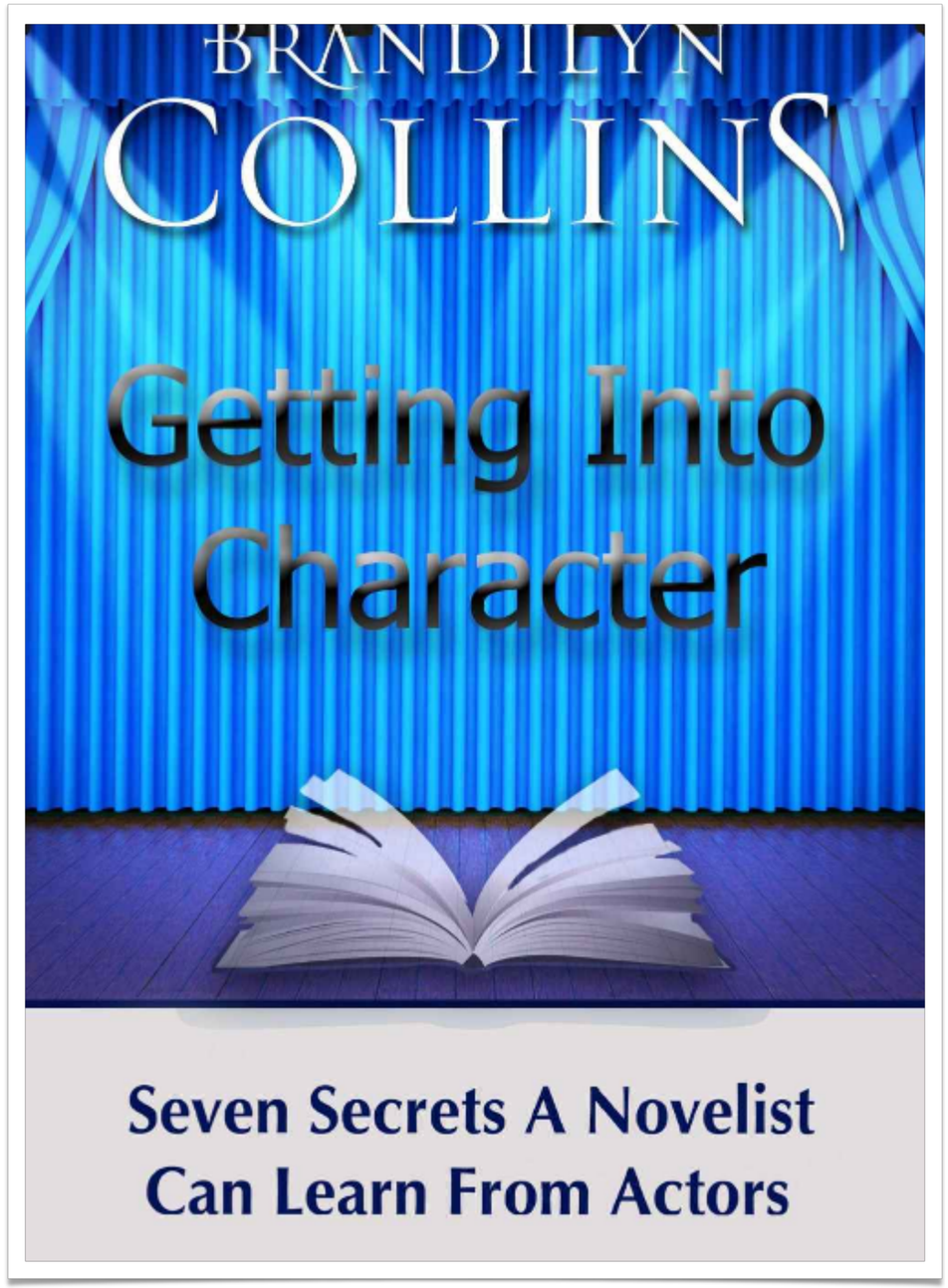
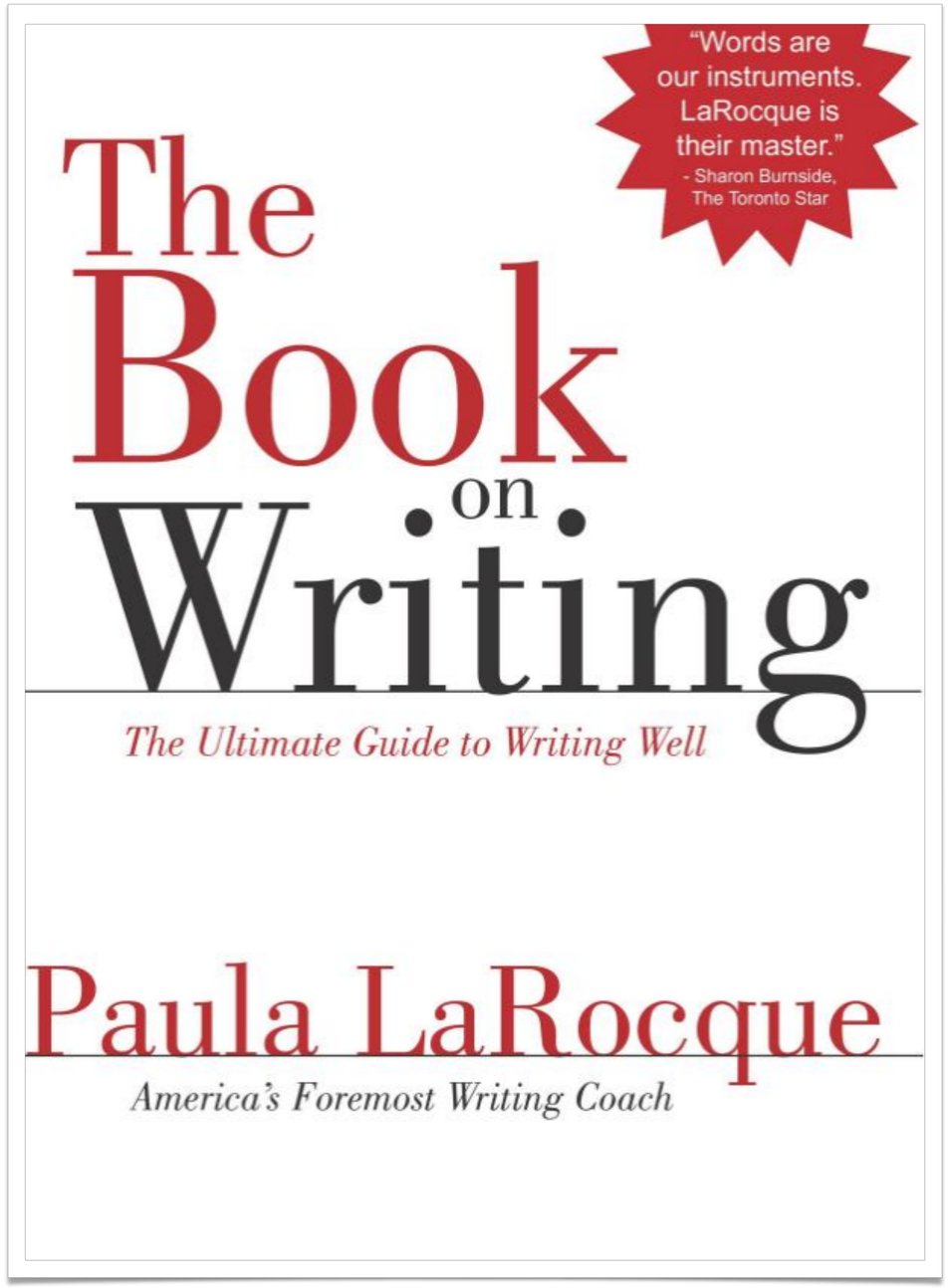


By Brandilyn Collins

Getting into Character

Seven Secrets a Novelist Can Learn from Actors



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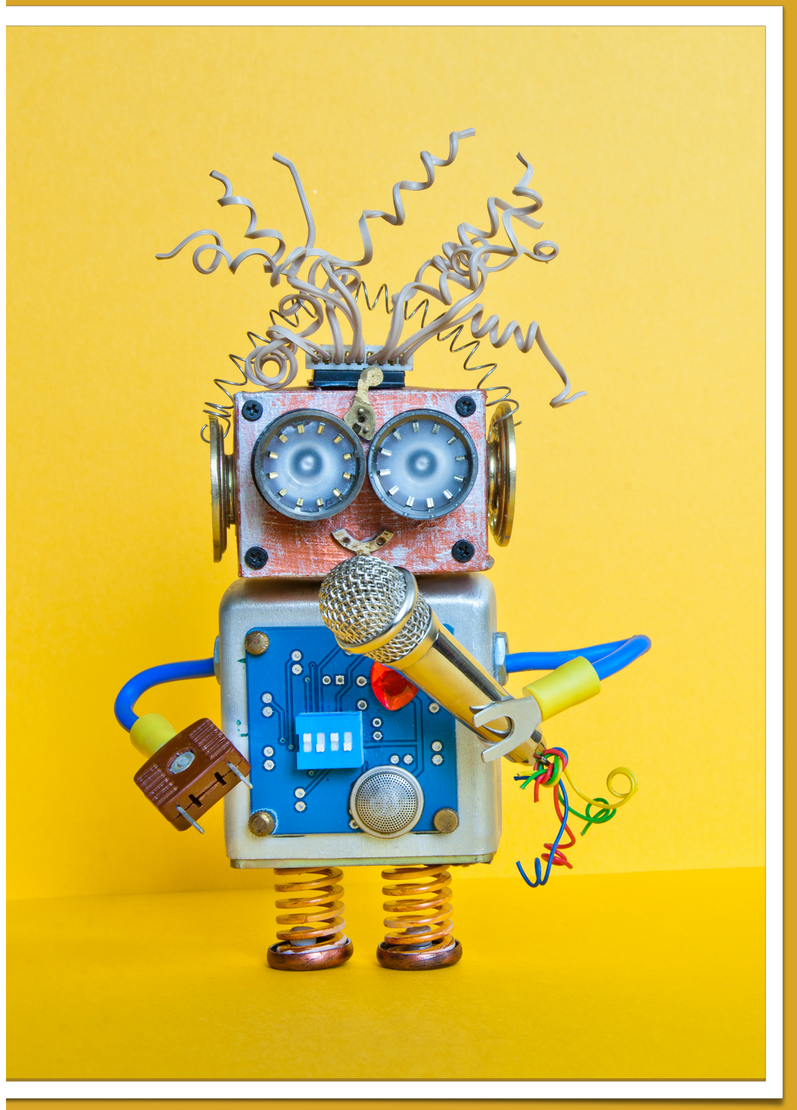
The Ultimate Guide to Writing Well

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

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