

# **What Came First? Plot or Character**

## **by Julie Kenner and Kathleen O'Reilly**

Conflict is key to tying character and plot together. Ideally the scenes in the plot should:

1. illustrate conflict
2. show character grow (character put in tough decision, must move forward – turning point and change in plot direction)
3. drive the storyline

### ***The Three Act Structure:***

All good stories can be broken down into 3 acts—a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning is your set-up, where you introduce your players and give us clues to their character. The inciting incident (Luke leaving Tatooine) is informed by the player's character (Luke has wanderlust; he's not a natural-born farmer).

In the second act, we explore the character more as the plot develops as a result of choices made by the character. The more conflict, the more character is revealed. (See Cause/Effect, below).

When we get to that ultimate turning point, our hero/heroine isn't in the same place they started. They've learned and grown, and when faced with that final challenge (in the Third Act), their character drives their choices.

### ***Secondary characters***

Choose wisely to illustrate hero and heroine and keep them larger than life. Can be used to expose strengths or weaknesses. Can be used as a parallel to the main character (i.e. Indiana Jones and the French archeologist, Bellach)

Secondary character can drive the conflict (i.e. secondary character presents a situation that hero or heroine must react to), but make sure it's the hero or the heroine who is driving the plot.

### ***Multi-facteted characters***

One way to create dimensions in your character. Multiple faces for different relationships. A person doesn't show the same face of the character to their parent, their spouse, their children, their boss, or their boss friend. By showing the same character in different relationships, you give the character depths.

### ***Forward motion of a plot:***

Cause ---→ Effect --→ Character reacts in accordance with their “character” as driven by the conflict created by the cause/effect. That reaction serves as a new “cause” and the next link in the plot necklace begins.

All of that leads up to a major turning point, where the character’s reaction takes us in a new direction and, ultimately, shows his character growth in the choices he makes (Indie shutting his eyes when the Ark is opened.)

The importance of showing your character’s weakness – if the character chooses unwisely (i.e. they haven’t fully grown), then the author creates tension and suspense. Will our hero FINALLY do the right thing? But for this to work, the hero has to have done the wrong thing more than once.

### ***First Impression***

Use the first impression of a character wisely. All other impressions are built from the first one. Chance to make unsympathetic characters sympathetic. Consider the flow of the story. What is the best way to show off your character.

### ***Markers***

- Use the familiar, the recognizable to bring the reader into your story world. Different from a stereotype. Used to create empathy and recognition in the reader.
- Examples
  - Jangling change
  - Tapping fingers on the steering wheel is my dad
  - Swaying back and forth when they talk is a guy I worked with and I heard that Bill Gates does this as well
  - Pock mocks on floor (or wall) from where the chair is leaned back on two legs

### ***How to Make the Reader Like Your Characters***

- In order to make characters real, they can’t be all black or all white. They have to have flaws. In this comes the bigger challenge, how to make a flawed character likable.
- Some ways:
  - Suffering, either physical or emotional -- don’t overuse, and the most important aspect is the cause and effect of the suffering, rather than the act itself. Also, stoicism works well. The more restrained the pain in the character, the greater the reader reaction.
  - Sacrifice
  - Jeopardy --
  - Sexual Tension
  - Make them familiar, yet not boring. We need to be curious about them.

- Courage and Fair Play
- Good Attitude
- Draftee or Volunteer
- Dependability
- Cleverness
- Endearing Imperfections: The Lovable Rogue -- can't make your character too perfect. The most loved are those with very real flaws.
- Give your characters, hungers, hopes, dreams, desires (see Character and Goals). Let me be proactive about taking charge of their life. Give the reader a reason to root for them.

### ***How to Add Dimensions to Your character***

- Ways to Improve Characters -- a little bit of exaggeration makes them interesting
- Don't be afraid to go against type -- surprise the reader, twist a character, twist a stereotype
- When you try to understand your character's motivations, before your character is well-formed, don't take the easy way out; chances are it's a cliché. Work to overcome clichés.
- Use tags to distinguish characters from each other.
  - Appearance
  - Ability (skills or talents)
  - Speech
  - Physical Mannerism
  - Attitude
  - Traits:
  - Habitual modes of response and patterns of behavior
  - Relationships
  - Use secondary characters to flesh our main characters and display new facets of hero/heroine's character

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***National bestselling author Julie Kenner has been praised by Publishers Weekly as an author with a "flair for dialogue and eccentric characterizations," Julie's books have hit lists as varied as USA Today, Waldenbooks, Barnes & Noble, and Locus Magazine. Julie lives in Georgetown, Texas, with her husband, two daughters, and several cats.***

## **Book Sources**

### **CHARACTER SOURCES:**

- Characters & Viewpoint, Orson Scott Card, Writer's Digest
- Story, Robert McKee, ReganBooks
- How to Tell A Story, by Peter Rubie and Gary Provost, Writer's Digest
- Creating Characters: How to Build Story People, Dwight Swain, Writer's Digest
- Stein on Writing, Sol Stein, St. Martin's Press
- Creating Fiction, edited by Julie Checkoway, Story Press

### **PLOT BOOK SOURCES**

- Story, Robert McKee, ReganBooks
- How to Make a Good Script Great
- Writing the Blockbuster Novel