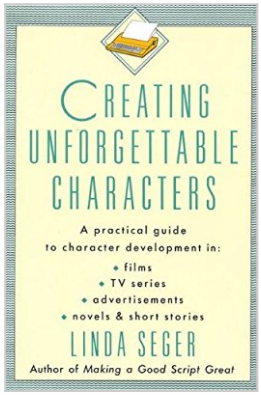

Creating Unforgettable Characters: A Practical Guide to Character Development in Films, TV Series, Advertisements, Novels & Short Stories

By Linda Seger

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Linda Seger is the author of *Making a Good Script Great*. She is married and lives in Venice, California.

Creating Unforgettable Characters
1
Researching the Character

Some time ago, one of my writing clients came to me with a terrific concept for a script. She had worked and reworked the script for over a year. Her agent was excited and eagerly awaiting this new story.

Although she had been told that some of her scripts weren't strong enough for the American commercial market, this one was exciting and tough. It was the kind of story that many producers called "high concept"--with a strong hook and unique approach to the story, a clear conflict and identifiable characters.

Her first film had just been completed, and she was counting on this script to break new ground. She had to finish quickly--but the characters weren't working. She was absolutely stuck.

When I analyzed the script, I realized that she didn't know enough about the context--about the world of the characters. A number of scenes took place in a center for the homeless. Although she had spent some time serving soup at the center, and talking to the homeless, she had never experienced sleeping there or being on the streets. As a result, details andemotions were missing. It was clear that there was only one way that she could break through the character problems--she had to return to research.

The first step in the creation of any character is research. Since most writing is a personal exploration into new territory, it demands some research to make sure that the character and context make sense and ring true.

Many writers love the research process. They describe it as an adventure, an exploration, an opportunity to learn about different worlds and different people. They love seeing characters come to life after spending several days learning more about their world. When their research proves something they intuitively knew, they're overjoyed. Every new insight gained through research makes them feel they have made giant strides in creating an exciting character.

Others find research intimidating, and the most difficult part of the job. Many writers resist it, and resent spending hours making phone calls or foraging for information in the library. Research can be frustrating and time-consuming. You can go down a great many blind alleys before you accomplish a thing. You may not know how to begin to research a specific character point. But research is the first step in the process of creating a character.

The depth of a character has been compared to an iceberg. The audience or reader only sees the tip of the writer's work--perhaps only 10 percent of everything the writer knows about the character. The writer needs to trust that all this work deepens the character, even if much of this information never appears directly in the script.

When do you need to research? Consider for a moment: You're writing a novel. Everyone who has read it agrees that your protagonist, a thirty-seven-year-old white male, has a fascinating personality, but there are certain motivations they don't understand. You decide you need to learn more about the inner workings of your character. A friend suggests you read *Seasons of a Man's Life* by Daniel Levinson, about the malemid-life crisis. You also arrange to sit in on a group of men in analysis. Through this research, you hope to learn

what happens to men in the mid-life transition, and how it motivates their behavior.
Or, you've just finished your script, but the supporting character of the black lawyer doesn't seem as fleshed out as the others. You contact the NAACP to see if they know a black lawyer who might be willing to talk to you. You need to gain an insight into ways the ethnic background will affect this particular character in this particular occupation.
Or, you've been assigned to write a film about Lewis and Clark. You're smart--you ask the studio for research money, transportation expenses, and eight months' time. You know you will need to understand the experience of the journey, and how the period will affect the characters and the dialogue.

GENERAL VS. SPECIFIC RESEARCH

Where to start? First, understand that you're never starting from scratch. You have been doing research your whole life, so there is a great deal of material to draw upon.
You are doing what's called *general research* all the time. It's the observation--the noticing--that becomes the basis of character. You're probably a natural people-watcher. You observe how people walk, what they do, what they wear, the rhythms of their speech, even their thought patterns.
If you have another profession besides writing--perhaps medicine, or real estate, or teaching history--all the material you absorb within those jobs can be applied when you write a script for a doctor series, or a story about the real estate profession, or a novel or screenplay that takes place in medieval England.
You're doing general research when you take classes in psychology, art, or science. Later, what you learned may give you the details you need for your next story.
Many writing teachers say, "Write what you know about"--and for good reason. They recognize that this constant lifelong observation and general research yields many details that might take months or years to learn if you were writing about an area outside your experience.
Carl Sautter, writer, former story editor of "Moonlighting," and author of *How to Sell Your Screenplay*, recounts the story of a writer who pitched a Fort Lauderdale story to him. "He wanted to do a film about four girls who go to Fort Lauderdale for spring break. It's an all-right idea, but I discovered that he had never been to Fort Lauderdale during spring break. We continued to talk and I discovered he came from a little farm in Kansas. And then he said, 'It's a shame I'm not there this week because this is pancake week.'This little town was having their annual pancake festival. And he starting describing all the things they do with pancakes, and all the details about the festival. And I said, 'Now there's a story. There's a wonderful setting for a movie.' And I said, 'Why take a story that two thousand people could write better than you can, about a situation you've never experienced? Write about something you know'"
The creation of character begins with what you already know. But general research may not yield enough information. You'll also need to do specific research to fill in character details that may not be part of your own observation and experience.
Novelist Robin Cook (*Coma, Mutation, Outbreak,* etc.) is an M.D., but he still has to do specific research for his medical fiction books. "Most of the research is reading," he says, "but I do talk to doctors who specialize in the subject of my novel. In fact, I normally will work in that particular field for a few weeks. When I wrote the book *Brain,* which deals with a neuroradiologist, I spent two or three weeks with a neuroradiologist. For *Outbreak,* which was about a modern-day plague, I talked to the people at the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, and researched viruses. For *Mutation,* I researched the science of genetic engineering. The pace of change in thatfield is so rapid that most of what I had learned in medical school was no longer valid. I put out a book a year. I usually spend six months of research, two months of generating the outline, two months writing the book, and a couple of months doing other things such as publicity and working at the hospital."

THE CONTEXT

Characters don't exist in a vacuum. They're a product of their environment. A character from seventeenth-century France is different from one from Texas in 1980. A character who practices medicine in a small town in Illinois is different from someone who's the pathologist at Boston General Hospital. Someone who grows up poor on an Iowa farm will be different from one who grows up rich in Charleston, South Carolina. A

black, or Hispanic, or Irish-American will be different from a Swede from St. Paul. Understanding a character begins with understanding the context that surrounds the character.
What is context? Syd Field, in his book *Screenplay*, gives an excellent definition. He compares context to an empty coffee cup. The cup is the context. It's the space surrounding the character, which is then filled with the specifics of the story and characters.1 The contexts that most influence character include the culture, historical period, location, and occupation.
CULTURAL INFLUENCES
All characters have ethnic backgrounds. If you're a third-generation American of Swedish-German background (as I am), the influence of this background may be minimal. If you're a first-generation black Jamaican, the ethnic background could determine behavior, attitudes, emotional expressiveness, and philosophy.
All characters have a social background. It makes a differencewhether someone comes from a middle-class farming family in Iowa or an upper-class family in San Francisco.
All characters have a religious background. Are they nominal Catholic, Orthodox Jew, followers of New Age philosophies, or agnostic?
All characters have educational backgrounds. The number of years of schooling, as well as the specific field of study, will change a character's makeup.
All of these cultural aspects will have wide-ranging influence upon the makeup of the characters, determining the way they think and talk, their values, concerns, and emotional life.
John Patrick Shanley (*Moonstruck*) came from an Irish-American home, but observed his Italian neighbors across the street. He says, "I saw that they had better food. They were more connected to their bodies. When they spoke, they spoke with their whole selves. There were things about the Irish that I liked, too. They could, for example, outtalk the Italians. And they had a different bra...

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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