

Creating Character: Given Circumstances, Behavior, & Dialogue

Great characters are often the hardest element of a play to create because creating a vivid character requires keen observation of the world and some intuition. That said, there are some things that can help to activate characters and questions you can use to probe whether or not your characters are as round or as rich as they could be and viable for the stage. While there is no single “formula” to unlock a character, characters often break rules, and every author is different in how they approach character-building. Here are some tools I find generally helpful in thinking about characters.

Rich Characters

- Need something
- Need something in this moment
- Are decisive or have strong opinions
- Are unexpected or surprising
 - Defy stereotypes
- Are clever, often in ways we don’t foresee
- Contrast the other characters in perspective somehow
- Speak differently than other characters
- Know other characters in the story
- Have passions
- Have flaws
 - Make bad decisions sometimes
- Change in some way by the end of the play

Given Circumstances

The “given circumstances” of a character are the details that we know about their lives in this moment. While inspiration for a character may come from a variety of places—including real-life observations, personal relationships, needs of structural development, exploration of central character, dice-rolling—in order to be fully realized those characters should have a developed set of given circumstances. In other words, you should be able to articulate the experiences, personality, and internal workings of your characters (even if they are not the “main” character), or else risk losing them to a fog of vagaries. Hungarian playwright and author of *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, Lajos Egri provides a nice crib sheet for some basic given circumstances in his Character Bone Structure worksheet, which gives a basic set of factors that define what he calls a character’s tri-dimensionality—physical, social, and psychological dimensions.

Behavior

Humans are quirky. They act in ways that are surprising and often counter-intuitive, particularly when they are pursuing a strong need and/or juggling past experience. Behavior is what a character *does* (as opposed to what they say) and can communicate a lot about a character’s inner thoughts and feelings. Simple behavior can reveal information about a character’s attitude. For

example, putting *exactly* three sugar packets in one's coffee, versus pouring until it feels right, tells us about how those characters view the world. More complex behavior can provide insight into a character's past experience or present needs. When a character behaves in unexpected ways, it generates tension that draws the audience's interest—a small mystery that can later be revealed for the payoff of *why* that behavior developed.

Dialogue

Developing dialogue is challenging because there is no playbook to be able to hear your characters' voices in your head, especially knowing that different actors will bring out different elements of each character. Perhaps the most effective strategy to practice writing better dialogue is to listen to people speak. However, here are some questions that can help you think about aspects of your dialogue:

- How much does this character speak?
- What do they say? How do they say it?
- What do they *not* say? What things do they like or not like to talk about?
- What is the rhythm of their speech?
- Where are they from? Do they have a dialect of some sort?
- How old are they? What idioms or figures of speech does their generation use?
- Do they speak in long, complex, well-composed sentences? Short simple sentences? Fragmented train-of-thought rambling?
- What is the context in which they are speaking? Is it a busy restaurant at noon or a secret meeting at midnight?
- Of those in the room, who has the higher status?

More Questions for Your Characters

- What do they do on a day-to-day basis? Occupation, hobbies, work/life balance?
- How has their past history impacted how they think or behave today?
- Do they operate primarily using their head or their heart?
- What tactics do they tend to use?
- How much space do they take up in the world and in this room?
- What do they sound like? How is this distinct from others?
- What do they most hope for?
- What do they fear most?
- What are they willing to sacrifice for what they need or those they love?
- Can you inhabit this character to perform them at a party? Would others notice the change?

There are many other entry points into a character's life including

- Myers-Briggs or other personality types
- Astrological signs
- Dungeons and Dragons character building
- Improvisational exercises – act out events from your character's life!

Character-in-Action Exercises

Dreaming

- Your character falls asleep and has a particularly vivid dream that they remember. Describe that dream with as much detail as possible.
- Now, from that dream, let your character generate some piece of art. This may be a poem, picture, or other art form that you/they work in. Write, draw, or otherwise create this piece.
- Write a monologue in which your character shows and describes the piece to another character or group of characters.

How Many?

- You will be given a secret number between 2 and 4 (or roll a d4, with 1=reroll).
- Do not reveal this number to anyone.
- Now, you will write a short scene with that many characters. As you write this scene, do not identify any of your characters with names, letters, or other indicators—use only line breaks to separate the dialogue.
- After everyone has written a scene, we will rotate and read them aloud, guessing how many characters are in the scene.

Intimate Interview with a Character

- Sit at a table across from an empty seat.
- Spend a few minutes writing down details about your own life.
- Now do the same for the character you are interviewing.
- As you finish describing the character and their history, the character takes a seat across from you.
- You may interview them, writing down the dialogue between the two of you. Your character may not want to answer some of your questions.
- Next, rotate seats. You are now that character and may ask questions of the “playwright” sitting across from you.

Character Party

- Pick a character that you are writing and that feel you know fairly well.
- When you have that, stand up. We are going to inhabit each of our characters.
- Once everyone has become their character, we will all enter the space, which is now the location of a party being thrown.
- Mingle with other guests, interacting as your character would.

Lajos Egri's Character Bone Structure

Physiology

1. *Sex*
2. *Age*
3. *Height and weight*
4. *Color of hair, eyes, skin*
5. *Posture*
6. *Appearance*: good-looking, over- or underweight, clean, neat, pleasant, untidy. Shape of head, face, limbs.
7. *Defects*: deformities, abnormalities, birthmarks. Diseases.
8. *Heredity*.

Sociology

1. *Class*: lower, middle, upper
2. *Occupation*: type of work, hours of work, income, condition of work, union or nonunion, attitude toward organization, suitability for work.
3. *Education*: amount, kind of schools, marks, favorite subjects, poorest subjects, aptitudes
4. *Home life*: parents living, earning power orphan, parents separated or divorced, parents' habits, parents' mental development, parents' vices, neglect. Character's marital status
5. *Religion*
6. *Race, nationality*
7. *Place in community*: leader among friends, clubs, sports
8. *Political affiliations*
9. *Amusements, hobbies*: books, newspapers, magazines

Psychology

1. *Sex Life, moral standards*
2. *Personal premise, ambition*
3. *Frustrations, chief disappointments*
4. *Temperament*: Choleric, easygoing, pessimistic, optimistic
5. *Attitude toward life*: resigned, militant, defeatist
6. *Complexes*: obsessions, inhibitions, superstitions, phobias
7. *Extrovert, introvert, ambivert*
8. *Abilities*: languages, talents
9. *Qualities*: imagination, judgment, taste, poise
10. *I.Q.*