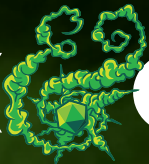


FOR TABLETOP ROLEPLAYERS

COMPLETE CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT GUIDE

A path to creating a beloved roleplay character crackling with potential, while learning the timeless storytelling guidelines that make them work.

HOOK  CHANCE



The three things that matter most in a story are characters, characters and characters.

Bob Gale

-Writer, Back to the Future

INTRODUCTION

ABOUT HOOK&CHANCE

Hook&Chance is a podcast brought to you bi-weekly by the two ding-dongs below. Combining our previous experience writing curriculum, with our love of storytelling structure and roleplaying games landed us in our most ideal niche.



DINGUS

My first official character wasn't on a character sheet. It was on a few. In a folder. A thick folder. Bigger than you're thinking. Like some eldritch demon straining against magical wards, it was being held together by one of those thick blue rubber-bands. The character had so many appendices and blueprints and drawings and printed references and pages worth of backstory, that it looked like it should have been slapped down on a steel interrogation table for a fugitive that had evaded capture for 50 years. I was so excited to play my first session. FIRST. Session.

For as fat as the folder was, the character was about as deep as a cheap plastic kiddie pool. The character could be summarized as what if Brad Pitt and Tom Cruise had an even cooler baby, who owned a movie theatre and also did heroic things from time to time. It was a tropey amalgam of all the movies I'd seen mashed with what I had hoped future me would be like.

We were all over-preparing and creating these characters we thought we wanted to play. As a result... to this day, I cannot tell you what the story was about or what other characters were in it. What I do remember was the amazing feeling of playing an absolute badass for 8-9 hours at a time until the sun came up and it was time to get breakfast at Tim's (Horton's for non-Canadians).

For me this is why it eventually became so deeply important to me to create characters and tell stories. When done poorly, it feels pretty good. When done really well, it feels great. Though when done well it can also be cathartic, essential, transforming, escapist, healing, jovial, bond-building good times with friends.

TRAVIS

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

We both LOVE frameworks. All day, every day. We use a framework to plan and outline every single episode of our podcast and beyond. Why? Because we find that our creativity flourishes within confines. That when given prompts, our ideas run wild. We hope this guide helps you unleash your creativity and leads you on a path that produces the results you want: a character everyone at the table is deeply invested in. We were also incredibly deliberate about including only details that enrich a game, avoiding those that bog characters down without adding to the adventure or roleplay. This guide is flexible enough that characters built with it can be incorporated into any story and any system.

It has been organized in an order that makes the most sense to us and hopefully facilitates better characters. For example, we believe choosing a background before a character class is a more character centric way of creation that isn't dictated by mechanical abilities. That being said, feel free to jump around wherever your inspiration takes you.

If you are using a printed version of this guide, we left some space over here that we'll drop some stuff in but you can also use for notes and doodles along the way.

Included on the pages are 'podmarks' like this one. Should you want to listen to the episode that inspired this step for a deeper understanding, these links have been included to help. Also, we've added hyperlinks to other resources and websites galore.

Copy your decisions onto the custom character sheet at the end. It's a printable section with the key elements you need to make character choices that inspire you and define them throughout your greatest games.

Finally, we hope you share your results. We love seeing storytelling structures applied.





Acknowledgements:

A huge thank you to both of our partners for supporting us through countless weekends spent in our home studio as opposed to outside in the sun... where it burns. **ALSO OUR PARENTS**

Thank you to our Patrons. They are as much a part of publications like these as we are. Their support, encouragement, kind words, and participation keep us pushing forward every single day.

The GM Tim is a darn beautiful human being and a great friend to us both. Generous and supportive. He has been a tremendous help in finding, connecting and opening doors to new opportunities for us. We are forever grateful for your friendship.

Thanks to creators and artists out there that freely encourage people to use and build on their work. Creators like Tabletop Audio.

Thanks to the authors and experts we have learned from and adapted frameworks from to be selectively applied to TTRPGs, authors like Shawn Coyne (*The Story Grid*) and Blake Snyder (*Save the Cat*), thank you for helping us sound smart!

To the many brilliant guests how have joined our community and enriched our show with their wisdom.

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Name, background, a description, and their role in the party are core to your favourite character.

Step 2 - Traits

The five words that describe how your character behaves is your most powerful roleplaying tool.

Step 3 - Backstory

Establish *what was* to provide drama to *what is* because the journey is important too.

Step 4 - Finalize

Put all the previous information into practice in a writing exercise to bring your character to life.

Step 5 - Game Time

Custom, form-fillable and printable character sheets to show off all your thoughtful creation.

BEDROCK

STEP 01

There is no right way to start building a character or to play tabletop games. That's what makes this activity so special. It's an experience that belongs to the few people gathered around the table. The games we play are the best "you had to be there" kind of experience.

You and your character are a part of that experience, a fraction of a whole, collaborating for the enjoyment of everyone. We think we owe it to everyone else at the table to contribute as best we can to that "you had to be there" feeling with a character everyone is invested in and cares about.

Characters brought about by an offhand joke, while funny in the moment might not have the longevity the table deserves. Fortresses built on shaky foundations are not long for their world. On the flip side, overly developed characters might end up lacking the flexibility that makes roleplaying games so fun.

Answering the right questions to hit that perfect middle ground starts by building a strong foundation, in other words, character bedrock.

BACKGROUND

Your job doesn't dictate who you are. You may have even been drawn to your job because of your background and experiences. So then why do we tend to choose a character class first? Why should your character class so often define who your character is?

Adventure and roleplay is where opinions, ideals and abilities are tested. So they must have formed before, in a simpler time and place. We find these four questions cover the core necessities. For example, growing up seaside is going to influence a person very differently than growing up in a desert. Growing up with two mums is going to be very different than being a ward of the state. The goal here is to give yourself prompts, the more straightforward and simple, the more flexibility it provides to roleplay and develop further in-game. 1 to 5 words. Nice and short.

What environment did they grow up in?	
What describes their family relationship?	
What did they show early talent in doing?	
What did they do to earn money?	

Alternatively, if you're playing Dungeons & Dragons, it has created a great shorthand for these details in the form of the aptly named 'Backgrounds'. Use that below or create your own shorthand, like 'seaside farmer', 'travelling salesperson'. You get the idea.

What is their background?	
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PARTY ROLE

Every character has a role to play. No, not character class, their role in the group dynamic. They could be the glue that holds the team together. The brains of the operation. The smooth talker. The face. The tough. The wild card. The creepy one. What is yours?

Knowing the role your character fills socially can help keep your roleplaying focused on leaning into and strengthening your character persona and dynamics with other characters at the table. Sometimes this happens naturally, but being aware of it so you can actively improve it can make all the difference whether others at the table “get” who your character is.

Party composition is an oft discussed topic in terms of abilities within game mechanics, but what about in demeanour and roleplay function? Below are some party compositions that work, and the roles that are involved. The reason these work is each role has inherent conflict and compatibility with others in the group. This tends to lead to easier roleplay opportunities. A tabletop group can be one or any combo of the following.

In a **Party of Two** the dynamic is focused on being the counter to another. They go high, you go low. You are neat, they are messy. The hijinks come naturally.

The **Party of Three** can be two-extremes and a mediator, or *speed, smarts and strength*, or the comic trio (a foolish leader, a follower, and a voice of reason who lacks ability to control them).

A **Party of Four** is typically comprised of the smarts, the charmer, the voice of reason and the goof.

Finally, a **Party of Five** - The leader, their foil or friendly opposition, the heart, the brains and the brawn.

What role do they lean to?

FEATURED IN:
BETTER ROLEPLAY
USING TROPES

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A SMATTERING OF FUN ROLES

- 1 The Action Hero
- 2 The Everyman
- 3 The Outlaw
- 4 The Lover
- 5 The Weirdo
- 6 The Caregiver
- 7 The Jester
- 8 The Creator
- 9 The Planner
- 10 The Do-er
- 11 The Pessimist
- 12 The Optimist
- 13 The Realist
- 14 The Apathetic
- 15 The Leader
- 16 The Rogue
- 17 The Heart
- 18 The Tough
- 19 The Moralistic
- 20 The Mediator

DESCRIPTION

All too commonly when someone asks about a character they are bequeathed a long winded backstory, a dive into their mechanics, or some other meta knowledge none of which the other character should know. A single quick observation is is roleplay gold.

Writing a character description is all about conveying a vibe and tone for your character quickly. A single sentence on the top 3-5 elements that immediately jump out helps other players and their characters decide how to regard yours.

What does their face look like?

Start with the eyes, then their expression, then a distinguishing feature.

What are they wearing?

What kind of attire do they wear and what is a detail that might stand out? Have they customized it? Is it well cared for?

How do they carry themselves?

Describe their walk, posture or general vibe.

What tools do they use?

Other players want to know about weapons, magic or otherwise. No character description would be complete without describing what they turn to when the going gets tough.

What is a brief physical description?

NAME

What is in a name? Turns out a LOT. A perfect character name evokes a lot of assumptions and first impressions of a character. Whether you want to play into those expectations or actively contradict is up to you. Both are tremendously fun.

What is their name?

Some tips for naming your character.

Choose one easy to pronounce.

Two syllables seems to be the magic. You can name your character B'aljmranig, but if you don't shorten it to something two syllables and easy to pronounce, the other players will, and you may not enjoy the result. Better to provide it to them. "You can call me Balj"... or maybe not. Which leads to...

Gag or pun names work in some games but not all.

Be considerate of your other players. Don't name your character until after your session zero where you can suss out the vibe and tone of the game. Having to call a character "Hiro Protagonist" is going to violently drag them out of the fiction every time it's uttered.

Reinforce the character concept.

Naming your character creates associations for you and other players at the table. Max Uberkill isn't impressive when he takes out the terrorists at Nakatomi Plaza, it's kind of expected with a name like that. An average schmo named John though? That's heroic.

Consider an honorific.

Who was Alexander III of Macedon other than "the great". If you struggle with a name, not only does an honorific convey anything you want to about your character, but it also hints at a backstory about how they got the moniker as well. Check out the Traits section. A character with a trait of stubborn might be called "the Nail".

NAMES FOR BARD
~~BINGBONG THE SINGSONG~~
~~MR MIXYZPTLK~~
~~BRAD~~
SIR BRAD THE BARD ✓

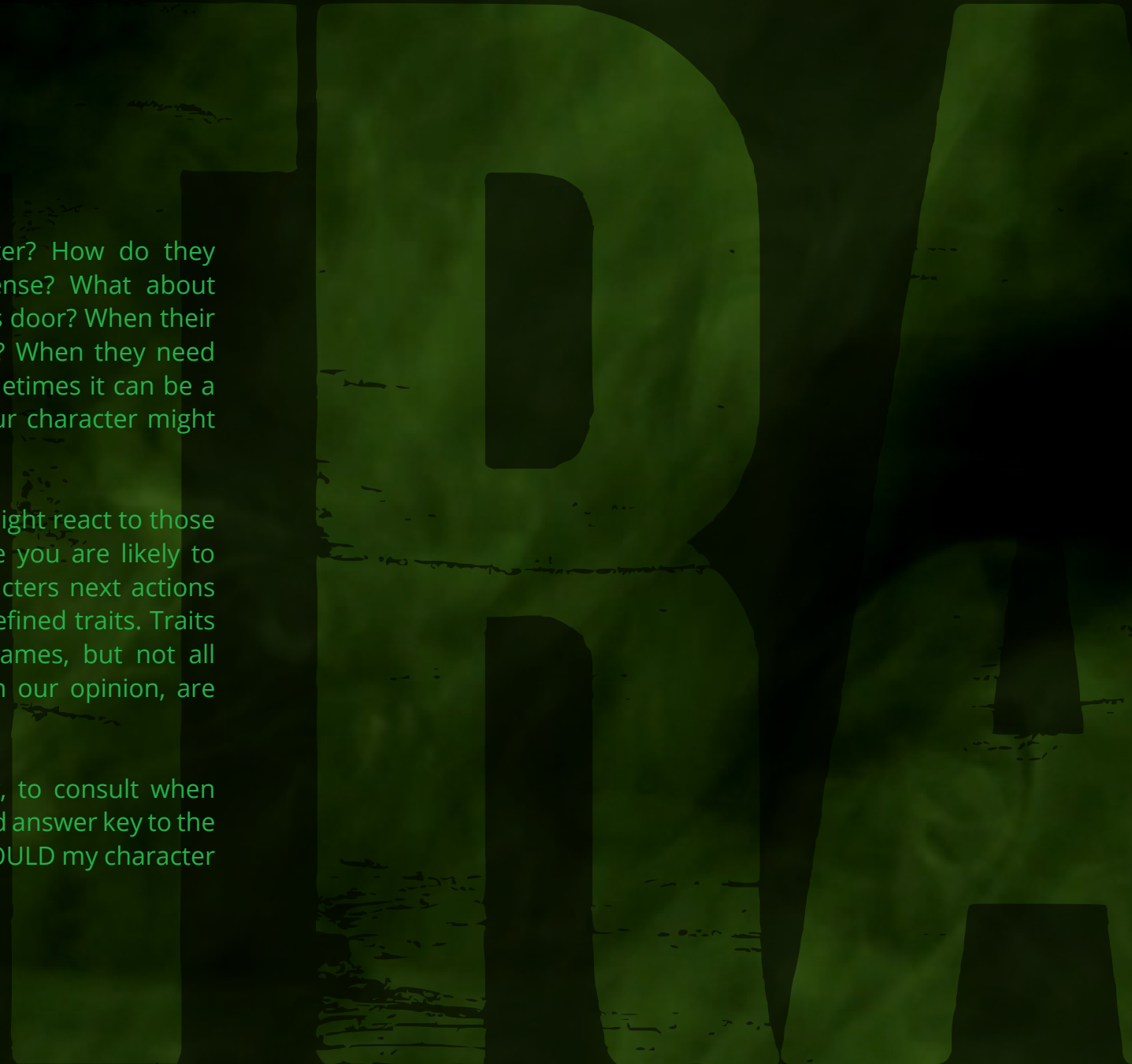
TRAITS

STEP 02

How do you roleplay your character? How do they react when a conversation gets tense? What about when they are successful? On deaths door? When their friend is hurt? When they're scared? When they need something from someone else? Sometimes it can be a real challenge to figure out how your character might react to any given situation.

Now think of how Homer Simpson might react to those situations. Or Spider-Man? The ease you are likely to experience in assuming those characters next actions given circumstances is due to well defined traits. Traits are present in some role-playing games, but not all (cough, looking at you D&D), and in our opinion, are criminally overlooked.

Traits act as a map during roleplay, to consult when given a scenario. A constant guide and answer key to the constant roleplay question, "what WOULD my character do next?"



CHARACTER TRAITS

We have opinions. Most pretty flexible. However the value of using character traits over (or in addition to) alignment charts is a hill we'll die on. Choosing traits is, in our opinion, the single most valuable roleplay character refinement step you can make.

Character traits are super flexible prompts that can sit innocuously at the top of a character sheet. They guide your characters actions in literally every single interaction they have in a game with a lot more precision than you may be used to. Every time you mentally ask yourself, "what would my character do?", guaranteed at least one or two will apply in that moment. They tend to focus a character in the same way your favourite TV character is reliable in their actions, whom you could also likely boil down to 5 key traits. Consider how your background might influence your characters traits.

Included in the following pages are lists of positive, neutral and negative traits. Choose traits that are dissimilar and sound fun to roleplay. Contrasting or conflicting traits in your own character and others at the table can create a lot of fun and drama.

Choosing a balance of positive, neutral and negative traits gives you a very different character feel. Keep in mind a flawed character might not mesh well with a table of god like characters. Don't be afraid to explore the dark side of a positive trait or vice versa, therein lies some roleplay gold.



Trait 1	
Trait 2	
Trait 3	
Trait 4	
Trait 5	

POSITIVE TRAITS

These are the kind of traits that are generally perceived as positive traits. The kinds of traits that make a commoner say “boy they are some kinda swell folk”.

These lists are broken into blocks of 20 if you're the type that leaves things to fate. You can roll a D10 for the block of 20 (signified by bold groupings), then roll a D20 for the trait in that group.

1 Active	10 Courageous	19 Free-thinking	8 Innovative	17 Patient	6 Romantic	15 Supportive
2 Adaptable	11 Courteous	20 Friendly	9 Inoffensive	18 Patriotic	7 Rustic	16 Sweet
3 Adventurous	12 Creative	1 Fun-loving	10 Insightful	19 Peaceful	8 Sage-like	17 Sympathetic
4 Alert	13 Cultured	2 Funny	11 Insouciant	20 Perceptive	9 Scholarly	18 Talented
5 Amiable	14 Curious	3 Gallant	12 Intelligent	1 Perfectionistic	10 Secure	19 Tasteful
6 Appreciative	15 Daring	4 Generous	13 Intuitive	2 Personable	11 Self-critical	20 Teacherly
7 Articulate	16 Debonair	5 Gentle	14 Kind	3 Persistent	12 Self-reliant	1 Thorough
8 Aspiring	17 Decisive	6 Genuine	15 Knowledgeable	4 Persuasive	13 Selfless	2 Tidy
9 Athletic	18 Diplomatic	7 Good-natured	16 Leader-like	5 Playful	14 Sensitive	3 Tolerant
10 Attractive	19 Dedicated	8 Gracious	17 Leisurely	6 Polished	15 Sentimental	4 Tractable
11 Benevolent	20 Dignified	9 Happy	18 Logical	7 Popular	16 Serious	5 Trusting
12 Bold	1 Disciplined	10 Hardworking	19 Lovable	8 Practical	17 Sexy	6 Trustworthy
13 Brave	2 Discreet	11 Healthy	20 Loyal	9 Precise	18 Sharing	7 Uncomplaining
14 Brilliant	3 Dynamic	12 Hearty	1 Lyrical	10 Principled	19 Shrewd	8 Understanding
15 Calm	4 Earnest	13 Helpful	2 Mature	11 Profound	20 Skilful	9 Uninhibited
16 Capable	5 Easygoing	14 Heroic	3 Merciful	12 Protective	1 Sober	10 Unselfish
17 Captivating	6 Educated	15 High-minded	4 Methodical	13 Prudent	2 Sociable	11 Upright
18 Caring	7 Efficient	16 Honest	5 Meticulous	14 Punctual	3 Sophisticated	12 Vivacious
19 Charismatic	8 Elegant	17 Honourable	6 Moderate	15 Purposeful	4 Spontaneous	13 Warm
20 Charming	9 Eloquent	18 Hospitable	7 Modest	16 Rational	5 Sporting	14 Well-read
1 Cheerful	10 Empathetic	19 Humble	8 Neat	17 Realistic	6 Spunky	15 Well-rounded
2 Clean	11 Energetic	20 Humorous	9 Nurturing	18 Reflective	7 Stable	16 Wholesome
3 Clever	12 Enthusiastic	1 Idealistic	10 Objective	19 Relaxed	8 Steadfast	17 Winning
4 Colourful	13 Exciting	2 Imaginative	11 Observant	20 Reliable	9 Steady	18 Wise
5 Compassionate	14 Extraordinary	3 Incisive	12 Open-minded	1 Resourceful	10 Stoic	19 Witty
6 Confident	15 Fair	4 Incorruptible	13 Optimistic	2 Respectful	11 Strong	20 Youthful
7 Considerate	16 Farsighted	5 Independent	14 Orderly	3 Responsible	12 Studious	
8 Contemplative	17 Focused	6 Individualistic	15 Organized	4 Responsive	13 Suave	
9 Cooperative	18 Forgiving	7 Industrious	16 Passionate	5 Reverential	14 Subtle	

NEUTRAL TRAITS

These traits tend to lean positive or negative depending on the situation, are wonderfully fun to explore in roleplay and generally regarded as more neutral traits.

- | | | | |
|-----------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| 1 Aggressive | 10 Flamboyant | 19 Predictable | 8 Trendy |
| 2 Ambitious | 11 Flexible | 20 Preoccupied | 9 Unaggressive |
| 3 Authoritarian | 12 Flirtatious | 1 Private | 10 Unambitious |
| 4 Big-thinking | 13 Folksy | 2 Progressive | 11 Unceremonious |
| 5 Breezy | 14 Forceful | 3 Prideful | 12 Unchanging |
| 6 Busy | 15 Formal | 4 Pure | 13 Undemanding |
| 7 Carefree | 16 Freewheeling | 5 Questioning | 14 Unhurried |
| 8 Casual | 17 Frugal | 6 Quiet | 15 Uninhibited |
| 9 Childish | 18 Glamorous | 7 Religious | 16 Unpredictable |
| 10 Chummy | 19 High-spirited | 8 Reserved | 17 Unsentimental |
| 11 Competitive | 20 Hurried | 9 Restrained | 18 Whimsical |
| 12 Complex | 1 Hypnotic | 10 Retiring | 19 Zealous |
| 13 Conservative | 2 Iconoclastic | 11 Rough | 20 Zany |
| 14 Conventional | 3 Impassive | 12 Sarcastic | |
| 15 Crisp | 4 Impersonal | 13 Self-conscious | |
| 16 Cute | 5 Impressionable | 14 Sentimental | |
| 17 Deceptive | 6 Intense | 15 Serious | |
| 18 Determined | 7 Mellow | 16 Sceptical | |
| 19 Dominating | 8 Mindful | 17 Smooth | |
| 20 Dreamy | 9 Moralistic | 18 Soft | |
| 1 Driven | 10 Noncommittal | 19 Solemn | |
| 2 Droll | 11 Noncompetitive | 20 Stern | |
| 3 Dry | 12 Obedient | 1 Strict | |
| 4 Emotional | 13 Old-fashioned | 2 Stubborn | |
| 5 Enigmatic | 14 Ordinary | 3 Stylish | |
| 6 Experimental | 15 Outspoken | 4 Surprising | |
| 7 Even-tempered | 16 Physical | 5 Talkative | |
| 8 Familial | 17 Placid | 6 Tough | |
| 9 Firm | 18 Political | 7 Traditional | |

NEGATIVE TRAITS

The negative traits that can make others perceive your characters as a real bastard. Why the hell are they like that? Maybe there is a clue in their backstory.

1 Absentminded	10 Contemptible	19 Envious	8 Impulsive	17 Negative	6 Repressed	15 Unappreciative
2 Aimless	11 Controlling	20 Erratic	9 Inconsiderate	18 Neglectful	7 Resentful	16 Uncaring
3 Aloof	12 Cowardly	1 Escapist	10 Indecisive	19 Nervous	8 Ridiculous	17 Uncharitable
4 Amoral	13 Crass	2 Extravagant	11 Inhibited	20 Neurotic	9 Rigid	18 Uncouth
5 Angry	14 Critical	3 Extreme	12 Insecure	1 Nihilistic	10 Ritualistic	19 Uncooperative
6 Anxious	15 Crude	4 Fanatical	13 Insensitive	2 Obnoxious	11 Sadistic	20 Uncreative
7 Apathetic	16 Cruel	5 Fanciful	14 Insincere	3 Obsessive	12 Scheming	1 Undisciplined
8 Argumentative	17 Cynical	6 Fatalistic	15 Insulting	4 Obvious	13 Scornful	2 Unfriendly
9 Arrogant	18 Decadent	7 Fearful	16 Intolerant	5 Opinionated	14 Secretive	3 Ungrateful
10 Bewildered	19 Deceitful	8 Fickle	17 Irrational	6 Opportunistic	15 Selfish	4 Unhealthy
11 Bizarre	20 Delicate	9 Fiery	18 Irresponsible	7 Oppressed	16 Shallow	5 Unimaginative
12 Bland	1 Demanding	10 Flaky	19 Irritable	8 Paranoid	17 Shortsighted	6 Unpolished
13 Blunt	2 Dependent	11 Foolish	20 Lazy	9 Passive	18 Sloppy	7 Unprincipled
14 Boisterous	3 Desperate	12 Forgetful	1 Macho	10 Pedantic	19 Slow	8 Unrealistic
15 Brittle	4 Destructive	13 Frivolous	2 Manipulative	11 Perverse	20 Sly	9 Unreliable
16 Brutal	5 Devious	14 Gloomy	3 Mannerless	12 Petty	1 Steely	10 Unrestrained
17 Callous	6 Discouraging	15 Graceless	4 Mechanical	13 Pompous	2 Stiff	11 Unstable
18 Cantankerous	7 Dishonest	16 Greedy	5 Meddlesome	14 Possessive	3 Stupid	12 Vacuous
19 Careless	8 Disloyal	17 Grim	6 Melancholic	15 Power-hungry	4 Submissive	13 Vain
20 Charmless	9 Disobedient	18 Gullible	7 Messy	16 Predatory	5 Superficial	14 Venomous
1 Clumsy	10 Disorganized	19 Hedonistic	8 Mischievous	17 Prejudiced	6 Superstitious	15 Vindictive
2 Cocky	11 Disrespectful	20 Hesitant	9 Miserable	18 Presumptuous	7 Suspicious	16 Violent
3 Cold	12 Disruptive	1 Hostile	10 Miserly	19 Pretentious	8 Tactless	17 Volatile
4 Complacent	13 Distractible	2 Ignorant	11 Misguided	20 Procrastinating	9 Tasteless	18 Vulnerable
5 Complaining	14 Disturbing	3 Imitative	12 Moody	1 Puritanical	10 Tense	19 Weak-willed
6 Compulsive	15 Dogmatic	4 Immoral	13 Morbid	2 Reactionary	11 Thievish	20 Whiny
7 Conceited	16 Domineering	5 Impatient	14 Naive	3 Regimental	12 Thoughtless	
8 Conformist	17 Dull	6 Impractical	15 Narcissistic	4 Regretful	13 Timid	
9 Confused	18 Ego-centric	7 Imprudent	16 Narrow-minded	5 Repentant	14 Treacherous	

BACKSTORY

STEP 03

Whether it's 15 pages or one sentence, every character needs a backstory. Their beginnings are going to give weight and contrast to where they are in their adventure. Their "normal" makes their extraordinary adventures and heroic actions all that more dramatic and engaging. So it should go without saying, the backstory matters.

While it may sometimes seem challenging to develop, it needn't be. We've compiled some simple questions that should help to refine your ideas into details that can add to a game as opposed to simply adding fluff and details that may never arise or come into play in a game.

These details create an image of your character to work from. This background system is flexible enough to fit into any game system you may use. This serves as a great starting point for character creation.

THEME

A theme can help you figure out what your characters story is about. The campaign you are playing in may have themes driving the narrative, (lean into those) your character can have some too. During play, looking for that theme provides character growth opportunities.

This is a simple theme that will be the basis for your character's journey and who they are. Use this to influence your ideas for everything from here forward. This is expressed as a word (revenge), a question (how far will they go for revenge?), or a dichotomy (revenge or forgiveness?).

Simple and straightforward like, "revenge" or "family" can be great separately or play well together. What stories pop to mind when you consider the two? A point to mention though; work with your GM as there are two paths forward here. If your game allows for some similar general themes to be explored as a core part of the story, great. If not, there is still much you can do with a theme even though the story may not center on it.

During your game, your character is now looking for revenge and helping others seek it. Additionally, you can now play with this concept. What happens to your characters morality? Are their actions heroic? This might be the most important step to telling a story with your character that has gravity and weight.

What theme(s) is/are central to their character journey?

STUFF
YOUR CHARACTER
CARES ABOUT

- 1 Good vs. Evil
- 2 Chaos vs Order
- 3 Love
- 4 Redemption
- 5 Courage
- 6 Coming of Age
- 7 Revenge
- 8 Faith vs Doubt
- 9 Family
- 10 Fate vs. Free Will
- 11 Hubris
- 12 Identity
- 13 Justice
- 14 Vanity
- 15 Societal Issues
- 16 Abuse of power
- 17 War
- 18 Survival
- 19 Corruption
- 20 Purpose

DREAD
PIRATE
ROBERTS

DOM
TORETTO



ELLEN
RIELEY

WANTS VERSUS NEEDS

Internal conflict makes us care about characters. If Spider-man just busted baddies and swung away, he wouldn't have a near trilogy of trilogies. He wants to enjoy his powers and life, but "with great power..." Conflicting priorities gives character decisions weight.

Internal conflict is what makes a character's decisions matter, and as a player, gives us fuel for roleplaying our own. This can be as simple as your character desiring a bath while they dungeon delve or it can have more weight by tying it to their traits, theme and ultimately their arc (coming up soon).

What external goal do they think will solve their problems, and make them happy? This is what your character pursues throughout your game.

What is your characters ultimate want?

What internal change is actually necessary to improve themselves or their perspective even if they never achieve their external goal? A simple and powerful answer is to acknowledge and overcome a negative trait that's been holding them back. This is often not known to your character, and might come to them in a moment of great stress.

What is your character's ultimate need.

BACKSTORY

Welcome to the danger zone! Here is where one typically gets into the weeds, with more details, tragedy, drama and history than Shakespeare could shake a spear at. Our goal here is to pump the brakes and focus only on what give a character purpose.



It can be more simple than it sounds. Take that character in your mind to keep shaking the sifter until all you're left with are the most essential, juiciest nuggets. Take a look at the template Pixar uses to tell their beloved stories and it's brilliant simplicity.

Once upon a time there was _____. Every day, _____.
One day _____. Because of that, _____. Because of that, _____. Until finally _____.

Notice the first two points function to build a connection and empathy towards the character and also set the stage for their heroism later. The rest of the template serves to continually up the ante with complications until they triumph or fail. In tabletop games though, there is some challenges to this formula.

1. We aren't telling stories about a singular character but one member of a group.
2. The function of the backstory is really more about setting the stage for how they arrived at their current adventure whereas with film, this is often the whole story.
3. Telling an overly dramatic backstory runs the risk of overshadowing the events of your current game.

This is why we've adapted this format to suit tabletop a bit better. You might notice this format focuses a bit more on their personality traits, both positive and negative. To disrupt wherever they came from to force them into a life of adventure, avoiding the risks just discussed.

What was the everyday routine that your character came from? The most powerful rulers to the poorest fishmongers have an everyday routine. This monotony is used to contrast the adventurous lives they will eventually lead.

Every day they...

One day however, something changed for them. External forces will typically create a situation that complicates their desire to carry on with their every day routine. What was it that shifted things for them?

Until one day...

Now what would cause your character to resist facing this change head on? Life changes are rarely easy, so what was their internal or external conflict? This step helps to relate to their fears or challenges and in contrast make their actions heroic.

But they resisted this change because...

This is when the adventure begins. Your character accepts the call to action, leaves whatever comfort they might have, and ventures into a new world. They are doing the heroic thing, the difficult thing, the dangerous thing. Why did they decide to do this?

However, they ultimately rose to the challenge because...



ALLY AND NEMESIS

Building both someone your character cares about and loathes provides a GM with a lot of story options for you. A character with no attachments is a leaf on the wind, hard to direct and even tougher to predict the path of.

By creating someone you care about you provide the GM with incredibly powerful building blocks to draw your character into the story. Regardless if they use them as a helpful resource for the party or suspend them over a pit of lava, the result is the same. Your character now cares about the stakes and the outcome to a much greater degree.

Who is your characters greatest ally?

A nemesis can be anyone from your characters past who has directly or indirectly harmed your character. You can create an extra juicy nemesis by looking to your traits. By taking any of your traits and giving their nemesis one trait they share and one or two traits that directly oppose, they will have baked in conflict. Some of the greatest villains hold a mirror to the hero and contain traits the hero may not like but respect as a worthy adversary.

Who is your characters most hated nemesis?

BOTH MAY
BE BE USED
AGAINST YOU...
BUT IT'LL BE
SO GOOD!

CHARACTER ARCS

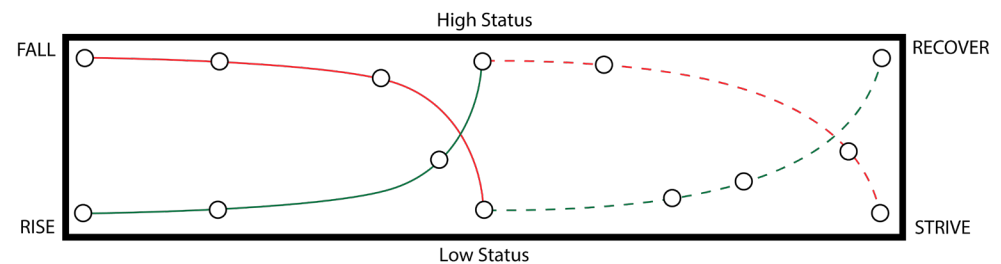
FEATURED IN:
CHARACTER ARCS I - III

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Ever get the feeling that your character is more of a plucky sidekick than a core part of a team? Where Merry and Pippin are seemingly impervious to their harrowing adventure, characters like Frodo and Sam, go through internal journeys. They had arcs.

Now that you have some backstory details, you can mold an arc of your own. Flexibility is essential when considering your arc. Books and movies can use much more precision because their writers get to decide the exact details of each character's arc before the story is told. Since stories in a TTRPG are collaborative and ever-changing, we have to approach an arc differently. Think of it as a loose guide that points your character in a direction full of transformative moments and powerful beats. Play it out quickly in a single session, or explore it over a multi-year campaign. When an arc doesn't feel right for your game or character anymore, don't be afraid to wrap it up and start a new one, shift it to a different type, or just scrap it and start from scratch.

Status - This deals with a character's standing within some kind of group, whether it be society, a club, or even just their pals. Like a hero *rising* in notoriety in town. In a *fall* arc, a character starts high in status, and throughout the story loses it.



Morality - Characters with a moral weakness on a *redemptive* arc are given an opportunity to correct past mistakes in a similar manner to their failure. *Punitive* arcs focus on likeable characters that have been successful in being awful, starting high and falling low when their deeds catch up to them. *Testing* arcs push characters morals to their breaking point, eg. reaching a positive outcome by morally grey means.

Education - These arcs revolve around information being learned, changing the characters perception. Maybe their perspective is naive, but it matures through their adventures, called a *maturation* arc. Maybe their *worldview* changes. Maybe they simply lack knowledge and are *educated* by their experiences or the inverse and they are *disillusioned*.

FINALIZE

STEP 04

Write a short story for yourself, about your character. This can evoke more raw materials for you and other players at the table than any character art or miniature ever could. You might be surprised by the advantages re-reading it provides when roleplaying your character.

Actors use triggers, like songs or memories to make themselves laugh or bring them to the verge of tears for a scene. This short story can do the same for you and your character, transporting you to back into how they think, behave and perceive the world in seconds.

A trigger for your best roleplaying ever and a final cherry on top of all your character considerations.

FEATURED IN:
CAPTIVATE WITH
YOUR CHARACTER
INTRODUCTIONS FT.
BETH BALL

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A CHARACTER INTRO

Remember the first introduction of your favourite character from fiction? A character conveyed in simple, near-wordless scenes? Joker's bank heist? Jack Sparrow's triumphant arrival to Port Royal? Michonne in The Walking Dead? Your character deserves that too!

If you're immediately flooded with excitement and ideas, great! If that's followed by anxiety about how to do this, well then you're just like us and we have a process that makes it much easier than starting from scratch. The subtle benefits of completing this challenge are fantastic though. A reminder that your character isn't simply stats and class features, but has a presence in the world.

By the time you're done, you'll have a very short read that would convey almost everything another player would need to know about how to regard your character with far greater accuracy than the typical physical description followed by class and level. You can read this quietly to yourself before a game to slip back into this character.

This exercise is broken into three important paragraphs, each serving a function within this short story. Follow the prompts for each sentence and see what you arrive at. Try some scrap paper if you want but the results will be compiled on the character sheet.

Keep physical description minimal.

Note the first things an outside perspective would notice about your character within the span of a glance.

Avoid dialogue.

Conversation can easily slip you into a runaway. This is more about setting a scene and mood with a "show, don't tell" approach.

Want to them to feel heroic?

Write the experience through the perspective of someone else, a bystander or even their source of conflict in the scene.

FEATURED IN:
SHOW, DON'T TELL FT.
OLLO CLARK

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SET THE SCENE

The setting of the scene and stakes; where the environment and conflict are clarified before your character arrives. If this hasn't been conveyed yet, opposing forces are dramatic. The distance between those forces makes drama. The setup is key.



When considering the setup of how to introduce your character our recommendation is looking to mundane, everyday interactions to highlight who they are and the qualities of their character. Try to focus on the kind of conflict they would find themselves in during their everyday activities.

To set the scene, the first sentence describes a place your character would naturally be found. Describe the notable features of this place with concrete, sensory details like a smell, sounds or a general feeling.

1

What is another person or NPC doing that conflicts with your character? Try to oppose a character trait. If your character is generous then introduce a greedy NPC and describe what they are doing that is clearly greedy. What is happening?

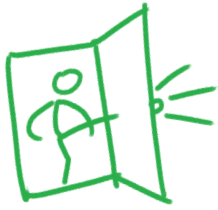
2

Describe how the scenario would be worse off if nobody intervened? Only one person will oppose these forces and resolve this conflict and that's your character. In this sentence we would try to convey the stakes to give their actions weight. If someone is being robbed, then this is the opportunity to describe this being the last scrap of money the victim has. If someone is near death about to be saved by your character, then their family looks on in anticipatory horror before your character springs to action.

3

Describe a change in the environment that would announce the arrival of your character. Does the tavern door chime? Does a bystander yell, "look out!" Whatever form this takes, the drama is increased, leading to the introduction of your character next.

4



MAKE AN ENTRANCE

The introduction and presence of your character, and the impact that has on the scene. This paragraph is all about visually describing your hero. How they stand, what they carry and ultimately the impression they give to the world.

Describe the signature weapon/item/tool of your character as it interacts with the environment around it. Is it the crackle of their magic staff through the air? Is it the rust on their poorly maintained sword? This description reflects your characters personality.

1

Describe the change of demeanour in the NPC now that your character is present. Their reaction can say a lot. Are they underestimating based on your characters unassuming nature? Are they fearful and running away? How do others react to their arrival?

2

Describe a signature element of your characters attire and how they have personalized it intentionally or through use. This could be polished buttons on their uniform, hinting at a regimented person. Describe the attire and a single noticeable detail.

3

Building on this, we work our way up to their face or whole form. Describe the most unique physical feature of the your character. Are they scarred, do they walk with a limp or do they have interesting hair. Describe the first thing a person would notice.

4

Behold! The tone shifts in the scene. Your character is now fully present. The others nearby are able to reference them. In this sentence, you can describe your characters demeanour or feeling of presence, how does the tone shift as they settle in the scene?

5

ACTIONS MATTER

This is where we want to both resolve the scene and also complete the full picture of your character by working in elements of who they are as a person. We do this by describing what they say and how they resolve the conflict set at the beginning of the scene.

Write a single line of dialogue said by your character to the NPC or the scene at large. This is extra impactful if we can incorporate their personal catch phrase of some kind. Regardless, their speech (pattern, volume, tone) can say a lot about them, so be specific.

1

Describe your characters posture change or physicality as they ready to fix the conflict in the scene. Are they ready for battle? Are they aloof or dismissive? Do they draw a weapon? Confident? Snarky?

2

Describe the NPC's reaction to your characters words. Did the NPC back down or change their tune? As we wrap up, this will project almost all of the assumptions about what follows this scene. Is it a bloody battle or did your silver-tongued character sway their opposition to sharing a drink with your character? We don't want to resolve the action, but how the NPC reacts sets the scene for what is to come.

3

Describe the result of this action, without resolving the final result. Does your character charge at them or extend a hand in friendship? Whatever the case, stop just short of confirming the end result. Always leave them guessing.

4

Look at that! You're done! Lay it all together and see how it flows. You may need to make a few tweaks to piece it all together but hopefully you have something that feels hella cool.

GAME TIME!

STEP 05

Finally, it's time to put this character into action. The following pages are our own character sheet design. They contain some of what we consider to be information critical to keep on hand typically not found in other character sheets.

It has sacrificed prime character sheet real estate for roleplay centric information. When you've spent time considering some of these details, it might be worth having a gentle reminder of how your character deals with stress, where any grievous wounds are, what topics are important to your character.

