

# CHARACTER

*A practical, flexible guide to desire, contradiction, agency, moral development, emotional effect, narrative arc, voice, viewpoint, cast design and the art of making every character earn their place*

FICTION CRAFT · CHARACTER & CAST · STRUCTURE · MORAL DEVELOPMENT · AFFECT · VOICE · REVISION

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Character is not a dossier of facts placed inside a plot. It is a dynamic relation among a person, a pressure, a field of possible choices and a reader who keeps revising what that person might do. A character becomes vivid when desire selects action; resistance forces adaptation; choice produces consequence; and the consequence changes what the character, the cast and the reader can believe. Sometimes the change is moral or psychological. Sometimes the character remains recognisably the same while the situation tests that identity to destruction. Sometimes a relationship, family or community carries the arc that no individual can complete alone.

This guide brings together two exceptionally useful books dedicated to character craft. *Character: The Art of Role and Cast Design for Page, Stage, and Screen* by Robert McKee is strongest on the revelation of inner nature through consequential choice, and on designing an entire cast to put that nature under pressure. *The Art of Character: Creating Memorable Characters for Fiction, Film, and TV* by David Corbett is strongest on embodied desire, secrets, contradiction, intuitive discovery and the danger of reducing behaviour to a single explanation. Their approaches meet at a productive principle: characters need coherent pressures, but they must remain larger than the writer's diagram of them.

*"The only way we ever come to know characters in depth is through their choices under pressure."* — Robert McKee, *Character*

*"The writer's task is to balance expectation against surprise, word for word, action by action, scene by scene."* — David Corbett, *The Art of Character*

The apparent disagreement is useful. McKee reminds us that biography is not drama: a character's decisive conduct matters more than an author's private explanation. Corbett reminds us that "motive" can become a cage: if every action is a predictable symptom of one wound, trait or want, the character stops feeling alive. Design enough causality for the reader to form expectations; preserve enough contradiction for those expectations to remain revisable.

## In this guide

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1. **Foundations — Sections 1 to 4:** what character is, how it differs from characterisation and role, why McKee and Corbett form the central pair, and what their methods can and cannot do.

2. **History and the character engine — Sections 5 and 6:** historical shifts from action and moral choice to social realism, interiority, antiheroes, collective identity and contemporary formal experiment; a six-part model for turning character into story.
3. **Depth and structure — Sections 7 to 12:** desire, need, fear, value, secrets, contradiction, agency, choice under pressure and the reciprocal design of character arc and narrative structure.
4. **Arc families and moral development — Sections 13 to 16:** transformation, education, steadfastness, corruption, tragedy, revelation, relational and communal arcs; moral consequence without sermonising; emotional attachment without compulsory likability.
5. **Voice, viewpoint and tension — Sections 17 to 19:** first, second and third person; omniscient, close, rotating and external narration; information gaps; suspense, curiosity, irony, dread and recognition.
6. **Cast and page-level craft — Sections 20 to 25:** protagonists, antagonists, foils, mirrors, witnesses, confidants, chorus figures, entrances, bodies, names, objects, backstory, dialogue, subtext, scenes and pace.
7. **Novel examples — Section 26:** Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Virginia Woolf, Toni Morrison, N. K. Jemisin, Anna Burns, Sally Rooney and Percival Everett.
8. **Revision — Sections 27 to 31:** redundancy, a whole-novel character inventory, diagnostic passes, a complete workshop, a compact comparison and a final checklist.

## 1. The useful definition: character is a pattern of consequential choice

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A person in life exceeds every account of them. A character in fiction is necessarily selected: the novel cannot include every breakfast, memory, mannerism and unrealised possibility. Selection does not make the character simple. It makes the writer responsible for choosing details and situations that create the impression of a life beyond the page.

The most useful unit is not the trait but the **choice under pressure**. A trait is a claim—generous, cautious, vain, loyal. A choice is that claim encountering cost. A generous person with surplus money tells us little. A person who gives away the fare home after promising to collect their child presents generosity, recklessness, tenderness and failure in one action. The pressure does not merely prove a trait; it makes competing values visible.

Character therefore operates on at least six levels:

- **Capacity:** what the person can perceive, endure, imagine and do.
- **Desire:** what draws or repels them now, across the story and beneath their conscious account.
- **Strategy:** the habitual and improvised means by which they pursue, avoid, conceal or test.
- **Relation:** who they become with this person, in this institution, under this gaze.
- **Choice:** what they select when goods, loyalties or identities cannot all be preserved.
- **Consequence:** what their conduct changes in the world, the cast, the reader's judgement and their own future range of action.

**Character test:** replace *Who is this person?* with five sharper questions. *What do they attend to? What do they want here? What tactic do they choose? What would make that tactic fail? What cost reveals which value wins?* A useful answer generates scenes. A static description generates only notes.

This definition does not require a conventional hero, a redemptive arc or constant decisiveness. Refusal is a choice. Delay can be a strategy. Inaction can redistribute danger to other people. A character who cannot articulate desire may still organise every scene around avoiding it. The point is not that all characters are free; it is that fiction becomes dramatic where constraint, capacity and conduct meet.

### Character is also a reader model

Readers build characters prospectively. They infer a pattern, predict behaviour, notice deviation and revise the pattern. This is why first impressions matter and why they should not be complete. If the model never changes, the character may remain functional, comic or iconic. If it changes arbitrarily, the character feels written for surprise. If new conduct is both unexpected and retrospectively legible, the character feels deep.

E. M. Forster's famous test remains useful when treated as an effect rather than a ranking: a “round” character can surprise convincingly. Yet “flat” characters are not failed round ones. Forster also notes their speed, memorability and immediate recognisability. A large cast needs varied resolution. The question is not *Is everyone equally complex?* but *Does each role have enough particularity and agency for the work the novel asks it to do?*

## 2. Character, characterisation, role and personhood

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Four terms are often collapsed. Separating them gives the writer more control.

### Characterisation: the visible and audible surface

Characterisation includes age, body, clothing, work, name, accent, vocabulary, gesture, possessions, history, habits, reputation and self-description. These details create social location and rapid recognition. They are not superficial in the dismissive sense: a uniform changes how a room responds; an accent may be performed differently across contexts; a scar can be history, stigma, evidence or a detail the character barely notices.

The danger is confusing accumulation with depth. Ten eccentricities do not equal complexity. A wardrobe, favourite song and childhood anecdote matter when they affect attention, relation or choice. Otherwise they remain inventory.

### Deep character: the pattern revealed by cost

McKee distinguishes the apparent person from the nature revealed under pressure. The distinction is productive if “deep” does not mean a single secret essence. People act differently across relations; power changes behaviour; fear narrows capacity; later choices can revise earlier patterns. Think of deep character as a **hierarchy of values made temporarily visible**, not an immutable true self hidden beneath a false exterior.

### Role: the structural work performed

Protagonist, opponent, confidant, rival, witness, guide, dependent and catalyst are roles in an arrangement. They describe how a figure changes story pressure, not the whole of the person. One

character can perform several roles; one role can migrate between characters. A love interest can also be an ethical opponent. A child can be a dependent, witness and source of counterpressure. An apparently peripheral neighbour can become the person whose knowledge turns the plot.

### Personhood: the ethical illusion of a life not owned by the plot

Even a deliberately minor character benefits from one sign that the protagonist is not the centre of their universe: a private aim, a relationship elsewhere, a refusal, a competent judgement, a mood not caused by the hero. This is not a demand for equal page space. It is a way to avoid treating secondary people as vending machines for information, comfort or obstruction.

**The four-layer audit:** for each important figure, write one line for **surface**, one for **value under cost**, one for **structural role**, and one for **life beyond the protagonist**. Repetition across all four lines signals a thin design. Friction among them creates energy.

## 3. Why these two craft books

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Calling any craft books “the best” requires criteria. For this resource, the books needed to be substantially devoted to character rather than containing one useful chapter; applicable to novelists; detailed enough for whole-cast revision; practical without reducing people to a branded formula; and different enough to correct each other's blind spots.

On those criteria, McKee's *Character* and Corbett's *The Art of Character* form the strongest complementary pair. The choice is not universal. A writer focused specifically on viewpoint may prefer *Orson Scott Card's Characters & Viewpoint*; a writer rebuilding a draft may reach for *Nancy Kress's Dynamic Characters*; a writer working from an internal change may value *Lisa Cron's Story Genius*; a writer studying emotional transmission may add *Donald Maass's The Emotional Craft of Fiction*. The central pair is selected for range and productive difference, not as a declaration that craft has a final canon.

### Robert McKee: pressure, deep character and cast architecture

McKee's major contribution is architectural. He asks the writer to create story events and a surrounding cast that progressively increase pressure until conduct reveals dimensions unavailable in ordinary circumstances. His model is particularly strong when a protagonist has an interesting history but a passive present, or when secondary characters blur together because they all support, obstruct or advise in the same way.

Practical advantages:

- It joins character to causation: a choice changes what can happen next.
- It distinguishes surface characterisation from conduct under cost.
- It treats the cast as a designed field of pressures rather than a list of satellites.
- It helps calibrate dimensionality: contradiction can be built from opposing traits, values and roles.
- It makes an arc observable in altered choices rather than explanatory monologue.

Risks if applied rigidly:

- “True character” can sound like one fixed essence, underestimating context, development and relational selves.
- Extreme pressure may be mistaken for loudness; social embarrassment or compromised care can be more revealing than physical danger.
- A perfectly functional supporting cast can feel instrumental if nobody wants anything beyond the protagonist's arc.
- An arc designed as a diagram may force behaviour that the scenes have not earned.

Use McKee firmly when the plot happens *to* the protagonist, when choices do not create consequences, or when the cast fails to draw out different dimensions. Use him lightly when ambiguity, paralysis, fragmentation or social determination is the novel's subject.

### David Corbett: mystery, embodiment and the limits of motive

Corbett's book is expansive and psychologically alert. It explores desire, vulnerability, secrets, contradiction, roles, dialogue, scenes and the writer's imaginative relation to characters. Its recurring corrective is that a person should not be reducible to a single cause. Corbett asks writers to know enough to stage meaningful behaviour while preserving an element of discovery.

“*What if she did the exact opposite?*” — David Corbett, *The Art of Character*

Practical advantages:

- It resists the idea that one wound explains an entire life.
- It treats contradiction as a source of curiosity rather than a continuity error.
- It gives secrets social and dramatic functions: keeping, revealing, misreading and weaponising.
- It encourages embodied observation and meaningful interaction instead of résumé-building.
- It allows intuition and surprise to revise an overplanned character.

Risks if applied vaguely:

- “Mystery” can excuse unprepared inconsistency.
- An intuitive approach can generate fascinating fragments without a causal arc.
- Multiplying motives can obscure the immediate playable desire of a scene.
- Refusing explanation entirely may deny the reader the pattern needed for emotional investment.

Use Corbett firmly when a character behaves like a diagnosis, a trauma delivery system or a plot function. Pair his openness with structural consequence: the opposite action must alter the story and become convincing through context, cost or retrospect.

### A combined working principle

**McKee asks:** what pressure and choice reveal a dimension, and how does the cast draw it out? **Corbett asks:** what expectation has been established, and what credible surprise keeps the person larger than the motive? **Together:** design conduct that is causally consequential, psychologically plural and retrospectively legible.

## 4. What a character profile can and cannot do

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Profiles are useful when they solve a live writing problem. They become avoidance when they substitute information for dramatic invention. The test is transfer: can the note change a sentence, scene, relationship or decision?

### Useful profile material

- **Attention:** what does this person notice first in a crowded room, an argument, a landscape or a body?
- **Social calibration:** how do they speak upward, downward, privately, professionally and under surveillance?
- **Material conditions:** what time, money, mobility, safety, care and institutional access are available?
- **Competence:** what can they do well, and where does that competence fail to transfer?
- **Embodied state:** what fatigue, pain, pleasure, medication, hunger, disability, age or sensory condition changes their options?
- **Relational history:** with whom do they become younger, harsher, funnier, quieter or more performative?
- **Live contradiction:** which two values, identities or desires cannot both be protected?
- **Threshold:** what cost would make them change tactic, confess, leave, betray, ask, refuse or act?

### Profile material that often remains inert

Favourite colour, star sign, school subjects and breakfast order can produce texture, but only if they enter selection or action. “Favourite colour: blue” is inert. “She buys only blue gifts because her dead sister once claimed red” contains relation, ritual and avoidance—but it still needs a present situation in which the ritual costs something.

### The wound is not the person

Many templates begin with a formative wound, infer a false belief and design a plot that corrects it. This can create clarity, especially in a focused change arc. It can also become reductive. Not every temperament is a symptom. Structural injustice is not merely a protagonist's mindset. Trauma does not exist to make someone profound, and recovery is not a reward for performing the correct moral lesson.

If you use wound and misbelief, add counterweights:

- What did the experience teach accurately?
- What capacity or pleasure exists independently of it?
- What material condition keeps the belief rational?
- Who benefits if the character calls their response irrational?
- What remains unresolved even after genuine growth?

**Profile rule:** build only enough past to complicate present choice. If a fact cannot affect attention, tactic, relation, cost or consequence, postpone it until the manuscript asks for it.

## 5. Historical trends: changing ideas of fictional character

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The history of character is not a simple evolution from flat types to complex modern selves. Sophisticated inwardness exists in ancient and early texts; contemporary novels use allegory, type and caricature brilliantly. Trends describe changes in prestige, available form and cultural models of personhood. Every period contains countertraditions and exceptions.

### Action and moral choice in classical theory

In [Aristotle's \*Poetics\*](#), plot is the “soul” of tragedy and character is secondary: character reveals moral purpose through what a person chooses or avoids. Modern novelists sometimes hear this as plot defeating psychology. A more useful reading is reciprocal. Action makes ethical quality perceptible; relationship makes action pitiful or fearful; reversal and recognition change both knowledge and fortune.

This inheritance remains visible whenever a novel asks: what will this person do when no clean choice remains? It suits tragedy, crime, adventure, romance and political fiction, but it also works in a drawing room where the irreversible action is a humiliating joke.

### Eighteenth-century selves: letters, sensibility and social identity

The rise of the English novel expanded sustained access to ordinary experience, private correspondence, economic circumstance and contested reputation. Epistolary fiction made character an act of address: the self changes according to recipient, purpose and the delay between event and narration. Sentimental traditions treated susceptibility to feeling as moral evidence, while satire exposed self-description as performance.

Practical inheritance: character can be created by discrepancies among versions—what I write to my sister, what I tell my creditor, what the servant observes, what the letter never sends.

### Austen and social realism: moral discrimination in ordinary life

[The British Library's account of Austen's social realism](#) emphasises her use of probable events, domestic spaces, gossip, overheard speech and limited opportunities. Austen shows that character need not wait for war or murder to become morally consequential. Whom Emma notices, patronises, interprets or embarrasses reorganises a small community.

The historical advantage is decisive for novel craft: a minimal plot can sustain major development when social perception itself is action. The danger is to imitate the small scale without reproducing the density of relation. Tea is not automatically tension. It becomes tension when invitation, seating, information, money and attention distribute power.

### Victorian seriality and the memorable social cast

Victorian publication in parts favoured recurrence, multiple plots, withheld revelations and characters who could be recognised after an interval. Dickens's names, verbal habits, silhouettes and

comic formulas create rapid re-entry. His major characters also move through systems—law, debt, education, inheritance, industry—so that a cast can embody a social world without becoming a sociological chart.

Forster later praised the efficiency of “flat” characters: they are immediately recognised and remembered. Their disadvantage appears when a stereotype is asked to carry moral or tragic weight it has not been granted. A contemporary ensemble can learn from Dickens's differentiation while refusing the prejudices embedded in some caricatures.

### Modernism: consciousness, fragments and relational identity

Modernist fiction shifted prestige toward perception, memory, temporal layering and the instability of a coherent self. The British Library's introduction to *Mrs Dalloway* describes Woolf's movement among minds, using memory and multiple perspectives to represent private consciousness and cultural change across a single day. Character becomes not only what someone does but how sensations, phrases, clocks, streets and other people pass through a mind.

Advantages: minute affect, contradiction without explanation, distributed social vision, deep temporal resonance. Risks: inert introspection, indistinguishable consciousnesses, or a belief that obscurity equals depth. Interior movement still needs selection and change.

### Mid-century psychology, existential choice and the antihero

Psychoanalysis, world war, existential thought, decolonisation and changing moral authority altered the fictional person. Motive might be unconscious; identity might be performed; virtue might be compromised by institutions; narrators might be defensive, estranged or radically unreliable. The antihero widened the distance between reader alignment and moral approval.

Practical inheritance: the reader can remain close to a character without endorsing them. Tension can arise from anticipated self-betrayal, not only external danger. Yet psychological explanation can become its own determinism: a label should not close the question of conduct.

### Late twentieth-century histories: race, gender, class, empire and collective memory

Many writers challenged the supposedly universal, autonomous individual by showing selves made and constrained through history, law, kinship, racialisation, gender, labour, migration and colonial power. Character could be communal, haunted, archival, bodily and discontinuous. A house, inherited story or suppressed name could participate in personhood.

This does not abolish agency. It makes agency specific: what choice is available to whom, at what cost, under whose account? Moral development may mean recognising complicity, recovering relation or rejecting an imposed story—not simply achieving confidence.

### Twenty-first-century multiplicity and revision of the canon

Contemporary fiction freely combines genre momentum with formal experiment: rotating viewpoints, second person, fractured chronology, documentary inserts, collective narrators, retellings from a former minor character, protagonists disclosed as several apparent identities, and casts organised around networks or systems. *The Fifth Season* turns the structure of identity into a

major revelation; *James* gives strategic interiority and linguistic control to a figure long confined by another novel's viewpoint.

The practical trend is not “characters are more complex now.” It is that writers have more visible permission to ask who was denied interiority, whose language was misread, whether one consciousness should dominate, and whether the self is best represented as singular at all.

## 6. The six-part character engine

A character becomes a story engine when six elements form a loop. They are not compulsory boxes in a planning template. They are diagnostic controls that can be discovered before, during or after drafting.

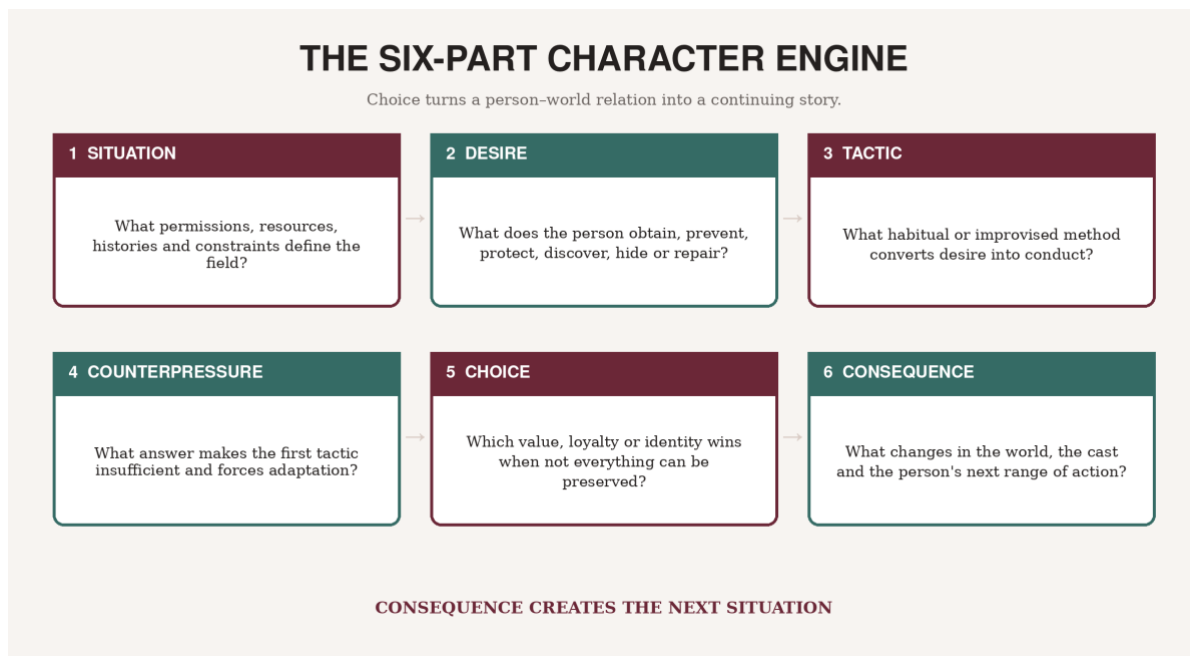


Figure 1. An original character engine. Pressure activates desire; tactics produce choices; consequences revise the person's capacities, relations and future strategies.

### 1. Situation: the field of permission and constraint

Where is this person placed socially, materially, physically and historically? Situation includes law, money, care, geography, body, reputation, kinship and immediate circumstance. It establishes what can be attempted and what attempt will be legible to others.

**Reader effect:** credible limits prevent agency from becoming wish fulfilment. Specific constraint also lets small acts register as brave, cruel or dangerous.

### 2. Desire: the vector of attention and action

Desire can mean obtain, protect, avoid, discover, hide, repair, punish, belong, leave, endure or be seen differently. A character may misname it. The reader may perceive the vector before the character does.

**Tension made possible:** anticipation, pursuit, divided loyalty, temptation and fear of exposure.

### 3. Tactic: the character's chosen method

Two people may want safety and produce opposite stories because one controls, one charms, one documents, one flees and one becomes indispensable. Tactic is where temperament meets learned survival. It is more dramatically useful than a trait because it can succeed, fail and change.

**Reader effect:** tactics create a forecastable behavioural pattern. Their escalation or reversal reveals development.

### 4. Counterpressure: the answer the world gives

Another person's desire, institutional procedure, scarcity, shame, the body, incomplete knowledge or the character's own competing value makes the first tactic insufficient. Good counterpressure is responsive: it changes because of what the character does.

**Tension made possible:** conflict, negotiation, self-division, moral compromise and creative adaptation.

### 5. Choice: the value hierarchy made visible

A genuine choice preserves one good by endangering another. Save the witness or preserve the operation; tell the truth or protect the child; accept help or retain secrecy. Even an apparent non-choice can show which cost the character transfers to someone else.

**Reader effect:** choice changes judgement. We may understand and condemn, admire and fear, forgive and remain wary.

### 6. Consequence and revision: the new person–world relation

Consequences alter external conditions, relationships, self-conception and available future tactics. A character need not consciously learn. The novel learns through pattern: the same tactic becomes more costly; a relationship no longer tolerates it; a capacity expands; a moral debt accumulates.

**Structural effect:** consequence creates the next situation. Character and plot cease competing because conduct generates event and event revises conduct.

**Engine sentence:** *Because this person is situated within \_\_\_\_, they want \_\_\_\_ and habitually try \_\_\_\_; when \_\_\_\_ answers that tactic, they choose \_\_\_\_ over \_\_\_\_; the consequence changes \_\_\_\_, so next time they can no longer \_\_\_\_.* If the last clause does not alter a future possibility, the episode may reveal character without yet building an arc.

## 7. Desire, need, fear, value and misbelief

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These terms are tools, not organs every character must possess in identical form.

### Desire: what creates forward motion

Separate three scales when useful:

- **Scene desire:** keep the visitor from opening the cupboard.
- **Story desire:** secure custody of the child.

- **Life desire:** become a person who cannot be abandoned.

The scales may align, clash or remain partly unconscious. Scene desire creates playability; story desire creates continuity; life desire creates resonance. Do not force every scene to state the life desire. Let the cupboard matter first.

**Advantages:** prediction, momentum, active tactics, measurable change.

**Disadvantages:** a single clean desire can make behaviour schematic; some novels are about not knowing how to want.

**Often suits:** quest, romance, crime, adventure, political struggle, comedy of ambition. With exceptions, it pairs easily with close viewpoint because attention bends toward the desired object.

### Need: the capacity the story tests

“Need” is often the writer's name for an internal change the character does not initially pursue: tolerate uncertainty, accept dependence, recognise another person's autonomy, relinquish control. It can help design a transformation arc, but it easily becomes authorial superiority. The writer should ask: who defines this need, and what social or moral assumption makes it appear corrective?

**Best use:** describe a capacity the ending makes newly possible, not a lesson the novel announces.

### Fear: the forecast of cost

Fear shapes attention and strategy. It can be explicit danger, shame, loss of status, engulfment, repetition of history or discovering one's own capacity. Fear is dramatic when it changes conduct. Repeatedly naming fear while the character acts identically creates emotional redundancy.

**Tension:** avoidance, dread, self-sabotage, defensive aggression, secrecy.

### Value: what the person refuses to trade cheaply

Values are best inferred at points of exchange. Loyalty sounds noble until loyalty protects harm. Independence sounds strong until another person must absorb its cost. Place values in conflict rather than attaching one to each character like a label.

**Moral effect:** readers evaluate priorities, consequences and exceptions rather than receiving the theme as a maxim.

### Misbelief: a limited model, not a stupidity

A misbelief is useful when it has once been adaptive or remains partly accurate. “If I ask, I will be refused” may be false in one relationship and historically rational in another. Change should not make the past foolish. The character gains a more discriminating model: *this person, this time, at this cost*.

**Avoid the slogan arc:** do not simply replace “I need nobody” with “I need people.” Build situations in which self-reliance protects dignity, then causes harm; dependence creates risk, then permits reciprocity. Development is increased discrimination, not exchanging one absolute for another.

## 8. Secrets, concealment and revelation

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A secret is not automatically depth. It becomes character when keeping it requires strategy, when different people understand its meaning differently, and when revelation redistributes power.

### Four functions of a secret

- **Protection:** concealment keeps a person, relationship or future safe.
- **Control:** the keeper manages what others can decide.
- **Identity:** disclosure threatens the story the character tells about themselves.
- **Debt:** concealment obliges further lies, payments, alliances or avoidance.

The same secret can perform all four. A parent hides a diagnosis to protect a child, controls the family's choices, preserves an identity as caretaker and creates a chain of practical deceptions.

### Who knows, suspects, misreads and benefits?

Map knowledge across the cast. The strongest secret plots rarely divide the world into one knower and everyone else. One person knows the event but not its motive; another suspects the motive but identifies the wrong event; a third benefits from silence; the reader sees a behavioural symptom without the cause.

**Tensions made possible:** mystery when the reader knows less; suspense when the reader knows more; dramatic irony when speech carries double meaning; moral dread when disclosure will harm the innocent as well as the guilty.

### Revelation should create action, not close a file

An exposition scene that explains the past can drain a novel if knowledge changes nothing. A strong revelation alters obligation, plan, alliance, self-conception or interpretation. It may solve one question while making the moral question harder.

### The character may be secret from themselves

Self-ignorance is not a hidden fact waiting in a locked drawer. It appears as pattern: disproportionate attention, repeated jokes, tactical overreaction, missing categories, stories told too smoothly.

Recognition becomes credible when earlier conduct has made the truth available without making it obvious.

**Secret audit:** *What practical behaviour does keeping this secret require? Who pays for that behaviour? What false story does the cast construct? What becomes newly possible or impossible after disclosure? If nothing changes except the reader's file of facts, the secret is decoration.*

## 9. Contradiction without incoherence

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Contradiction creates dimension when two actions arise from a legible tension. Incoherence occurs when behaviour changes only because the plot requires a turn.

## Productive sources of contradiction

- **Role conflict:** a doctor is also a daughter; a judge is also a friend.
- **Value conflict:** mercy competes with fairness; truth with safety; belonging with integrity.
- **Context:** the person is commanding at work and deferential at home because power differs.
- **Time:** a former strategy persists after its conditions change.
- **Self-image:** the character behaves against the virtue they claim, or protects the claim through elaborate exception.
- **Mixed desire:** they want intimacy and the power to leave first.
- **Embodied state:** fatigue, pain, intoxication, panic or pleasure changes available control without replacing character.

## Establish the pattern before breaking it

A reversal becomes meaningful only against expectation. Let the reader see the usual tactic in more than one context. Then vary pressure. When a conciliatory character refuses, the refusal should cost enough to distinguish development from convenience.

## Prepare backward, surprise forward

The ideal contradiction is not predictable in advance but convincing afterwards. Plant capacities, not answers. A character who later commits violence need not make ominous threats, but the novel might establish their rapid attention to exits, intolerance of humiliation and competence with physical risk. The preparation remains polyvalent until action selects it.

## Do not explain the contradiction twice

If speech claims kindness and conduct withholds help, the reader already holds the contradiction. An explanatory paragraph about hypocrisy may reduce both emotional participation and pace. Explain only what the viewpoint adds: perhaps the character experiences the withholding as scrupulous fairness. That deepens rather than labels.

**Contradiction formula:** *They are \_\_\_\_ when \_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_; they become \_\_\_\_ when \_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_; both behaviours protect or pursue \_\_\_\_.* The shared pressure supplies coherence. If no shared pressure exists, the contradiction may still work—but the manuscript must create another form of continuity.

## 10. Agency under constraint

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Agency is not dominance, competence or freedom from circumstance. It is the capacity to affect the arrangement, including by refusal, interpretation, alliance, endurance, testimony or strategic performance. A character can be severely constrained and still act; a powerful character can drift without meaningful agency.

## The agency chain

**Perception** → **interpretation** → **intention** → **tactic** → **action or refusal** → **consequence**. A story may interrupt any link. The character does not perceive the danger; interprets care as control; cannot form an intention under shock; lacks the means to act; chooses refusal; acts but the institution absorbs the action. These interruptions are not failures of fiction. They specify where tension lives.

## Give the protagonist consequential error

When every setback comes from an opponent, accident or misunderstanding, the protagonist may remain morally spotless but structurally weak. Let a plausible choice worsen the situation. Error is not stupidity. It can arise from limited knowledge, divided loyalty, a value protected too rigidly or a tactic that succeeds locally and fails systemically.

## Distinguish victimhood from passivity

A character harmed by violence or oppression does not owe the reader inspirational control. Agency may consist of survival, witness, care, coded speech, withholding cooperation or preserving an account the dominant power denies. Avoid converting structural harm into a self-belief that courage alone can cure.

## Distribute agency across the cast

Secondary characters should initiate at least some pressure. They arrive with news because of their own objective; withdraw help after their own threshold is crossed; misread the protagonist through a history the protagonist does not control. This makes the world feel populated and prevents every scene from becoming a response to the hero.

**Agency audit:** underline every event caused by the protagonist's decision. Circle every event caused by another character's decision. Box every event caused by material or institutional conditions. A healthy pattern varies by novel, but pages of boxes with no underlining may mean the protagonist never converts experience into action.

# 11. Choice under pressure: how character becomes plot

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McKee's pressure principle becomes most useful when pressure is calibrated, not merely increased. Pressure should force a choice among live values and change category across the novel.

## Build a pressure ladder

- **Convenience:** the character can preserve all values by making a small adjustment.
- **Exposure:** the usual tactic risks reputation, privacy or advantage.
- **Relationship:** success now costs trust, care, belonging or another person's autonomy.
- **Identity:** the character must violate the story they tell about themselves.
- **Irreversibility:** delay itself selects an outcome, or no option permits restoration.

Not every novel needs lethal stakes. A comedy of manners may climb from inconvenience to public embarrassment to the recognition that one's benevolence is domination. Emotional scale comes from value and consequence, not explosions.

### Pressure must change the available tactics

Repeatedly asking the same question more loudly creates redundancy. Good escalation removes an option, exposes a tactic, changes the audience, shortens time, adds an innocent dependent or reveals that the desired object carries an unexpected duty. The character must adapt, not simply try harder.

### The irreversible choice is often quiet

Signing a form, deleting a message, failing to correct a rumour, sitting beside the wrong person, using a private name in public: small conduct can reorganise a novel. The writer's task is to establish why this action crosses a threshold.

### Consequence is part of characterisation

Do not rush from major choice to the next plot point. The aftermath shows whether the character minimises, repairs, rationalises, boasts, dissociates or changes. Moral development is not the choice alone; it is the relation to its consequence.

**Pressure design:** for the midpoint and climax, write two columns: **what the character wants to preserve** and **what the situation makes incompatible with it**. If the climax tests the same values at the same scale as the midpoint, escalation may be only logistical.

## 12. Character and narrative structure: reciprocal design

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“Plot-driven” and “character-driven” often describe emphasis, not separate species. Plot without character is a sequence whose outcomes matter abstractly. Character without event is potential without testing. In a novel, structure is the pattern by which conduct produces consequence and consequence revises conduct.

### The causal braid

A strong structural link contains both an external and an internal clause:

- Because she fears exposure, she destroys the letter.
- Because she destroys the letter, the witness loses protection.
- Because the witness is harmed, her identity as protector becomes untenable.
- Because that identity fractures, she confesses to the wrong person.

Each event changes the world and the character's next decision. The chain avoids two common problems: an internal arc narrated but not dramatised, and an external plot that leaves the protagonist psychologically untouched.

### **Inciting disturbance: target the current equilibrium**

The opening need not display the protagonist's entire life. Establish a working arrangement: a role, routine, relationship, lie or compromise that holds competing pressures in temporary balance. The inciting disturbance makes the old tactic insufficient.

**Character effect:** the story begins not merely when trouble arrives, but when the person's way of managing life can no longer contain it.

### **Early movement: let the old strategy work**

If the habitual tactic fails immediately and always, readers may wonder why it became habitual. Let it produce a local gain. Control prevents a scandal; charm wins access; withdrawal avoids humiliation. Then show the transferred cost. Effective strategies are harder—and more moving—to relinquish than obviously foolish ones.

### **Midpoint: change the meaning of the goal**

A midpoint can reveal that the object of desire is wrong, the opponent is also a victim, success serves the harmful system, the protagonist has already crossed a line, or the private problem has public consequence. The goal may remain, but its moral and emotional meaning changes.

### **Crisis: remove the compromise**

The crisis should make two protected goods incompatible. If a third easy option appears, the choice cannot reveal priority. The crisis may be external action, social exposure, confession, refusal or an interior recognition that demands later conduct.

### **Climax: action answers the governing character question**

The climax does not have to complete psychological change, but it should make the novel's deepest tested capacity visible. Can this person recognise another's autonomy? Act without being seen as good? Accept a loss without transferring it? Use power without reproducing harm? Remain loyal without lying?

### **Resolution: show the new pattern at ordinary scale**

A climax under exceptional pressure can produce exceptional behaviour. The resolution asks whether the new relation survives a smaller moment. A changed greeting, payment, silence, division of labour or willingness to ask may be more convincing than a paragraph declaring transformation.

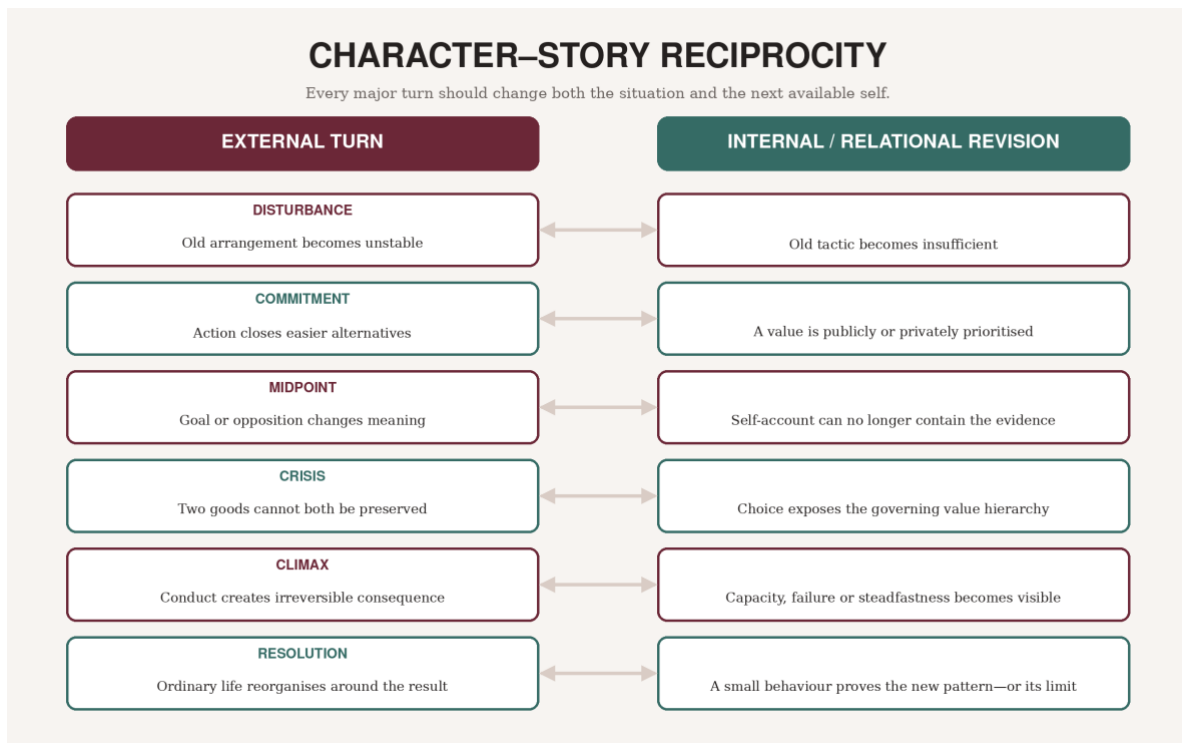


Figure 2. An original character–story reciprocity map. External change and internal revision are braided at every major structural turn.

**Structural audit:** at each major turn, complete both sentences: *Because the character chooses \_\_\_\_, the situation becomes \_\_\_\_.* / *Because the situation becomes \_\_\_\_, the character can no longer believe, protect or attempt \_\_\_\_ in the same way.* If only one sentence works, strengthen the braid.

### 13. Arc families: transformation is only one possibility

An arc is a patterned change in conduct, understanding, relation, status or reader judgement. The protagonist does not always become better, wiser or more self-aware. Some stories test constancy; some reveal what was hidden; some distribute change across a relationship or community.

#### Positive transformation

The character develops a capacity that alters decisive conduct: trust, responsibility, courage, discernment, grief, reciprocity or moral imagination.

**Reader knowledge:** the reader often recognises the needed capacity before the character, creating hopeful dramatic irony.

**Tension:** will pressure produce adaptation or reinforce defence?

**Often suits:** coming-of-age, romance, rehabilitation, quest, domestic and many genre narratives. Close third or first person can make resistance intimate.

**Advantages:** strong emotional payoff, clear structural escalation, satisfying resolution.

**Risks:** therapy-speak, tidy cure, one speech replacing earned conduct, trauma rewarded with improvement.

**Corrective:** make the old strategy intelligent, change costly and the final capacity partial.

### Education and recognition

The world does not primarily require a new personality; it requires more accurate perception. Emma's moral movement depends on seeing the effects of her interpretations and social power.

**Reader knowledge:** narration may align us with the character's misreading while planting evidence that permits correction.

**Tension:** who is being misread, and what harm will confident interpretation cause?

**Often suits:** comedy of manners, mystery, social realism, first-love and apprenticeship novels; free indirect style is especially fertile.

**Risk:** the truth may arrive as authorial correction rather than discovered consequence.

### Steadfast or testing arc

The character's central value remains comparatively stable while increasingly costly circumstances test its meaning. Constancy can transform the world or expose its limits.

**Reader knowledge:** the question is not “will they change?” but “what will constancy cost, and is this really the same value under new conditions?”

**Tension:** endurance, corruption by compromise, isolation, martyrdom, influence on others.

**Often suits:** resistance narratives, procedural series, ethical quests, satire, some heroic and detective fiction. External or omniscient viewpoint can make conduct primary.

**Advantages:** moral force, iconic memorability, clean series continuity.

**Risks:** sanctification, predictability, opponents reduced to tests.

**Corrective:** let the stable value require new tactics and produce mixed consequences.

### Negative or corruption arc

A capacity narrows, a rationalisation hardens, or repeated compromise changes what the character can tolerate. The character may gain power while losing relation, freedom or moral perception.

**Reader knowledge:** readers may perceive the pattern before the character, producing dread.

**Tension:** when does an exception become identity? What line remains, and will it move?

**Often suits:** tragedy, crime, political fiction, gothic, ambition narratives, noir. First person can recruit the reader into rationalisation; omniscience can show distributed harm.

**Risks:** inevitable villain origin story, glamorised harm, a single “bad choice” bearing all causality.

**Corrective:** show local rewards, available alternatives and incremental thresholds.

### Disillusionment arc

The character loses a false or sustaining belief. The result may be liberation, grief, cynicism or a more limited hope.

**Tension:** is the belief protecting life, preventing perception, or both?

**Often suits:** political awakening, war, institutional fiction, family secrets, artistic apprenticeship.

**Point of view:** retrospective first person can contrast former belief with later knowledge; close present-tense narration can make the collapse immediate.

**Risk:** replacing one slogan with the author's slogan.

### Tragic failure to change

The character repeatedly approaches recognition but cannot convert it into conduct before consequence closes the field. Failure may be moral, psychological, social or materially constrained.

**Tension:** recognition without capacity; the reader sees the narrowing alternatives.

**Often suits:** tragedy, addiction narratives, family cycles, political catastrophe.

**Risk:** diagnosing the character from above or making suffering feel punitive.

**Corrective:** preserve dignity, alternatives and systemic context; understanding is not the same as rescue.

### Revelation arc: the reader's model changes

The character may change little; instead, the narration progressively revises who the reader thinks they are. The revelation can involve identity, motive, capacity, history or viewpoint.

**Tension:** curiosity and re-interpretation.

**Often suits:** mystery, psychological suspense, retelling, speculative fiction, unreliable narration. Rotating or second-person structures can make identity itself the architecture.

**Risk:** twist character—details exist only to conceal a reveal.

**Corrective:** every concealed element should possess emotional meaning before and after disclosure.

### Relational or mutual arc

Two or more people alter one another; the unit of change is the relation. They may not end together. The relationship can still enlarge capacity, revise self-image or change the future.

**Tension:** miscommunication, asymmetrical timing, care versus autonomy, changing power.

**Often suits:** romance, friendship, sibling, mentor, parent–child and rival narratives. Alternating close viewpoints reveal complementary blind spots.

**Risk:** one person becomes the other's cure; independent life disappears.

### Communal or distributed arc

A family, neighbourhood, movement, workplace or nation becomes the changing unit. Individual arcs may be partial, conflicting or sacrificed to the pattern.

**Reader knowledge:** multiple viewpoints reveal that nobody possesses the whole account.

**Tension:** coalition, contagion, rumour, institutional memory, resource distribution, collective responsibility.

**Often suits:** sagas, historical fiction, political and speculative fiction, polyphonic literary novels.

**Risk:** characters become representatives of positions.

**Corrective:** give each person an embodied stake and a relation that exceeds the theme.

### Episodic or picaresque persistence

The protagonist moves through changing worlds while remaining comparatively stable; the arc lies in accumulation, exposure of society or the reader's changing judgement.

**Advantages:** breadth, satire, encounter, flexibility.

**Risks:** repetitive episodes, no escalating consequence, secondary characters discarded as scenery.

**Corrective:** let encounters accumulate debt, knowledge, reputation or altered reader expectation even when personality persists.

**Choose the arc after naming the governing question:** *Does this person develop a capacity, recognise a truth, preserve a value, corrupt a value, become knowable, change another person, or reveal a collective pattern?* More than one can operate, but one should usually govern the climax.

## 14. Moral development without didacticism

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Moral development is not becoming pleasant. A charming person can become more exploitative; an abrasive person can act with integrity. Moral character concerns how someone recognises claims beyond the self, uses power, distributes cost, responds to harm and revises conduct.

### Put values into action and collision

Do not assign the theme to a wise character's speeches. Give different characters partially valid goods. Care can become control. Justice can become punishment. Loyalty can protect abuse. Freedom can abandon dependants. The novel thinks by arranging consequences, not by ensuring the correct character wins every argument.

### Distinguish intention, action, consequence and repair

A character may intend kindness, act paternalistically, cause harm and then defend the intention. Another may act from mixed motives but repair the harm effectively. Readers form moral judgement across all four layers. This creates richer affect than sorting characters into good intentions and bad intentions.

### Understanding is not absolution

Backstory can make conduct intelligible without removing responsibility. If every harmful action is followed by an explanatory wound, the narration may appear to purchase forgiveness on the character's behalf. Let consequence and other viewpoints retain weight.

### Do not use suffering as moral detergent

A harmed character is not automatically purified. Punishing a cruel protagonist does not complete a moral arc unless their relation to harm changes. Conversely, a character can develop morally without being broken first. Care, practice, witness, pleasure and solidarity can enlarge capacity.

### Give the reader room to judge

Didacticism often arises through redundancy: the scene demonstrates the harm; another character names it; the narrator interprets it; the protagonist repeats the lesson. Choose the strongest carrier. If readers can infer the value collision, their judgement becomes an active part of the experience.

### Let good action cost something real

Virtue without trade-off reads as branding. A confession that brings only relief is emotionally light. Repair may require status, money, safety, fantasy, allegiance or the acceptance that forgiveness is unavailable.

**Anti-sermon test:** remove the paragraph that states what the scene means. Do the choices, counterclaims and consequences still make the moral problem legible? If not, strengthen the dramatic evidence before restoring explanation.

## 15. Affect: how characters create feeling in readers

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Emotion is not transferred by naming it repeatedly. Readers feel through prediction, discrepancy, embodied detail, value, withheld response and consequence. “She was devastated” supplies classification. A character reheating the untouched dinner for the third time supplies action, time, denial and the absent person.

### Alignment, allegiance, interest and affection

These are different reader relations:

- **Alignment:** access to a character's perception or experience.
- **Allegiance:** moral or evaluative support.
- **Interest:** curiosity about what the character will do or reveal.
- **Affection:** warmth, attachment or pleasure in company.

A novel can align us closely with someone we do not endorse. We can love a secondary character with little interior access. We can remain fascinated by an opponent. “Likable” collapses these distinctions and encourages generic charm.

### Emotional effect needs a live value

Readers cannot measure loss until the novel has made the object valuable in action. Before threatening a friendship, show its particular ease. Before destroying a home, show one ritual that makes it shelter. Before a betrayal, let trust create a practical vulnerability.

## Use prediction and violation

Emotion often occurs when readers know the character's pattern and perceive its strain. The compulsively articulate person cannot finish a sentence. The caretaker does not notice a wound. The avoidant character asks someone to stay. The deviation is moving because the pattern has been established without overstatement.

## Embody, but select

Physical sensation can bring emotion near: dry mouth, altered hearing, a hand that cannot complete a familiar task. Avoid a universal catalogue of pounding hearts and released breaths. Select sensation through this body, this history and this social situation.

## Delay at the threshold, not everywhere

To intensify emotion, slow the instant when defence fails or choice becomes irreversible. Expand perception, micro-action or silence. Then compress familiar aftermath. If every feeling receives ceremonial treatment, the novel loses hierarchy and pace.

## Let aftermath change relation

Tears are not necessarily the emotional climax. The lasting effect may lie in who cleans the room, who cannot use a nickname, who begins to knock, who returns an object without comment. Consequence turns affect into structure.

## Restraint is not emotional absence

Understatement works when the reader has enough context to supply magnitude. Without preparation it can feel vacant. Overstatement works when excess belongs to the character's voice and creates its own truth. The question is not “show, don't tell” but “where does the reader perform the emotional inference?”

**Affect ladder:** establish **value**, create **forecast**, introduce **pressure**, show a **specific defence**, let one detail **violate the pattern**, and give the consequence an **afterlife**. Cut any explanation that merely repeats a completed inference.

# 16. Maximising emotional effect without manipulating the reader

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Manipulation is not the presence of craft; all narrative selects. The problem arises when the text demands an emotion without earning the value, hides information the viewpoint would naturally supply, or treats suffering as a shortcut to significance.

## Earn attachment through particular relation

Generic virtue creates respect; particular reciprocity creates attachment. Show the joke only these two understand, the task they divide without speaking, the boundary one reliably observes. Then pressure that relation.

### Preserve the other person's autonomy

If a character exists only to die, forgive, inspire or validate the protagonist, the reader may feel the mechanism. Give the affected character a goal and judgement of their own. Emotional force increases when the loss is of a person, not a function.

### Use irreversible choice rather than arbitrary catastrophe

Random disaster can shock. Choice-linked consequence implicates character and sustains feeling. This does not mean victims cause their suffering. It means the emotionally central question may be what someone does within catastrophe, what relationship the event exposes, or what duty follows.

### Make sentiment contestable

Allow another character, detail or consequence to complicate the preferred emotion. The reunion is joyful and excludes someone; the sacrifice is loving and controlling; the apology is sincere and late. Mixed affect feels trustworthy because the novel has not cleared the stage for one response.

### Do not repeat the peak

Drafts often climax several times: the character realises, says, cries, remembers, explains and summarises. Choose a sequence with movement. Recognition may lead to action; action may lead to silence. Remove versions that do not change the emotional state.

**Emotional economy:** if a passage contains an emotion word, bodily symptom, memory, metaphor and explanatory thought all carrying the same meaning, keep the two that create the greatest difference between surface and depth.

## 17. Character, narrative voice and point of view

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Point of view determines not only what the reader knows but what kind of character can be made. Narrative voice determines the language through which that knowledge acquires value. The narrator and protagonist may be the same grammatical person without being the same consciousness: a retrospective “I” judges, edits or protects a former self.

### First-person immediate

The narrator speaks close to unfolding experience, with limited hindsight.

**Character effect:** voice itself becomes conduct—selection, syntax, euphemism and omission reveal the person.

**Knowledge:** reader and narrator often discover together, though self-deception creates gaps.

**Tension:** uncertainty, unreliable interpretation, confession under pressure, fear of what the narrator cannot name.

**Often suits:** coming-of-age, survival, psychological suspense, comic voice, identity narratives.

**Advantages:** intimacy, speed, tonal distinctiveness, strong control of attention.

**Disadvantages:** restricted cast interiority; relentless voice; artificial withholding when the narrator avoids known facts only to preserve a twist.

### First-person retrospective

The narrating self knows more than the experiencing self. Dickens uses this gap in *Great Expectations*: adult Pip can render the child's terror and expose the later shame organising the life story.

**Character effect:** two arcs coexist—the past self's conduct and the present self's act of narration.

**Tension:** what happened, why tell it now, what has the narrator understood, and where does hindsight remain self-serving?

**Often suits:** moral education, testimony, confession, memoir-shaped fiction, unreliable self-account.

**Risk:** hindsight explains away immediacy or announces lessons before scenes earn them.

### Third-person close

Narration remains grammatically outside the character while selection and language adhere closely to their consciousness.

**Character effect:** combines intimate misperception with flexible distance. Free indirect discourse can let the narration speak in the character's evaluative idiom without quotation marks.

**Knowledge:** usually limited to the focal character, enabling mystery and surprise.

**Tension:** misreading, self-deception, emotionally charged attention.

**Often suits:** psychological, romantic, coming-of-age, speculative and mystery fiction.

**Advantages:** depth with more tonal and structural flexibility than first person.

**Disadvantages:** “close” can become incessant explanation; other characters may feel opaque or merely interpreted.

### Third-person omniscient

An overt or covert narrator can move among minds, summarise histories, compare perspectives and interpret a social field.

**Character effect:** individuals become visible in relation, irony and system. The narrator may grant a minor character one decisive interior sentence unavailable to the protagonist.

**Knowledge:** broad, but not necessarily complete; omniscience can withhold by selection without pretending ignorance.

**Tension:** dramatic irony, distributed consequence, collision of private interpretations, historical scale.

**Often suits:** social novel, family saga, epic, historical and communal narratives, comedy of manners.

**Advantages:** cast breadth, moral counterpoint, compression, contextual authority.

**Disadvantages:** diluted intimacy, intrusive judgement, head-switching without hierarchy.

### Rotating or multiple close viewpoints

The novel gives sustained sections to different characters.

**Character effect:** nobody owns another person's meaning; the same event acquires incompatible interpretations.

**Knowledge:** readers often know more than any one character, creating suspense and painful miscommunication.

**Tension:** convergence, asymmetry, secret networks, relational irony.

**Often suits:** romance, family sagas, political and speculative fiction, ensemble narratives.

**Advantages:** plural agency, complex cast, distributed moral judgement.

**Disadvantages:** repeated events, stalled momentum at switches, voices differentiated only by biography.

### Second person

“You” can address the self, split a traumatised identity, implicate the reader, reproduce instruction, or stage a relation between narrator and character.

**Character effect:** identity becomes formally unstable. The character may be both speaker and object, self and dissociated other.

**Knowledge:** the reader is given intimate access while the grammar keeps estrangement active.

**Tension:** identity mystery, command and resistance, withheld self-recognition.

**Often suits:** fractured memory, grief, speculative estrangement, accusation, procedural or interactive forms. *The Fifth Season* demonstrates how grammatical form can become part of the character revelation.

**Risk:** gimmick, reader resistance, ambiguity about addressee without meaningful payoff.

### External or behaviourist narration

The narration withholds direct interiority and presents speech, gesture and observable action.

**Character effect:** readers infer motive and emotion; behaviour gains weight.

**Knowledge:** less than the characters about their own thoughts; often more room for ambiguity.

**Tension:** curiosity, moral uncertainty, surveillance, inability to know another person.

**Often suits:** noir, minimalist fiction, stories of estrangement, social performance and denial.

**Risk:** emotional vacancy, generic gesture, coyness.

**POV selection question:** Which misreading, information gap or moral comparison is essential to this character's story? Choose the viewpoint that creates that gap honestly. Do not choose first person merely for intimacy or omniscience merely for freedom.

## 18. Reader knowledge and character tension

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Character tension lives in the difference among conduct, motive, self-account, other people's interpretation and reader knowledge.

### The reader knows less: mystery of person

We observe behaviour without the cause or discover that three apparent identities belong to one life.

**Question:** who is this person, and what pattern will make the evidence cohere?

**Advantages:** curiosity, rereading value, powerful reveals.

**Risks:** arbitrary concealment, twist replacing development.

### The reader knows roughly what the character knows: immersive uncertainty

We share incomplete perception and changing forecast.

**Question:** what will they choose with the same evidence we possess?

**Advantages:** identification, surprise, emotional immediacy.

**Risks:** informational flatness if the character only reacts; contrived surprise if preparation is absent.

### The reader knows more: dramatic irony and dread

We know the lover is lying, the institution will betray, or the character's habitual tactic is causing the feared outcome.

**Question:** when will recognition occur, and what will delay cost?

**Advantages:** sustained suspense, double-meaning dialogue, moral witness.

**Risks:** character appears implausibly obtuse; repeated threat cues spend rather than build tension.

### The character knows more: strategic opacity

A first-person narrator, expert or reticent figure understands something the reader must infer.

**Question:** why is this knowledge being managed, and what does management reveal?

**Advantages:** strong voice, intrigue, power dynamics.

**Risks:** cheating if narration unnaturally avoids the thought; mystique mistaken for depth.

### Characters know different things: relational pressure

A knows the event, B knows the cost, C controls the evidence, D believes a rumour. Dialogue becomes action because every line changes the map.

**Knowledge matrix:** for every major scene, record what each character **knows, believes, wants others to believe, suspects,** and **cannot afford to learn**. Mark the reader's position. The largest active gap is often the scene's tension source.

## 19. Kinds of narrative tension character makes possible

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### Goal tension

Will the character obtain, prevent, protect or discover? This is clean forward pull. It weakens when the goal is generic or success changes nothing.

### Tactical tension

What will the character try next when the usual method fails? Tactic makes personality dramatic and varies pace through adaptation.

### Identity tension

Will conduct confirm or violate who the character believes they are? Especially strong in moral crisis, coming-of-age, disguise, retelling and fractured-identity narratives.

### Relational tension

What do these people want from one another, and why can neither ask directly? Power, dependency, miscommunication and asymmetrical timing generate sustained pressure without external danger.

### Moral tension

Which good, duty or person will bear the cost? Moral tension intensifies when every option preserves something real and damages something real.

### Recognition tension

When will the character understand what the reader or another character already sees? The danger is humiliating the character for reader superiority. Preserve reasons for misreading.

### Curiosity about motive

Why did the character do that? Corbett's warning matters: an answer should enlarge the pattern, not reduce it to one wound. Sometimes uncertainty is the durable effect.

### Suspense about capacity

Can the character perform the needed action—tell the truth, endure intimacy, use the skill under moral pressure, survive the body? Establish both competence and limit.

## Dread of repetition

We recognise the old tactic returning under a more costly situation. Negative and tragic arcs thrive on this forecast.

## Tension of influence

Which character will change whom? Relational and communal narratives can make influence reciprocal, delayed and unintended.

**Tension hierarchy:** choose one governing character question for the novel, one for each act or large movement, and one for each scene. If all three are versions of “will they get what they want?”, add identity, relation or moral cost. If every scene asks a new unrelated question, strengthen continuity.

## 20. Cast design: build a field of pressure

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A cast is not a hierarchy of important and disposable people. It is an arrangement of desires, knowledge, values, permissions and dependencies. The protagonist becomes more dimensional because different relations call forth different behaviour.

### Protagonist: the principal carrier of consequence

The protagonist usually bears the central line of agency, suffering, choice or change. This need not mean the most admirable person, the narrator or the person with the most page time. In a communal novel, protagonism may be distributed. In a mystery, the absent victim can organise the plot while the investigator carries agency.

Ask what makes this figure structurally central:

- Their choices cause the largest irreversible changes.
- Their desire organises the main line of anticipation.
- Their moral or perceptual problem governs the climax.
- Their change, revelation or steadfastness supplies the ending's meaning.

If none applies, the manuscript may have chosen the wrong centre—or may need to embrace an ensemble form.

### Antagonist and counterforce

An antagonist is not necessarily a villain. It is the person whose goal or value persistently makes the protagonist's easy success unavailable. Counterforce can also be institutional, material, historical, environmental or internal. A strong opponent has an affirmative line of action; they are not waiting offstage to obstruct.

Give the opponent:

- a desired future that would continue without the protagonist;
- a competence that earns pressure;
- a value the story takes seriously, even if conduct is condemnable;

- relationships that do not concern the protagonist;
- thresholds, blind spots and costs of their own.

Avoid symmetrical biography as a shortcut to depth. The hero and villain do not both need dead siblings. More useful symmetry lies in choice: each protects the same value by different means, or pursues opposite values with the same tactic.

### Foil

A foil makes a difference perceptible. Two ambitious people define success differently; two survivors respond to vulnerability with opposite tactics. A foil is most effective when similarity accompanies contrast. Otherwise the comparison becomes a moral diagram.

### Mirror or double

A mirror suggests a possible version of the protagonist: what they could become, what they deny, what they once were, or what the same condition produces under different privilege. Mirrors generate identity tension and thematic resonance.

**Risk:** repeated function. If three characters all demonstrate “the protagonist without courage,” merge them or differentiate the scale, relation and outcome.

### Confidant

A confidant permits articulation, but dialogue written solely to reveal the protagonist's thoughts becomes an interview. Give the confidant their own stakes in the disclosure. They may misadvise, withhold patience, require reciprocity or use the knowledge later.

### Witness

A witness changes the ethical status of action. Conduct performed under observation can become shame, testimony, reputation or future leverage. A quiet witness may carry the reader's attention without acting as a mouthpiece for the correct judgement.

### Catalyst

A catalyst triggers change without necessarily changing. The role can feel mechanical if the person arrives, transforms the hero and vanishes. Give the catalyst a cost, limit or misreading. Influence should not erase personhood.

### Dependent or person cared for

A child, patient, sibling, client or vulnerable adult can make responsibility concrete. Avoid using dependency only to humanise a hard protagonist. The dependent person has preferences, resistance and effects of their own. Care is a relation, not a prop.

### Chorus and social field

Neighbours, colleagues, classmates, online communities and extended kin can transmit rumour, enforce norms, provide comedy or show collective change. They need not all become individually

round, but the chorus should contain variation. “The town believed” can conceal power differences and dissent.

### Walk-ons and service roles

Minor figures can be vivid through one precise action or attitude. Avoid overloading them with eccentricity or turning workers into atmosphere. A receptionist does not need a subplot, but can possess competence, impatience, a boundary or a choice about whom to help.

**Cast test:** every major supporting character should exert at least two distinct pressures—on desire, knowledge, value, tactic, identity or relation. If they perform only one function, ask whether they need more agency, less page space or merger with another role.

## 21. Relationship design: character exists between people

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No character has one voice, one status or one degree of honesty. The self is relational. Map not only who each person is, but who they become together.

### The relationship line

For each major pair, identify:

- **Want:** what A wants from B, and B from A.
- **Leverage:** what each can grant, withhold, expose or legitimise.
- **History:** what past event each interprets differently.
- **Ritual:** what repeated behaviour stabilises the relation.
- **Forbidden subject:** what cannot be named without changing it.
- **Public version:** what others think this relation is.
- **Threshold:** what action cannot be taken back.
- **Change:** what becomes possible, impossible or differently understood by the end.

### Vary status by context

Status is not a permanent number. A famous politician may become a frightened child with a parent; an employee may control the technical knowledge a manager needs; a patient may refuse the doctor's authority. Scene tension often comes from mismatch between formal and practical power.

### Triangles create movement

Two-person relationships can become static if every conflict is direct. A third person or institution redistributes desire and information. A sibling alliance changes when care for a parent is divided; a romance changes under friendship, class or professional obligation. The third point should exert its own pressure, not merely provoke jealousy.

## Let relations carry arcs the individuals cannot name

Two people may repeat the same argument while the relation changes through timing, touch, division of labour or what is no longer assumed. This is particularly useful in restrained narration. Track the relation's behaviour, not only its declarations.

**Relationship sentence:** *A needs B to \_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_; B needs A to \_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_; each can give the other what they need only by risking \_\_\_\_.* This creates mutuality and prevents one character from existing solely as an obstacle or cure.

## 22. Character on the page: entrance, body, name, object and setting

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### Entrance as a forecast

A first appearance should create a usable impression, not a complete portrait. Introduce the person doing something under a small pressure: correcting a bill nobody else checks, refusing a chair, remembering the waiter's name but not their child's teacher. The action creates a pattern the story can later complicate.

Avoid the police-lineup entrance: height, hair, eyes, clothing, age. Distribute description through attention, relation and change. What the viewpoint notices is also characterisation of the observer.

### Body without inventory or destiny

Bodies affect experience, social interpretation and capacity. Write them specifically without treating appearance as moral evidence. Beauty is not kindness; fatness is not appetite or lack of discipline; disability is not metaphor, punishment or automatic inspiration; age is not one temperament.

Useful questions:

- What can this body do easily, painfully, pleurably or not at all?
- How does the character experience it versus how others classify it?
- What accommodations, tools, routines or expertise belong to daily life?
- When does the body become foregrounded, and when is it simply lived?
- Whose gaze supplies the description, and what does that gaze reveal?

### Names as social action

A name can carry class, language, kinship, gender, aspiration, history or imposed categorisation. More important, people use names: surname at work, childhood diminutive in conflict, mispronunciation as dominance, a chosen name as boundary. Repetition of a name in dialogue can change intimacy or threat.

## Objects as relational memory

A character's object becomes meaningful through use, transfer and misrecognition. The same coat can be uniform, inheritance, disguise or burden. Avoid symbolic labelling; let action produce symbolism. Who repairs it, borrows it, notices its absence or throws it away?

## Setting as a character pressure

Place shapes posture, speech and permission. The person who commands a kitchen may disappear at a formal dinner. A childhood room can restore an old role. A workplace makes competence visible; a border makes documents part of identity. Setting should not merely match mood. It should change what conduct is possible.

**Entrance test:** after the first scene, can the reader predict one likely behaviour, ask one live question and notice one social relation? That is enough. Preserve room for revision.

## 23. Backstory: make the past active without stopping the novel

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Backstory earns space when it changes the meaning or tactic of the present. Chronology alone is not relevance.

### Three useful delivery modes

#### Trace

A small present detail implies history: the character checks whether a door opens inward before sitting; two siblings use a formal title only when angry. Traces create curiosity and pace.

#### Triggered recollection

The present activates a specific past event through sensation, phrase, place or dilemma. The memory should alter attention or action when the narrative returns. If it only explains an emotion already clear, compress it.

#### Dramatised past scene

Use a full past scene when the reader must experience misinterpretation, relationship or choice rather than receive the fact. Place it where new context makes the scene necessary, not automatically at the moment it occurred chronologically.

### The order of revelation is character design

Readers judge early conduct with partial knowledge, then revise. Withhold ethically and honestly. A close viewpoint character should not avoid thinking an obvious known fact just to preserve a twist. They may avoid naming it because avoidance is itself present conduct, but the prose should register pressure.

## Backstory can reduce tension by overexplaining

If every behaviour is immediately paired with its origin, the reader stops wondering and the character stops surprising. Corbett's resistance to the tyranny of motive is especially useful here. Let some history remain multiple in effect or contested among characters.

## Do not duplicate biography across scenes

A wound introduced through action does not need later recap, confession and dream unless each version changes ownership or meaning. Repetition becomes powerful when the difference matters: the public story, the private memory and the victim's account are not the same.

**Backstory gate:** include the past now only if it **changes a present choice, reinterprets an active relationship, answers one question while raising another, or creates a cost for the next action**. Otherwise place it later, compress it or keep it in the writer's private knowledge.

## 24. Dialogue and subtext: voice as strategy

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Distinctive dialogue is not a collection of catchphrases. It is a pattern of attention, syntax, metaphor, status and tactic.

### Build a private linguistic system

For each major character, consider:

- sentence length and degree of completion;
- direct statement versus implication;
- concrete, abstract, technical, moral or sensory vocabulary;
- whether questions seek information, test loyalty, dominate or defer;
- preferred metaphors and forbidden words;
- what changes under anger, intimacy, fear or professional role;
- how speech differs from thought and written communication.

### Give every line an action

A line can recruit, delay, shame, soothe, classify, test, bargain, distract, disclaim, expose or punish. If dialogue merely transmits facts, attach those facts to competing actions. One person wants a plan; another wants absolution. The same information will be selected and timed differently.

### Subtext needs a coherent text

Characters can discuss groceries while negotiating a separation, but the grocery conversation must still make practical sense. Subtext is not random evasion. The literal subject gives the characters cover and material actions; the deeper subject changes which details become charged.

## Silence is a tactic

Silence can protect, refuse, invite, punish, transfer responsibility or show overload. Give it consequence: who fills it, what action proceeds, which interpretation wins?

## Voice changes by relationship

A strong “voice sheet” includes variants. How does the character sound to a superior, a child, a former lover, a stranger who misclassifies them, a person they need, and a person who needs them? Consistent variability is more lifelike than an identical signature everywhere.

**Dialogue redundancy test:** remove dialogue tags, gestures and explanatory thoughts. If three elements all communicate the same emotion, restore only the one that adds a second value—status, concealment, setting, rhythm or contradiction.

# 25. Character, scene length and pace

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Pace is the felt rate of meaningful change, not sentence speed. Character work accelerates when choices, tactics and relations change quickly; it slows productively when recognition, resistance or aftermath requires attention.

## Expand when the process is the event

Give scene space to:

- the first time a habitual tactic fails;
- a choice among competing values;
- a relationship crossing an irreversible threshold;
- a revelation whose interpretation changes while it is received;
- a performance in which public and private selves diverge;
- the aftermath that proves whether change is durable.

Expansion lets the reader forecast, hope, dread and revise. Emotional effect comes from experiencing resistance, not receiving a summary that the character struggled.

## Compress when the pattern is already understood

Use summary for:

- repeated attempts whose sameness is the point;
- routine acquisition of skill or intimacy;
- travel and logistics without threshold;
- familiar emotional responses;
- consequences that need duration but not continuous experience.

Compression is not anti-character. “For six months she apologised in gifts and never in words” can reveal a pattern more powerfully than six similar scenes.

### Use scene length to create hierarchy

A long scene says the process matters. A short scene says the change is sharp or should propel. If every relationship receives the same page space, readers cannot tell which line governs the novel. Vary length according to novelty, cost and consequence.

### Speed through competence; slow at moral friction

Readers enjoy skilled action. Summarise familiar procedure and dramatise the exception that tests value. A surgeon's routine can move quickly; the moment the patient is the opponent's child may need dilation. Conversely, an action climax can be fast because prior scenes have already loaded the choice.

### Interior thought must change something

Reflection can deepen character and regulate pace, but every thought should not paraphrase the preceding line. Interior movement earns space when it revises interpretation, suppresses a response, selects a tactic, remembers a relevant pattern or collides with bodily evidence.

**Pace test:** after each paragraph of interiority, ask *What is newly noticed, believed, feared, decided or withheld?* If the answer is “nothing; the same feeling is described again,” compress to the strongest sentence or replace explanation with the next action.

## 26. Eight novel examples: character as craft in action

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These examples are not presented as formulas. Each novel combines techniques and resists a single account. The brief quotations are linked to public-domain texts, authorised extracts or publisher pages so that readers can examine context.

### Jane Austen, *Emma*: confidence, free indirect irony and moral recognition

“Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich” begins with apparent assets and an immediate structural problem: comfort, status and self-confidence have left Emma with little external correction. The opening characterisation is efficient because each advantage becomes pressure. Wealth grants freedom; rank grants influence; intelligence supplies convincing misinterpretations.

Austen's narration often inhabits Emma's evaluations while maintaining an ironic margin. The reader is close enough to participate in her matchmaking logic and far enough to see unearned certainty. This creates a recognition arc: plot events are social consequences of interpretation. The humiliation of Miss Bates at Box Hill matters because Emma's wit, status and desire to perform converge in a small choice that wounds another person publicly.

**Reader state:** aligned with Emma but not confined to her judgement. **Tension:** whom will she misread next, and when will confidence encounter consequence? **Structure:** ordinary visits, letters and conversations accumulate into moral education. **Practical lesson:** build an arc by turning a strength into a source of error, then require more discriminating use rather than erasing the strength.

## Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*: self-naming, retrospective shame and the revision of value

“I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip.” makes character and narration acts of self-creation. The child invents a manageable name from family language; the adult narrator reconstructs that child's fears, desires and later shame. The double perspective lets Dickens render young Pip's vulnerability while exposing the moral cost of his aspiration to become a gentleman.

Pip's external goal—rise in class through mysterious expectations—braids with an internal corruption of perception. Joe's goodness becomes embarrassing because Pip has accepted another hierarchy of value. The benefactor revelation reorganises plot and character at once: wealth, crime, gratitude and gentility acquire new meanings.

**Reader state:** knows the adult voice has survived but not what he has understood. **Tension:** benefactor mystery, moral dread and delayed recognition. **Pace:** serial reversals and memorable secondary figures keep a reflective first-person novel propulsive. **Practical lesson:** in retrospective narration, give the narrating self a live moral task; do not let hindsight merely decorate the past.

## Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*: distributed consciousness and an internal arc across one day

“Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.” begins with a small domestic decision and a social name. Clarissa is introduced through marital identity and action, then expanded through sensation, memory and movement across London. The novel's narrow clock contains decades of relation.

Woolf moves among consciousnesses, most decisively juxtaposing Clarissa with Septimus Smith. They do not need to meet for their arcs to resonate. His trauma, the doctors' coercion and his death enter Clarissa's party and change her relation to life, privacy and social performance. Character becomes distributed: the city's minds interpret common stimuli differently, while clocks bind them materially.

**Reader state:** knows more than any one figure through a mosaic of partial interiors. **Tension:** mortality, social performance, unseen connection and whether interior change can coexist with ordinary ritual. **Structure:** one day gains amplitude through memory and parallel lives. **Practical lesson:** interiority creates pace when perception keeps crossing thresholds; every memory should alter the present pattern.

## Toni Morrison, *Beloved*: character as body, memory, house and community

Near the end of *Beloved*, Paul D tells Sethe, “You your best thing, Sethe. You are.” The ungrammatical compression matters because Sethe has organised selfhood around children, ownership, survival, guilt and the demand for *Beloved*'s forgiveness. The line offers relation without pretending history can be tidily cured.

Morrison's character design refuses an autonomous present-tense self. Memory returns through smell, song, scars, place and altered chronology. The house at 124 is both setting and participant; community withdrawal and return change what survival can mean. First-person streams of

consciousness for Sethe, Denver and Beloved intensify voices within a novel told largely through third person.

**Reader state:** assembles histories through recurrence and revision; understanding grows without dissolving moral horror. **Tension:** identity, memory, forgiveness, possession and whether private catastrophe can be met communally. **Practical lesson:** backstory need not be a block behind the character. Let the past change form as bodies, places and witnesses claim different parts of it.

### N. K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*: fractured identity as narrative architecture

Jemisin began from the sentence “Let's start with the end of the world.” The line names apocalypse at two scales: planetary fracture and a mother's grief. Three apparent protagonists and distinct modes of narration eventually disclose one life across time. The formal reveal is not merely a twist; fragmentation makes trauma, repression and survival structural.

Second person addresses one strand as “you,” producing intimacy and estrangement. The reader is close to pain yet held at a grammatical split. As the identities converge, worldbuilding, character history and viewpoint are reinterpreted together.

**Reader state:** initially knows less than the protagonist's whole life, then realises the narration has staged dissociation. **Tension:** identity mystery, survival, oppression, maternal pursuit and catastrophic power. **Story match:** speculative scale permits body, geology, politics and self to mirror one another. **Practical lesson:** a formal experiment earns its place when the reveal changes emotional meaning, not only information.

### Anna Burns, *Milkman*: unnamed character, rumour and the tension of inaction

“I didn't know whose milkman he was. He wasn't our milkman. I don't think he was anybody's.” The narrator's self-correcting sequence creates character through voice and threat through social uncertainty. Most people remain unnamed—middle sister, maybe-boyfriend, first brother-in-law—because classification, rumour and communal surveillance matter more than stable private labels.

The protagonist's tactics are walking, reading, freezing, avoiding notice and attempting not to become “interesting.” In a coercive environment, inaction has enormous consequence. Long sentences accumulate qualification because precision is defensive: language anticipates accusation.

**Reader state:** shares the narrator's effort to parse danger while gradually learning the social codes. **Tension:** rumour, predation, misnaming and the danger of being seen. **Pace:** accrual replaces a conventional chase; recurrence increases pressure because the community keeps rewriting the character. **Practical lesson:** a passive-looking tactic can be highly active under constraint; make the cost and social field legible.

### Sally Rooney, *Normal People*: relational arc and alternating misrecognition

At the end of *Normal People*, Marianne thinks, “He brought her goodness like a gift and now it belongs to her.” The metaphor is generous but not a claim that Connell has cured her. The novel's deeper unit is mutual influence: class position, popularity, shame, intimacy and mental health shift across time and place.

Alternating close third person shows how two articulate people repeatedly fail to ask the decisive practical question. The reader often understands both sides of a miscommunication, producing painful dramatic irony. Time jumps compress repetition while each return tests a changed status arrangement.

**Reader state:** knows more about the relation than either participant at a given moment. **Tension:** asymmetrical timing, power, self-worth and speech that nearly becomes direct. **Structure:** episodes are selected where the relationship changes category. **Practical lesson:** do not make one character another's medicine; give each independent pressures and let change remain reciprocal, uneven and unfinished.

### Percival Everett, *James*: strategic voice and the reclamation of interior authority

In the authorised extract from *James*, Jim teaches his daughter performed dialect: “That would be the correct incorrect grammar.” The phrase makes language a survival tactic. White characters mistake performance for incapacity; the reader receives the double knowledge and recognises the cost of constant code-switching.

Everett transforms a canonical supporting figure into the perceiving, judging protagonist. Character is not newly manufactured by adding a sympathetic wound. It is recovered through intellectual agency, family desire, strategic conduct and control of narrative voice. The novel's tension lies partly in when James must perform another person's version of him.

**Reader state:** aligned with private language while watching dangerous public misrecognition. **Tension:** exposure, family separation, voice and the gap between attributed and actual knowledge. **Pace:** verbal strategy operates inside physical pursuit. **Practical lesson:** when revising a cast, ask whose apparent flatness is created by the chosen viewpoint and who possesses expertise the narrator has failed to recognise.

## 27. Avoiding character redundancy

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Redundancy is not resemblance. Siblings may share speech; a chorus may repeat a norm; doubles may deliberately echo one another. Redundancy occurs when two characters perform the same narrative work at the same scale, create no meaningful difference in response, and require separate introductions, scenes and maintenance.

### Common forms of redundancy

- **Duplicate confidants:** two people receive the same disclosures and offer similar advice.
- **Same-note opponents:** several characters obstruct for the same reason and with the same power.
- **Repeated mirrors:** multiple lives demonstrate the identical warning future.
- **Theme delegates:** each character arrives to state a position, then leaves unchanged.
- **Interchangeable friends:** distinct names, identical voice, knowledge and loyalty.
- **Exposition relays:** characters exist to ask questions or deliver facts the protagonist could learn in one channel.

- **Trait repetition:** several scenes prove the same person is generous, volatile, clever or afraid without changing cost.
- **Backstory repetition:** the same origin is told, remembered and explained with no new ownership or implication.
- **Emotional repetition:** the character experiences the same feeling in the same form after the same trigger.

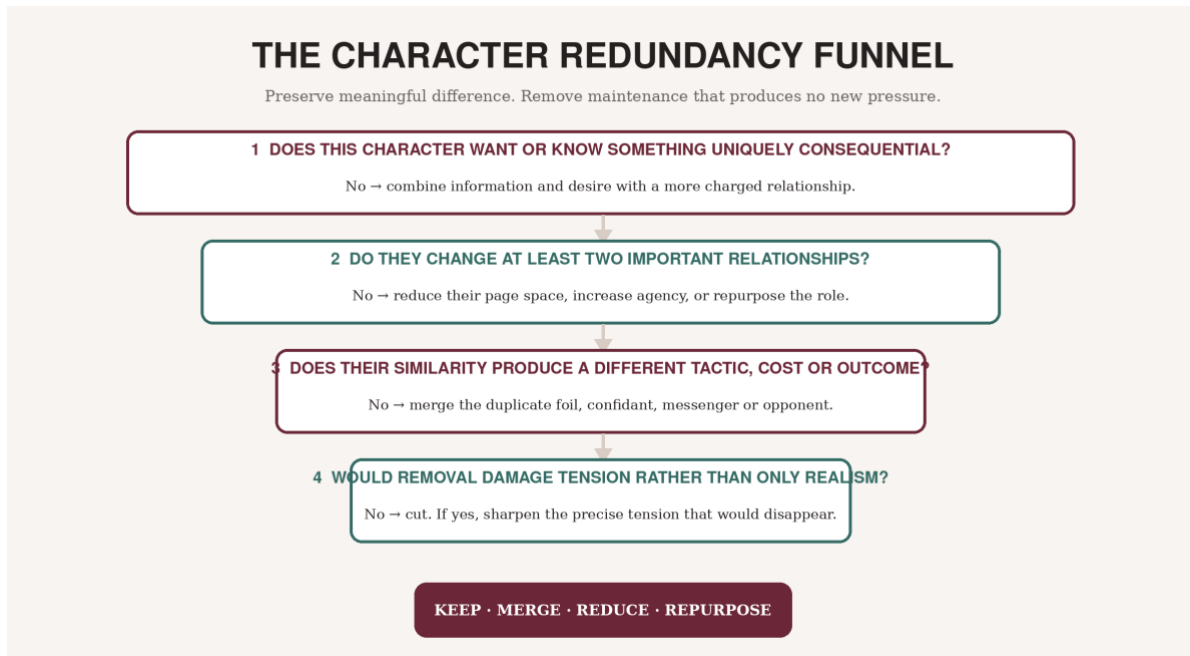


Figure 3. An original character redundancy funnel. Keep separate characters when difference in desire, knowledge, pressure or relationship changes the story; otherwise merge, reduce or repurpose.

## Merge when functions overlap and relations do not change

Combining the colleague who knows the secret with the rival who wants the promotion may produce a more charged character. The merger turns exposition into leverage. It also reduces introductions and lets consequences travel through an existing relationship.

## Differentiate when similarity is the point but outcomes diverge

If two characters share a wound, give them different resources, values, tactics or social permissions. The contrast then tests the novel's assumptions. Similarity without difference is duplication; similarity under altered condition is inquiry.

## Reduce when a function is necessary but personhood is not central

Not every messenger needs a subplot. Give the figure precise conduct and proportionate space. Over-characterising a functional walk-on creates false promises and slows pace.

## Repurpose when the novel needs pressure elsewhere

Move a redundant friend into a witness, rival, dependent or institutional role. Change what they know, what they want from the protagonist and what they can withhold. A cast becomes efficient when information, emotion and power travel through the same charged relationships.

## Repeat with difference

For a trait, feeling or argument to recur, change at least two variables: audience, cost, tactic, knowledge, power, result, bodily state or moral meaning. The reader then experiences development rather than reminder.

**The strongest redundancy question:** *If these two characters were merged, what valuable tension would disappear?* If the answer is only “real life has several friends” or “both are based on people I know,” the manuscript has not yet made the distinction dramatic.

## 28. A whole-novel character inventory

Create one row per recurring character and one column for each diagnostic below. Keep entries short enough to compare.

- **Structural role:** what pressure or consequence only this person carries.
- **Immediate desire:** what they want in their principal scenes.
- **Story desire:** what future they are actively building.
- **Value under cost:** what they protect when goods conflict.
- **Usual tactic:** the verb pattern readers learn.
- **Tactic change:** how pressure alters method.
- **Knowledge:** what they know, misread, conceal and discover.
- **Relationship difference:** who becomes different in their presence.
- **Voice marker:** syntax, attention and social variation—not a catchphrase.
- **Agency event:** one plot change they initiate.
- **Moral consequence:** who pays for their conduct and whether they respond.
- **Arc or function:** transform, recognise, persist, corrupt, reveal, influence or carry collective change.
- **First/last image:** how the reader's model is established and revised.
- **Unique necessity:** why merger or removal would damage the novel.

Colour-code repeated answers. If four characters all “challenge the protagonist to trust,” examine whether they create distinct costs or simply restate the theme. If only the protagonist initiates events, redistribute agency. If every voice marker is a biographical fact, return to syntax and tactic.

**Inventory limit:** the sheet is a comparison instrument, not the novel's hidden bureaucracy. Stop adding columns when the table no longer changes scenes.

## 29. Ten revision passes for character

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Revise one system at a time. Trying to fix agency, voice, arc and line-level emotion simultaneously makes diagnosis vague.

### Pass 1: causality

Underline choices that cause later events. Strengthen missing links. Replace accidental plot delivery with consequence where appropriate.

### Pass 2: agency

Track what the protagonist and supporting cast initiate. Give important secondary characters actions that alter the field.

### Pass 3: pressure and choice

Mark the cost at each major decision. Where all goods can be preserved, increase incompatibility rather than volume.

### Pass 4: tactic

List the operative verb in every scene: charm, evade, document, accuse, soothe, disappear. Repeated verbs need changing counterpressure or escalation.

### Pass 5: contradiction

Identify behaviour that surprises. Add preparation where it feels arbitrary; remove explanation where it is already convincing.

### Pass 6: relationship

Track status, ritual, leverage, forbidden subjects and thresholds for each major pair. Make the end state behaviourally visible.

### Pass 7: viewpoint and knowledge

Map who knows what and whether the narration withholds honestly. Cut thoughts the viewpoint could not plausibly have; add pressure where known facts are avoided.

### Pass 8: voice and embodiment

Read each character's dialogue in isolation. Differentiate syntax, attention and social variation. Replace generic bodily responses with selected, character-specific evidence.

### Pass 9: moral and emotional consequence

Trace harm, benefit, repair, denial and transferred cost. Remove scenes that demand feeling without establishing value; extend aftermath where it changes conduct.

## Pass 10: redundancy and proportion

Merge duplicate functions, compress repeated proof, reduce overbuilt walk-ons, and give the most consequential relations enough space.

**Revision order matters:** causality and agency before polished backstory; relationship before distinctive banter; moral consequence before a redemptive speech; redundancy before adding more character detail.

## 30. A complete character workshop

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Use this sequence for a protagonist, opponent or major secondary character. It can be completed before drafting or from evidence already present in a manuscript.

### Step 1: write the working arrangement

In 100 words, describe how this person currently keeps life manageable. Include one role, one resource, one relationship, one avoidance and one cost transferred elsewhere.

### Step 2: choose the governing character question

Frame it as capacity under pressure: *Can she accept help without converting it into debt? Can he tell the truth when truth will not make him admirable? Can they preserve loyalty without protecting harm?*

### Step 3: build three scales of desire

Write scene, story and life desires. Add what the character says they want and what conduct suggests instead.

### Step 4: identify the intelligent old tactic

Name the strategy that has worked. Write one scene where it succeeds and one where its transferred cost becomes visible.

### Step 5: design the relational field

Choose four cast pressures: someone who rewards the old tactic, someone harmed by it, someone who uses it better, and someone with whom it becomes impossible. Give each their own future.

### Step 6: create the knowledge map

Record what the character knows, believes, conceals, misreads and cannot afford to learn. Decide whether the reader begins above, below or beside that knowledge.

### Step 7: draft the pressure ladder

Design five situations that move from convenience through exposure and relational cost to identity and irreversibility. Change the category of pressure each time.

### Step 8: write the opposite action

Following Corbett's prompt, imagine the exact opposite of the expected choice. Do not keep it automatically. Ask what hidden value, altered context or capacity would make it convincing. The exercise reveals whether the design has become a cage.

### Step 9: braid the major turns

At inciting disturbance, early commitment, midpoint, crisis, climax and resolution, write external consequence beside internal revision. Eliminate turns that do only one job unless deliberate stillness is the point.

### Step 10: test the arc family

Does the story transform, educate, test, corrupt, disillusion, tragically narrow, reveal, relate or distribute change? Rewrite the climax question to match.

### Step 11: stage moral consequence

Name intention, action, harm or benefit, response and possible repair. Give another character a credible account that the protagonist cannot absorb immediately.

### Step 12: build voice variants

Write the same practical request to a superior, child, former lover, stranger and person who needs the character. Differentiate relation without turning voice into costume.

### Step 13: choose the first and last ordinary actions

Avoid summary of change. Select two comparable behaviours at different moral or relational states: accepting a cup, using a name, asking before entering, returning a key.

### Step 14: perform the redundancy test

List every other character who performs a similar role. Merge, differentiate, reduce or repurpose. Then list every scene that proves the same trait or wound. Keep the version with the greatest change in cost.

**Workshop output:** a usable design should generate at least three scenes, one structural turn, one relationship reversal and one deletion. If it only generates more biography, return to pressure and consequence.

## 31. Compact comparison and final checklist

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### Character choices at a glance

**Transformation arc** — Best for a tested new capacity. Creates hopeful irony and emotional payoff. Risk: tidy cure. Pair with close viewpoint when resistance is central; prove change in ordinary conduct.

**Steadfast arc** — Best for ethical testing, series protagonists and resistance. Creates suspense about cost and influence. Risk: sanctification. Change tactics and consequences even if the core value persists.

**Negative or tragic arc** — Best for ambition, crime, complicity and narrowing alternatives. Creates dread. Risk: inevitability or glamorised harm. Preserve choices, rewards and systemic context.

**Revelation arc** — Best when the reader's model is the changing unit. Creates curiosity and reinterpretation. Risk: twist machinery. Make concealed details emotionally active before disclosure.

**Relational arc** — Best for love, friendship, rivalry and family. Creates dramatic irony through asymmetric knowledge. Risk: one person as cure. Maintain independent aims and mutual influence.

**Communal arc** — Best for social, historical, political and speculative scale. Creates network tension and distributed responsibility. Risk: representatives instead of people. Give every viewpoint embodied stakes.

## Final manuscript checklist

- Can the protagonist be described through choices and tactics, not only traits and history?
- Does the opening establish a working arrangement that pressure will make insufficient?
- Does the old strategy succeed somewhere, proving why it persists?
- Do major turns braid external consequence with internal, relational or moral revision?
- Does pressure change category rather than merely increase volume?
- Are decisive choices made among live goods, loyalties or identities?
- Does the climax answer the novel's governing character question through conduct?
- Does the resolution show the new pattern at an ordinary scale?
- Does every major supporting character want a future beyond helping or blocking the protagonist?
- Do opponents initiate action and possess affirmative values or goals?
- Do foils and mirrors create differences in condition, tactic or outcome rather than repeat the theme?
- Does each central relationship have changing leverage, ritual and a threshold?
- Does viewpoint create the intended information gap honestly?
- Are narrator, protagonist and focal consciousness distinguished where necessary?
- Do dialogue and interiority vary by relation and pressure?
- Does physical description reveal viewpoint without turning bodies into moral shorthand?
- Does backstory change present action or interpretation?
- Are emotions carried by value, pattern violation and consequence rather than repeated labels?
- Does the novel distinguish understanding from absolution and suffering from moral purification?
- Are harm, benefit, transferred cost and repair visible across the cast?
- Can any confidants, mirrors, messengers or opponents be merged?
- Does every repeated trait, feeling or argument change at least two variables?
- Are walk-ons proportionate and granted one precise sign of agency or boundary?
- Does scene length reflect novelty, cost and structural importance?
- Are the first and last images of major characters in meaningful conversation?

The governing principle is simple but not reductive: **character becomes story when a person, within specific constraints, chooses a tactic that changes another person's possibilities—and must then live, resist or change inside the consequence.** Build enough pattern for expectation, enough pressure for revelation, enough relation for moral weight and enough mystery for the character to remain alive beyond the plan.

## Linked sources and further reading

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### The two principal craft books

- [Robert McKee, \*Character: The Art of Role and Cast Design for Page, Stage, and Screen\* — official book page](#)
- [David Corbett, \*The Art of Character: Creating Memorable Characters for Fiction, Film, and TV\* — official author page](#)
- [Authorised excerpt from Corbett, “Serving and Defying the Tyranny of Motive”](#)

### Additional craft and critical lineage

- [E. M. Forster, \*Aspects of the Novel\* — public-domain text on flat and round characters](#)
- [Lajos Egri, \*The Art of Dramatic Writing\*](#)
- [Nancy Kress, \*Dynamic Characters\*](#)
- [Orson Scott Card, \*Characters & Viewpoint\*](#)
- [Lisa Cron, \*Story Genius\*](#)
- [Donald Maass, \*The Emotional Craft of Fiction\*](#)
- [Aristotle, selections from \*Poetics\* on action, choice, recognition and reversal](#)

### Historical and novel sources

- [The British Library, “Jane Austen: social realism and the novel”](#)
- [Jane Austen, \*Emma\* — Project Gutenberg](#)
- [Charles Dickens, \*Great Expectations\* — Project Gutenberg](#)
- [The British Library, “Exploring consciousness and the modern: an introduction to \*Mrs Dalloway\*”](#)
- [Toni Morrison, \*Beloved\* — Penguin Random House reader's guide](#)
- [N. K. Jemisin, \*The Fifth Season\* — publisher page](#)
- [Raffi Khatchadourian, “N. K. Jemisin's Dream Worlds”](#)
- [Anna Burns, \*Milkman\* — authorised Booker Prize extract](#)
- [Sally Rooney, \*Normal People\* — Penguin Random House reader's guide](#)
- [Percival Everett, \*James\* — authorised Booker Prize extract](#)

*Craft language is offered as flexible diagnostic vocabulary rather than universal law. Historical trends describe changing emphases, not linear progress. Novel quotations are brief and linked to their source pages; consult the complete works for context.*