
Meet your characters first... They're your story.

Join best-selling, award-winning Superromance author Anna DeStefano and 2004 GH winner Trish Milburn, as they discuss how to plan your next story by researching and plotting character growth--BEFORE you write the first word.

1. Where you come from is half the battle

Add more punch to a character's present: Motivate from the past.

While your story pacing thrives on the here and now, so much of a character's motivation is anchored in the past we never see.

It's been said that designing your story, researching your characters and their lives and then planning the way they'll grow throughout your story, should take up at least 50% of the time you devote to writing a manuscript. This guideline has added depth to my stories and character development.

Note: Every character may have a bit of you in her/him. You can write those aspects with particular depth because you've lived them. Use what you know--particularly in planning.

Whether or not the past becomes a tangible part of your story through actual flashbacks or dialogue, character growth from the past straight through to your black moment and resolution is the internal journey your readers plug into while the external plot unfolds. If you can get your characters to turn in new directions with each scene, while the external plot keeps the reader on the edge of her seat, your pacing will take on an amazing new depths.

Start with your inciting incident, map out your black moment, then create the backstory that will take your plot to a whole new level.

A lot of writers and teachers I respect encourage this approach to planning your story: Deb Dixon talks about building to your character's black moment from the very first scene we see her; Robert McKee, in his screenwriting book, *Story*, tells us that the key value at stake at a story's inciting incident dictates what the black moment has to be for that character. What this tells me is that I have to understand my characters inside and out (where they've come from and how that's going to affect where they're going) before I sit down to write the draft of a new story.

How a character changes and grows from the first page of a story to the last is the internal journey a reader plugs into while a book's external plot unfolds. The process of intentionally mapping out character growth before I write the full draft of a story is a technique I've come to rely on in my own writing.

For me, paying as much attention as possible to character growth pays off as I plot and design each new story. Not only does this kind of research help clarify the character's journey or the reader, but I think it clarifies it for me as well, as I sit down to pound out each new chapter. Knowing up front how my characters are going emotionally move from one point in the story to the next frees up my creativity as I begin knitting scenes together. I've been amazed at how much quicker I can produce drafts of a manuscript with this kind of in-depth character knowledge in my tool kit.

No one needs to understand your character's past as much as you.

Before we go any further, I want to make it clear that my intention is not to encourage you to include more backstory in your manuscript. In fact, the less "back" story you include, the more growth in the here and now, the better--that's showing. Backstory, when we touch on it in our manuscripts, more often than not has to be done through telling, a narrative technique we have to be very careful to use with a light touch.

But that doesn't let you off the hook as an author.

In order to show character growth, we have to be able to encapsulate where our characters are at each stage of the story. And for most of us, that kind of understanding will take both research and planning.

The more you know, the better. Make your characters 3-dimensional in your mind, and they'll be 3-dimensional on paper. Don't forget to learn more and make adjustments as you write the story. It'll likely make it stronger.

Know a character as well as you can before you start writing her story, and you'll give your readers an indelible image of a person they just have to read more about.

Researching a character's backstory frees them (and you) to move forward. Each scene must build on the last, and on the past.

Gradual revelation of key backstory elements creates tension in your plot--use *Dangerous Kisses* as an example, why Jake doesn't like reporters.

Suggestions of ways to SHOW character--his/her name, habits, mannerisms, pet sayings... Perhaps a short exercise-- if we were to give them the nugget of a character (i.e. a bookstore owner or a doctor), everyone in the room would create a totally different character. That's the beauty of writing.

You can also focus on internal characteristics, rather than external--emotional "weapons" Deb Dixon calls them, that show us who they are as people, just as much as their external mannerisms.

2. Scenes (and characters) are built, they don't just happen

The best way to be a successful "organic" writer, whose characters rip the story out of your hands and run with it, is to have a game plan.

Your characters must change with each scene.

Always keep the beginning, middle, and end of their journeys in mind. Then torture them with your plot ;o)

Character arcs (i.e. from self-loathing to self-worth -- credit Alicia Rasley) -- how does your character get from one point to the other? What are the steps along that journey?

Get good at recognizing your characters' turning points, and they'll surprise you every time.

Give yourself permission to let characters and stories percolate, especially if it's a new type of story for you or if you're currently working on another project. You'll be surprised how these characters come to life while just existing at the back of your brain. Keep a notebook with you about the idea and write down every nugget about it as you think of it. (i.e. my women's fiction book).

3. Work hard for those surprises--revisions are good for your spontaneity

Your characters are reborn each time you learn a bit more about what they need.

Give yourself credit for learning as you go along. Bang out that first draft, then go back for some intuitive, spontaneous character revisions.

Interesting characters may emerge organically in your first draft. Character depth can take a trip or two back to the well to conquer.

Okay, I've said I spend at least half of my writing time getting ready to draft the story--for me, planning includes working out the character growth and writing the first three or four chapters. Then, I sit down and produce the draft of the entire manuscript relatively quickly--even organically, I dare say, once I've gotten my anal-retentive planning out of the way. But that's not the whole picture. Because the next step in my writing process is some pretty extensive revisions--mostly from the viewpoint of making sure the characters in the completed draft are doing what they need to be doing based on my plans.

Intentionally leaving myself time to revise the story, and more specifically characters' journeys, is key to delivering the kind of depth I like to see in my stories. Even with my planning, I learn a bit more about a character each time I work on her story. With my initial plan in hand, I can read back through a draft and really get a good feel for how I'm delivering the story through my character's journey. Inconsistencies or weak areas can then be revised, even further solidifying for the reader what the character's going through.

And that, I think, is the key to my process for working out stories through careful character development--the more straight-forward and clear I show the reader what the character has at stake and how she goes about getting what she needs, the better the reader will identify with the journey. And that kind of clarity, unless your one of the lucky few who can do it intuitively, takes careful planning, execution, and then revision.

Interesting characters may emerge organically in my first draft. But the kind of character depth I'm looking for in my stories often takes more work.

After some time away from your manuscript, you might be surprised by your new ideas for making the characters and story stronger.

If you say you don't like revisions, but your characters and stories aren't where you want them, it's time to bite the bullet.

Train yourself to look at revisions as an opportunity to make your book the best it can be, not as an obstacle. Revisions can give you a better chance of selling or, if you've already sold, a better chance of selling more books, making lists, making a name for yourself.

Planning is great. Being an organic, spontaneous writer is an awesome gift. But there's work to be done in your stories, so get busy.

The better you know your characters, the easier revisions will be--particularly editorial revision, in which you have to incorporate someone else's ideas into your imaginary world. You'll know when a character is acting out of character. It's important to be able to turn around requested revisions in a timely manner.

4. Get busy coming up with your own plan

Any of this sounding good? Then let's get specific.

Of course, you need to find our own process for planning a story, and your own comfort level for how much you can put into the planning stage. What I'm trying to encourage you to do is to figure out what planning means for you. Whether you do as much as I do or less--or even more--the time you spend up front learning about what you're trying to say through your characters is time well spent. It believe will strengthen and deepen your reader's attachment to your characters and your story.

I use a lot of different forms when I'm planning out a story--I dabble with Deb Dixon's Big Black Moment method. I often do a high-level pass through the hero's journey. Sometimes I try to encapsulate the story using the paradigm technique Syd Field talks about in his screenwriting books. Some of this might sound familiar to you, or you might have your own methods. But for the sake of this workshop, I'd like to focus on the planning I do for my characters.

In the pages I've handed out, I've given you one of my unfinished character planning documents for an old story that still resides in the vault of forgotten manuscripts under my bed, as well as a blank copy of the form for you to use with one of your current projects.

What this simple Microsoft Word table helps me do is map potential ways I can explore a character's internal journey in my story. It's a planning document that I use for brainstorming. From a high level, I can flush out how the characters will change through the beginning, middle, and end of a story, then I can pick the characteristics I like best and get more specific as I start plotting.

In the working example I've given, I started with my characters' archetypes and worked to figure out how they would evolve over the course of the story. I focussed on key internal issues the characters would be dealing with during the story. Some of the ideas I came up with I ended up not using, some became the backbone of my characters' journeys. As with any brainstorming exercise, the goal is not to be perfect but to explore every avenue you can so you have the most material to chose from when you move on.

Notice there's very little external plot details in this document. And in some cases, I seem to be repeating myself. Again, I use this at the early stages of planning a story, and the point is to explore my characters and how I might turn their emotional/internal needs throughout the story. The more freedom you give yourself as you're doing something like this, the better the end result (the deeper your characters' journey will ultimately become, once you chose the direction you want to take them in).

Look at the working example one more time, and consider the depth of information you can work out for your characters doing something like this. Each row of the chart represents a character element you can work through your story. Hopefully, you'll come up with two even three "keepers" that you'll carefully develop at each key point in the story (the beginning/inciting incident, the midpoint/point of no return, and the end/black moment/resolution of your story). Now look down at each column--once you've worked through this chart, you've created a kind of emotion roadmap of sorts. A checklist you can

go back to at each point in the story to see if you characters are developing the traits you've picked at the rate you thought they would.

In the middle of the story, is the hero being distracted from his work by the situation at home, or is it the loss of control challenging his definition of success? Is the heroine's inability to provide everything for her grandmother herself showing her how much her happiness is contingent on others'--how little she really knows what she wants? By the end of the story, has the hero learned to harness the control he once needed to produce real success for himself and those he's let himself love? Has the heroine stopped basing her security on everyone around her being okay and found the strength to risk her heart by letting herself need the hero more than could ever be safe?

Where to go from here

Here's one of my character planning documents (see attached). Let's see what you can learn about one of your current projects.

Mapping your character and plot-threads through the beginning, middle, and end of your story highlights weak areas that need fleshing out.

Forget about character-driven vs. plot-driven stories. The two plotting techniques are intertwined--one can't exist without the other.

Know where your characters are going--this frees them to get there in some amazing ways.

My next step after this process would be to look at the story as a whole (using whatever method I choose: hero's journey, paradigm, and so forth) and try to figure out where my characters need to be at the story's inciting incident and black moments--based on what I've learned about them.

What do they have at stake at the beginning of the story and at the end that is unique to who they are and must be dealt with again and again through the story? Based on what I know about my characters, what is the key story question I need to focus on as I write? Notice, I'm not plotting yet--I'm just trying to nail down what my characters will be working through and dealing with at key points in the story. Once I'm comfortable I understand the emotional journey I need the characters to take, I'm free to plot to my heart's content--or, if it's your method, to start writing and work the story out as I go.

In this example I gave you, I might choose to set up the hero at the inciting incident protecting himself by focussing on business, and not letting love touch him for fear of being weak and being hurt again. The heroine, by comparison, would be protecting herself from personal disappointment by focussing on everyone else's needs but her own--recognizing her own needs makes her weak in her mind. They're both working on a similar problem (which will be the key issue as they come together), but they're coming at it from totally different places emotionally--which will make for lovely conflict.

Whatever black moment I come up would then have to reflect back to these core issues, leaving them struggling with all they've learned through the story's turning points. They'll have to make the choices they didn't want to make at the inciting incident--do they fall back on their safe patterns of protecting themselves, or do they risk what they never

thought they could and in order to have what they can no longer deny they need? The tangible, external details of all this of course must be worked out as you plot/write your story. But the core of your characters' journeys would be set at this point

If you take nothing else away from all this, I hope I've encouraged you to know where your characters are going very early on in your planning process--whatever your planning process is. You'll be amazed at how much this approach will free you up to get your characters to their black moment and beyond in ways that will keep your readers hook on each and every page.

Use your planning tools to create your next pitch or synopsis.

This type of high-level character summary gives you a new command of exactly where your story is going. Get to know your characters, and your comfort level discussing your work with others will increase.

5. Commit to the Process of Understanding Your Characters Better

Plotting and charting may not be your thing, but understanding what works in your stories (and what doesn't) is required if you want to improve.

Where do your ideas and characters come from?

What brings your moments of inspiration to life?

What can you do to reproduce what's working for you now in your next project, not to mention improve what's not.

Know your patterns, know your weaknesses, then put them to good use in your next project.

Another author's method may not be your method. Don't let anyone make you feel like your process isn't the 'right' one. They're not writing your stories!!!!

Always play on your strengths--where your writing gifts thrive. But never forget that change is good. Always stretch a little with each new project.

Pick a new character type that you've never explored.

Break a story development rut.

Dare to explore a different direction in your character growth.

Never stop learning about the writing process. You don't stop learning craft when you get published. Read craft books, articles, novels by authors you think do great characterization, the books of authors in genres you normally don't read just to see how they handle characterization.

Suggested Reading

Character resources:

The Complete Writer's Guide to Heroes & Heroines; Sixteen Master Archetypes

Tami D. Cowden, Caro LaFever, Sue Viders

Please Understand Me II: Temperament, Character, Intelligence

David Kiersey

Characters and Viewpoint (Orson Scott Card; part of the Writer's Digest)

Orson Scott Card (Writer's Digest)

Dynamic Characters

Nancy Kress

Creating Characters: How to Build Story People

Dwight Swain

You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation

Deborah Tanner

Plotting resources:

Goal, Motivation, and Conflict: The Building Blocks of Good Fiction

Debra Dixon

Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and Principles of Screenwriting

Robert McKee

Writing the Breakout Novel: Insider advice for taking your fiction to the next level

Donald Maass

The Screenwriter's Workbook

Syd Field

Techniques of the Selling Writer

Dwight V. Swain

Bio

Anna DeStefano

Anna DeStefano writes long contemporary romance for Harlequin Superromance. Her 2004 *The Unknown Daughter*, was a Waldenbooks Series Bestseller, won the Romantic Times award for Best Superromance of 2004, and is a National Reader's Choice Award finalist for Best First Book. Her *June Super, A Family for Daniel*, is available in the book fair, and *The Runaway Daughter*, the much-awaited sequel to Anna's best-selling debut, will be out in February, 2006, as part of *Super's Count on a Cop* series.

In addition to writing fiction, Anna is a Senior Technical Writer and a technical trainer. A monthly columnist for the Georgia Romance Writers newsletter, *The Galley*, Anna regularly contributes motivational articles that explore the ins and outs of why writers write. She also does volunteer work in field of grief and crisis care. Visit her at www.annawrites.com for more information about her projects, appearances, awards, and for a daily affirmation in her online journal.

Trish Milburn

Trish Milburn is a four-time Golden Heart finalist and winner of the 2004 Golden Heart in Romantic Suspense for her manuscript, ***Dangerous Kisses***.

She's a former magazine editor and currently works as a freelance writer. She's completed 13 manuscripts with a wide variety of characters ranging from a National Park ranger to a Texas Ranger to a reporter. She was a workshop presenter at the 2004 RWA National Conference in Dallas.

In what little spare time she has, she enjoys reading, traveling, hiking and nature photography. Two goals are to hike the Appalachian Trail and visit all the units of the National Park system.

General issues:

Up front, show each character securing their own "safe" place, through different, opposing means.

Hero		Heroine			
Beginning	Middle	End	Beginning	Middle	End
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chief 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chief with a big distraction at home. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chief using his success to make it possible for his family to be his priority. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nurturer and spunky kid (protecting herself). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nurturer who's failing. Can't give grandmother the security she needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> She's trusted again, and is burned. Will she fight back, or fight to believe?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In control of the world and his lost soul. He's a good provider/protector for those who are important to him. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> He has to modify his approach to work and his job. His new world must accommodate Daniel. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> His money and success are now working for him, giving him the freedom to enjoy/discover the rest of his life. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has learned to hide her disappointment/personal dreams and goals behind laughter, hard work, and her sunny personality. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can't hide behind her sunny personality with Nick and Daniel. They break through her defenses every time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is she ready to choose Nick/Daniel (dream of family vs. dream of career). The "safe" way out no longer gives her her dream).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Daniel's schedule forces him to change (protective, rather than attaching). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> He reasserted control, yet has found another part of life he wants/needs (for himself and Daniel?). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Control is not as important now as the happiness he finds as he lets go 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> He begins to notice a yearning for his new life with Daniel, when he returns to his own "world" of business. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Admires/resents how natural nurturing is his for his neighbor(s). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> He's learned to let himself nurture--not just provide and protect. It's left him open to being hurt, but he's no longer closed off and alone. 			

General issues:

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Hero			Heroine		
Beginning	Middle	End	Beginning	Middle	End