

7. Introducing your characters

What drives your story along are the characters, and their reactions to situations, events and each other. If your characters are going to seem real to your readers – if their reactions are to be believable – then your reader has to be provided with some knowledge of the mental workings (the ‘inner life’) of those characters. How can the writer achieve this without going inside each character’s head?

Think about a person that you feel you know quite well (though preferably not a partner, as this can throw up all sorts of problems). First list their good points – what it is that you like about them. Then list their bad points – irritating habits, opinions and attitudes that you don’t care for. Now think back to when you first met her or him. Over time, how did you discover the things that you know/feel about them? Try to answer the following questions:

- What was the first thing that struck you about them?
- What did you see as their outstanding physical characteristics (list no more than 3)?
- How were they dressed, and what did this tell you?
- Did they have any little gestures or ways of speaking that caught your attention?
- Did they maintain eye contact or avoid it?
- Did they seek out physical contact or shrink from it?
- What did they talk about?
- Now that you’ve got to know them, what do you think makes them tick (their motivators*)? How does this knowledge differ from your first impressions?
- Finally, what sort of person do you think they really are? Are they straightforward or devious, honest or dishonest, tolerant or intolerant, placid or easily roused, warm-hearted or aloof?

Now for the more difficult part of the task. Just how, exactly, did you get the answers to the last two questions? (A third person might well have given you some information about them, but that information may not have been accurate.)

You will almost certainly find that your knowledge of them as people comes entirely from what they did (their physical actions, including gestures and facial expressions), what they said (their speech actions), and the degree to which these two types of action complement (or fail to complement) one another. As a writer, you should always try to present your characters in this way – through what they say and what they do. This is the essence of what is meant by ‘show, don’t tell’. A character’s factual history might not be important to the story, but the sort of person they are most certainly is.

(*What drives your characters along are the things that motivate them. Essentially, there are seven main motivators: **Love**, **Money**, **Power**, **Survival**, **Revenge**, **Glory** and **Self-integrity** (a sort of psychological survival). These need not be extremes – glory, for example, might involve something as simple as seeking praise from someone important to your character, not the search for fame – but shades of these motivators underlie most human actions.)