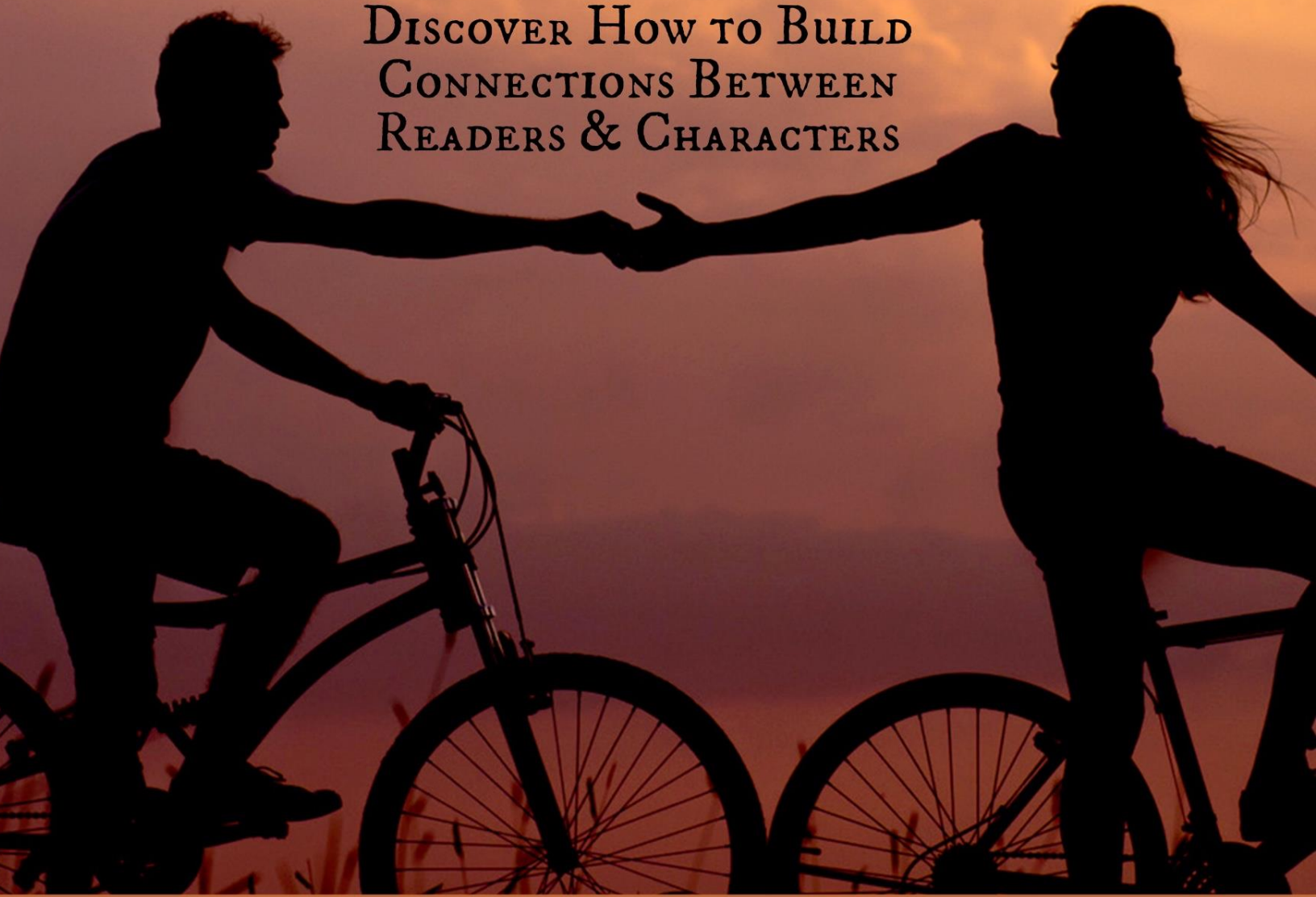


Evoking Reader Empathy

DISCOVER HOW TO BUILD
CONNECTIONS BETWEEN
READERS & CHARACTERS



StoryEmbers.org



Introduction

Few things tempt me to put a book down as much as a protagonist I don't care about.

You can't afford to turn readers away from your story like that. They need to be able to rejoice with the protagonist's successes, cry over his losses, and get their stomachs tied up in knots as he faces precarious situations.

This goal, however, is often one of the hardest for authors to accomplish. How can you craft characters that readers of all stripes and backgrounds connect with? And how can you make their thoughts, feelings, and actions as realistic and authentic as possible?

This book is comprised of an article series we originally published on our site in December 2019. It answers the above questions and explores the seventh resolution of our Christian Storytellers Manifesto: "We resolve to seek to understand readers' thought processes, emotions, and worldviews so we can connect meaningfully with them in our storytelling, knowing that human nature is repelled by simplistic representations."

We hope that our advice helps you create engaging, relatable characters who powerfully evoke empathy in readers.

-Josiah DeGraaf
Story Embers Editor-in-Chief



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Chapter One – The Secret to Developing Authentic Characters that Resonate with Readers

By Josiah DeGraaf, Editor-in-Chief

Three and a half years ago, I spent my summer studying recent Christian fiction releases to see if the genre still had significant problems. (Spoiler alert: it did.)

To be fair, I also stumbled across several great books—though the poor ones outnumbered them. Yet, as I noted the techniques that succeeded and failed, preachiness was less prevalent than I'd expected. Most of the themes weren't the evangelistic propaganda that readers complain about. Instead, the main issue was that I didn't care about or relate to the characters.

One of our goals at Story Embers is to launch annual series that unpack different resolutions from our Manifesto and help writers pursue our vision for Christian fiction.¹ Last year, this took the form of our Tricky Subjects for Christian Storytellers series, which addressed how to “portray the full human experience in all its beauty and depravity, not to glorify or endorse sin but to accurately reveal the brokenness of the world.”²

This year, as we discussed which resolution to focus on, empathetic characters rose to the top of our list. Readers need to bond with characters, or they won't enjoy and be impacted by a story. Accomplishing this as writers involves understanding “readers' thought processes, emotions, and worldviews so we can connect meaningfully with them in our storytelling, knowing that human nature is repelled by simplistic representations.”³

We hope you'll emerge from this series with new clarity and strategies for giving your characters humanlike qualities.

¹ “Christian Storyteller's Manifesto,” Story Embers, October 9, 2018, accessed December 19, 2019, <https://storyembers.org/manifesto/>.

² Josiah DeGraaf, “Dear Christian Storytellers: Cleanness is Not Next to Godliness,” Story Embers, October 15, 2018, accessed December 19, 2019, <https://storyembers.org/dear-christian-novelists-cleanness-is-not-next-to-godliness/>.

³ Ibid.



The Wrong Way to Build Empathy Between Readers and Characters

A common approach to relatability is to make the protagonist resemble *any and every* reader. Think of Bella in *Twilight* or Emmet in *The Lego Movie*. Is either character particularly distinct or interesting? No, and that's intentional, because they're meant to be everyman characters who readers can easily meld with.

These stories begin by hitting powerful emotional beats and relying as much as possible on a couple elements all humans share. The protagonist remains generic, allowing readers with any personality or background to see themselves in her. As a result, the author sells a bunch of books.

This tactic can be profitable, and at first glance it makes sense. Won't too many specific details that distinguish the reader from the protagonist hurt relatability? Wouldn't a few universal longings, fears, or weaknesses be more potent?

Sometimes that's true. But the effect won't last. *Twilight* has a truckload of fans—and haters. In *The Lego Movie*, Emmet's role as an everyman works because it's essential to the film's themes, though he does become more unique by the ending.

Characters who are only defined by a couple traits won't feel real. Hemingway draws on this line of thought in *Death in the Afternoon*: "When writing a novel, a writer should create living people; people, not characters. A character is a caricature."⁴ Readers don't connect with caricatures. This is one of the reasons the Christian fiction I read three years ago flopped: the characters seemed inauthentic.

Generic protagonists can have advantages when done well, but they're also shallow. We don't like people who flatter and ingratiate themselves to us in real life, and we respond similarly to characters who are intended to appeal to anyone who opens the book.

The Right Way to Build Empathy Between Readers and Characters

If creating simplistic characters is a mistake, how can you ensure that readers will identify with them?

By learning about people so you can imbue your characters with *complexity*!

Authors need to be part psychologists. In the sixteenth century, literary critic Sir Philip Sydney described storytelling as "an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in the word *mimesis*."⁵ Storytellers aim to

⁴ Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (New York: Scribner, 1999), 153.

⁵ Philip Sydney, "An Apology for Poetry," in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. David



imitate reality, and if you don't understand human beings, your characters will be little more than stick figures who walk and talk. Complexity generates relatability.

For example, Loki from the Marvel universe inspires a rabid fanbase. While that may partially be due to a less-than-healthy obsession with actor Tom Hiddleston, Loki is also unpredictable and wrestles realistic emotions. That strikes a chord with audiences.

Alternatively, consider Starr Carter from bestselling YA novel *The Hate U Give*. She self-admittedly leads a double life, taking on one persona in the inner city and another at the elite private school where she conceals she's from the "hood." She constantly struggles with her conflicting desires to seek justice for her friend's death and stay safe. This dichotomy makes her relatable, even to readers who may not have faced the same circumstances.

We yearn for characters who are as complex as we are. We're often paradoxical, hypocritical, and torn between multiple options. We can detect a simplistic character from a distance because we're not like that.

However, crafting characters who are both complex *and* relatable is incredibly difficult. Observing and replicating people's behavior isn't enough. You have to know the thoughts and emotions behind their actions to portray them compellingly.

Building Reader Empathy Through Character Thoughts

A character's internal dialogue shouldn't feel foreign or clichéd. Yet it frequently does—especially in Christian fiction. I've read countless stories where the protagonist's struggle with his faith didn't sound like how I or fellow believers deal with doubts and moral dilemmas.

Conversely, some characters don't think at all before making decisions. I've been coaching writers for the past five years, and this is one of the most common blunders I comment on in students' manuscripts. Readers need to witness a character's thought process and the stimulus for his choices.

Depicting complex thoughts presents a challenge, however: we have to climb inside the head of someone who's different from us. That's why we're going to explore this concept in further detail in the next two chapters. First, Daeus will provide us with an overview on how to create characters with relatable thoughts. Then, in chapter three, Hope will examine how personality types should affect a character's thought processes.

Richter (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998), 138.



Building Reader Empathy Through Character Emotions

As I wrote several months ago, fiction is about delivering a vicarious experience to readers—and emotions can either draw readers in or repel them.⁶

We've all read stories bogged down by teenage angst and a protagonist who is too sappy about which hot dude she should date. But we've also likely read novels where a protagonist's close friend dies and he hardly reacts (I have, at any rate). Readers won't recognize emotional clichés as accurate to their own lives, and they'll leave the story unmoved.

We'll help you avoid this weakness in the last two chapters. In chapter four, Brandon will explain how to create characters with relatable emotions. Then, in the last chapter, Maddie will dive into how gender and age should affect characters' emotions.

Forming Bonds Between Readers and Characters

Crafting characters who evoke reader empathy isn't optional. And the best way to do so is by becoming an expert on how people think, feel, and act. It's a daunting task, but also a high calling.

My favorite book so far this year has been *A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness, which earned the award of being the fourth book that brought me to tears. The painful rawness and beauty of the characters caused the story's thematic thrust to break me at the ending.

That's the power that relatable, complex characters have: they awaken readers to truths about themselves and the world around them.

God doesn't create simple characters or tell simple stories. As storytellers, we have the unique opportunity to mimic His greatest work. When we write masterfully, we'll touch readers deeply.

How will you seek understanding and apply it to your characters today?

⁶ Josiah DeGraaf, "The Real Reason People Read Fiction and Why This Matters to Writers," Story Embers, June 10, 2019, accessed December 19, 2019, <https://storyembers.org/the-real-reason-people-read-fiction-and-why-this-matters-to-writers/>.



Chapter Two – How to Create Characters with Relatable Thoughts

By Daeus Lamb, Community Manager

You open a book, and after several pages, you're not yourself anymore. You've become the character. He's different from you, yet somehow the same. When he remembers someone's face but not their name, you smile sympathetically—even though your memory has always been sharp. That's because his foibles seem true to life.

Being sealed inside a character's head can have two effects on readers: it can pull them in and expose them to valuable lessons, or it can chase them away. Since humans are complicated, a character who is two-dimensional will be unconvincing.

Writing compelling thoughts is all about flow, and a character's personality, beliefs, and struggles should be the pulse. This is easy to botch, because almost any thought could be realistic in a specific scenario. You need a system to determine how much introspection to include and when. Four factors can help you develop believable internal dialogue, but three others can ruin it, so you need to be vigilant with both. I'll start with the positives.

Four Factors that Drive Authentic Internal Dialogue

#1: Obsession

I prefer to give characters an obsession instead of a goal. The connotations of the former reminds me that the character is focused on a single need or desire that influences all her actions. "Goal" seems to imply that she'll follow her whims in the interim as long as she reaches the finish line at the end.

Your character's obsession sets the direction of her internal dialogue. For instance, imagine Jack and Jill climbing the hill again. Jack has amnesia from his last fall and doesn't recall the danger. Jill's obsession is to keep Jack from losing his footing on the loose stones. I guarantee she won't reminisce about writing a poem on the hilltop or reflect on how refreshing the water tastes up there. And if a baby goat wanders out from behind a bush, Jill won't squeal over its cuteness. She'll worry about how to stop Jack from chasing the animal and tripping!



Obsession is the overarching concern that guides a character's numerous and varied thoughts throughout a scene. If the obsession changes, you probably need to open a new scene.

#2: Experience

In Jill's case, her experience is tumbling down the hill. Without this information, her fear for Jack's safety won't make sense. Past experiences shape a character's present choices. If beta readers or editors warn you that a character's thoughts come out of the blue, maybe the character isn't relying on her backstory enough as she's dealing with the current situation. Note the difference between these two snippets:

Version #1:

Mark lowered his wine glass. Oliver flashed him a cardboard smile as he strode by the table.
Could Oliver be the murderer?

Version #2:

Mark lowered his wine glass. Oliver flashed him a cardboard smile as he strode by the table.

Before Mary died, she'd railed and railed, "Oh, his awful smiles!" But Mark hadn't reached her in time to ask the culprit's name. Oliver's beaming face belonged on a counterfeit dollar bill. Or perhaps on the millions that were stolen last night. *Could he be the murderer?*

The history that fuels a character's hunches and decisions will fascinate readers, deepen the characters, and provide an avenue for subtle exposition. Try viewing each character as a scholar who approaches his obsession scientifically.

#3: Core Values

This is the emotional force behind your character's obsession. Suppose Jill is in love with Jack. That's why she doesn't want him to get hurt. As she plans how to protect him, she might think about the first time they bonded over chlorine-free water and her dream of digging wells in Africa with him.

Core values explain characters' impulses and supply the strongest source of empathy for readers.

#4: New Data



When a character encounters an unexpected event, information, or dilemma, she'll analyze it through her obsession, use experience to handle it, and look to her core values to figure out how to feel toward it.

During the ascent, Jill notices that Jack is much more polite and gentlemanly with his memory loss, and she wonders if he would benefit from another conk on the head. Then they run into an ogre, and Jill confronts it rather than fleeing down the treacherous slope, which could result in injury for Jack—or separation from him.

New data propels internal dialogue forward. Otherwise, characters will go down rabbit trails and cycle through the same thoughts endlessly. While Chirrut Îmwe can chant, “I am one with the force; the force is with me,” Jill can't get away with continually repeating, “I must save Jack.” That is, unless you intend to write the next trashy YA romance, complete with a strong female lead who has no personality.

Three Factors that Kill Authentic Internal Dialogue

Fiction must be entertaining *as well as* realistic, so even believable internal dialogue can feel stilted if it's mishandled. Now that you know how to bring a character's thoughts to life, you need to be careful that you don't inadvertently suck that life out.

#1: Unclear Triggers

Thoughts rarely, if ever, plop out of nowhere. Fruit on the table makes us crave breakfast. Then camping jumps to mind because of the bacon and eggs we cooked over a fire while on vacation last summer. The context for a character's thoughts must be shown or readers will, at best, be confused. At worst, they'll skip ahead or shut the book.

Notice how the scene with Mark and Oliver falls flat if I remove all the triggers:

Mark lowered his wine glass as Oliver strode by the table.

Before Mary died, she'd railed and railed, “Oh, his awful smiles!” But Mark hadn't reached her in time to ask the culprit's name. *Could Oliver be the murderer?*

Obsession, experience, and the core value of justice are all present, but why should readers suspect Oliver? Is Mark just being paranoid? These gaps in reasoning often occur in early drafts and are fairly easy to catch if you watch for them during editing.

Sometimes, however, an author derails a character's thoughts in a way that's harder to detect. A detail may be relevant to the plot but incongruent with the immediate scene, as in this example:



Billy executed a perfect tech-armor enhanced flip onto the platform, then stuck his tongue out at Sarah.

Sarah gritted her teeth, flaring her booster jets. *You don't have to treat me like trash. Even if you're a million times richer.* His father owned the company that manufactured the tech-armor, making Billy next in line for commander of the army.

Billy's rudeness obviously provokes Sarah's mental retort. But the other parts of her reaction become progressively less related. Billy's promising future should either be mentioned elsewhere or introduced via a more fitting trigger.

#2: Telling

In my Show, Don't Tell course, I advise students to avoid POV telling. This is when a character's internal dialogue pushes a conclusion on readers that they ought to arrive at naturally. Below, I've rewritten the scene about Mark and underlined where the text becomes problematic.

Mark lowered his wine glass. Oliver flashed him a cardboard smile as he strode by the table.

Before Mary died, she'd railed and railed, "Oh, his awful smiles!" But Mark hadn't reached her in time to confirm the culprit's name: Oliver. His smile was condescending, like a rich person. And he must be loaded, assuming he'd stolen the money last night. It just had to be him!

Now compare that to the version I shared earlier:

Mark lowered his wine glass. Oliver flashed him a cardboard smile as he strode by the table.

Before Mary died, she'd railed and railed, "Oh, his awful smiles!" But Mark hadn't reached her in time to ask the culprit's name. Oliver's beaming face belonged on a counterfeit dollar bill. Or perhaps on the millions that were stolen last night. *Could he be the murderer?*

Observe how Mark's suspicions are *implied*, and Oliver's grin is described *indirectly*. Even if a scene leans toward a particular interpretation, allowing readers to discover it for themselves engages their imaginations more.

#3: Brooding

Reading a character's gloomy thoughts can be like swimming in quicksand. Everyone struggles with discouragement occasionally, but when a character dwells on it, the story will grow tepid. Here's an illustration:



Mopey vomited and sank on the rotten log. He couldn't kill. Yet the tribe expected him to lead them in battle. *How am I going to do this? They say it's so simple— No! I can't.* He would be the disgrace of his tribe. Like always. They'd say, "Mopey, you can't do anything right."

Three paragraphs later...

Why did the elders choose him? That was a huge mistake. If he ever became an elder, he wouldn't send scared teens into battle. Was this his punishment for being a coward?

To repair scenes like these, first eliminate the repetition. Readers don't need reminded again and again of the character's insecurities. A few strategically placed thoughts will convey that he's troubled even if he isn't moaning every five minutes.

Your next recourse is to comb through your manuscript for POV telling, because pity parties attract it like flies to corpses. If a character laments all the people he doesn't have the energy to help, that's telling. We aren't *feeling* his pain; we're just trusting his judgement.

Finally, differentiate between guilt and repentance. Guilt is regret over sin. Repentance is regret coupled with the commitment to shun temptation. Guilt leads downward toward despair while repentance leads upward toward change, but neither remain stagnant. A murderer can be disgusted with himself yet continue killing.

In one book I read, the protagonist recognized his own wickedness but didn't make any effort to correct his path. The author could have cut some woe-is-me segments by turning him into a new man sooner or searing his conscience until it finally softened. A character's inner turmoil needs a purpose and shouldn't overwhelm the scene.

Characters with Souls

Building reader trust starts with demonstrating your intimate understanding of humanity. How much closer can you get to a human soul than the thoughts that emanate from it?

Orient your character's internal dialogue with obsession. Guide it with experience and core values, and keep it fresh with new data. Prevent vagueness and blatancy by considering how it applies to the scene. And never let it stall the story with self-doubt.

As Josiah emphasized in the first chapter, our goal is to craft people, not characters. The people on the page should seem as real as the readers who explore the story alongside them. Most writers feel like they



understand their characters deeply, but only by connecting with a character's thoughts
can readers understand his motivations, convictions, and personality.

Once your character's thoughts start flowing freely, they'll spring from the pages and dance in the
meadows of a thousand imaginations. And that is the highest joy of sub-creation.



Chapter Three – How Personality Types Should Affect Characters’ Thought Processes

By Hope Ann, Newsletter Manager

Personality assessments are a hot topic today. But, like everything in life, people’s opinions differ widely. Some treat personality types as the explanation for all human behavior. Others are skeptical for reasons ranging from personal to religious.

The truth, as so often happens, falls between those two extremes.

While a character, and a person, is more than a set of numbers or letters, personality types help us learn more about ourselves and how others view the world. They are *not* excuses for sin. They do, however, reveal common weaknesses in particular types, show us where we can grow, and teach us how to empathize with and reach others better.

When we’re unsure how a character might react to a situation, her personality type provides a starting point. Through it, we can search out her motivations, fears, and much more.

Nature vs. Nurture

Before I discuss personality assessments in detail, note that people are shaped by two forces: 1) Nature—the personality and perspective they’ve had since opening their eyes for the first time. 2) Nurture—the lifestyles, people, and experiences they’ve been exposed to.

Stances on this vary. The MBTI website doesn’t commit to a side, but Carl Jung, who introduced the idea of personality types, believed people were born with a sense of personality. I agree with his hypothesis, because anyone who creates characters realizes that they don’t (and shouldn’t) all act like clones. A tragic childhood turns one character into a distrustful hermit, yet it inspires another character to become a tender healer. Opposite responses to the same event implies that these characters had unique natures or personalities beforehand.



In this article, I'll approach both MBTI and enneagram as the framework a person is born with. A character's initial type depends on her nature. However, the extent that she conforms to it depends on her nurturing, which plays an equally important role in her habits and choices.

For instance, my sister is an ENFP, but our father is an ISTJ. While she's much more emotional than I am as an INTJ, compared to every other ENFP I know, she's very logical. This is the result of growing up in a well-structured home.

Has a character's life been easy or hard? Has she lost someone? Has she built shields around herself because of past pains? Just because a character is a Three or an ENFJ doesn't mean she'll match those descriptions perfectly and never deviate.

Internally, how a character processes information is tied to her type. But how she expresses herself outwardly is influenced as much, if not more, by her backstory.

Applying Personality Types

Methods for typing a character will vary from writer to writer. I normally create a basic character, draft a few scenes to experiment with his voice, and then type him. After that I'm able to develop him further. In some cases, however, I want a particular pairing, such as ENFP and INTJ brothers, or an INFP father and INTJ son.

Just remember not to sacrifice your character so he'll fit into the type you think he's supposed to be. Sometimes people and characters display quirks we wouldn't expect. This is usually due to the nurturing I touched on above. If you give him some consistencies, though, you'll notice that he leans toward one type more than the others.

To type your characters, you can take online tests and answer as them. But tests can be unreliable because of human diversity. The best tactic is to research the types yourself and figure out which ones your characters resemble. The task may seem overwhelming at first, but you'll get faster at it the more familiar you become with the types.

Using the MBTI System to Deepen Your Characters' Thought Processes

MBTI is a well-known personality assessment that assigns individuals one of sixteen different types represented by a series of four letters.



The first letter is an I or E, which stands for *introvert* or *extrovert*.

Most people assume introverted characters are quiet while extroverts are loud. The contrast between these types goes beyond a preference for seclusion vs. socialization, though that's a factor as well.

When faced with a problem, introverted characters will look within themselves for answers. They need to analyze the situation and compare it to previous observations they've made. They may ask for input, but someone else's opinion takes second place to what they feel and know internally. Each of their thoughts interconnect like a vast, complicated web. This is why they're satisfied with much less "stimulation" than extroverts, who thrive off of crowds, surprises, and activity.

Extroverted characters, on the other hand, seek answers and energy from external sources. This doesn't mean they won't evaluate an issue carefully, but they do it more vocally—such as in a long, rambling conversation. They let the wisdom of those they trust help guide their feelings and goals.

Introverted characters can be as exuberant as extroverts, but they'll need time alone to recharge. Extroverted characters can enjoy solitude, but they'll need interaction with others to renew their energy and drive.

The second letter is an N or S, which stands for *intuitive* or *sensing*.

Intuitives draw conclusions in an abstract manner. They center themselves on ideals, beliefs, and instincts they've honed. They're the starry-eyed dreamers, the soldiers marching off to fight for freedom, and the artists arguing for the importance of beauty.

Sensors, however, ground themselves in facts and physical reality. They see the world as it is more than how it could or should be. They will still march to war, but it will be for the child left behind. They might argue for beauty, but they'll defend it from their own experience instead of as a general concept.

Ultimately, intuitive characters rely on gut feelings and observed patterns to process the world around them, but they can struggle to implement their ideas. Sensor characters rely on their background and the resources available to them, but they can struggle to see the big picture.

The third letter is a T or an F, which stands for *thinking* or *feeling*.

To be clear, both types think and feel. But one response will be more dominant than the other.



If your character is a thinker, he'll cling to logic and push emotion aside. What *should* be done? What will save the most lives? How can he ensure the group he's leading achieves its goal? He'll feel emotion, yes. But it's secondary to his convictions on the right move.

If your character is a feeler, she'll sift through scenarios in her head and imagine how her actions might impact others. Will her decision hurt someone? Can she avoid that by adjusting her plans? How can she keep her group unified while pursuing a goal? Logic comes *after* she considers the emotional aspects.

In the end, a thinking character *may* opt to follow emotion, and a feeling character may opt to follow logic. However, their type will determine the direction their brains jump when they assess a situation.

The fourth and final letter is a J or P, which stands for *judging* or *perceiving*.

If your character is a judger, she'll desire closure—and the organization that leads to it. Her thought process will be structured and future oriented, even if that future is just the next hour or day. When she encounters a problem, she'll hunt for the root, then map out steps to solve it, each with a deadline and checklist of its own.

If your character is a perceiver, he'll become stressed if he's forced to make a quick decision. He lives in the present, reacting to events as they occur and keeping all his options open. His thought process will likely zigzag chaotically from one notion to another.

In summary, judgers are doers and perceivers are explorers. A judging character attempts to prepare for what's ahead and control life as much as possible, while a perceiving character relishes each moment and welcomes the unexpected.

Keep in mind, all these examples are generalized.

Personality types are much more fluid than I've conveyed here. No matter how staunch of a thinker your character is, if his son has been captured and is about to be harmed, he'll do everything in his power to stop it—without consulting logic.

Also, cognitive functions are a crucial part of the equation. Cognitive functions are an extension of MBTI that dissects the letters (and their order) even further to define why a person gravitates toward certain thought patterns. The concepts are too complicated to address in this article, but if you want more details on how MBTI influences people's dispositions, delve into cognitive functions.



Merging the Principles of MBTI with Other Personality Systems

If MBTI is the skeleton of a person's attributes, enneagram is the muscle. A word of warning, however: enneagram has questionable, mystical, and arbitrary origins. I've found the basic aspects to be valuable, but others I tend to discard. With any personality assessment, make sure what you're learning aligns with biblical truth, and don't accept man's word as gospel for how the human mind works.

MBTI explains how a person processes the world, whereas enneagram pinpoints internal fears and longings. It consists of nine types, each one with three subtypes. Though I don't have room to go into depth, enneagram's largest benefit is how it explores people's motivations. It associates a single "vice" with each number that the individual either embraces or wrestles.

Enneagram concentrates on how people protect themselves physically and emotionally while pursuing their needs and desires. This is why it's a wonderful tool for fleshing out characters. Insecurities and yearnings naturally color a character's thought processes, whether it's a One seeing something wrong and itching to fix it, or a Six seeing something good and positioning herself to guard it. The better you understand what's driving your character, the more realistic she'll come across to readers.

Other personality systems exist, such as the DISC assessment and the Kolbe Index. The precise assortment you use is at your discretion, but MBTI and enneagram will probably cover all you need.

A final reminder: in life, we need to be careful not to get so swept up in ourselves that we forget our focus ought to be on God. We must orient ourselves properly when writing too. Types are helpful, but we can't let them take over our characters so thoroughly that they lose their unpredictable, endearing humanness.

Make 'em, Then Break 'em

I'll leave you with one last twist on personality types: breaking them.

This circles back to the nurturing I mentioned at the beginning. Discover your character's type, then build off of the paradoxes between his life and his impulses. You may have an extrovert who hides from interaction with others. Or a perceiver who freaks out if he doesn't know the tiniest detail about everything. Your character might not reflect his type's "normal" tendencies consistently—and that's the true normal.



Remember, personality types reveal the path a character's thoughts default to, as well as the behavior that may stem from it. Most importantly, personality types allow readers to understand your character's inner world and even connect with seemingly unrelatable characters.



Chapter Four – How to Create Characters with Relatable Emotions

By Brandon Miller, Head Writer

Great stories have a broad emotional range that sends readers looping through laughter, soaring toward ecstasy, and plummeting into despair. When we open a new book, we hope it's our ticket to a rollercoaster we'll never forget.

Unfortunately, building this thrill ride as a writer is challenging. Rarely do humans experience one emotion at a time. Sometimes we cry when we're reunited with an old friend and laugh when our fifth job application gets rejected. Big moments in our lives become tangles of feelings that are impossible to straighten out.

But, no matter how difficult the task seems, you *can* construct an emotional rollercoaster for readers if you have the correct blueprints and materials. First you need to learn three rules that prevent unrealistic reactions and then three techniques for conveying emotions vividly and accurately.

I'm not a psychologist or even a personality type enthusiast, so I won't probe into all the recesses of the human mind. Instead, I'll touch on basic, common emotional reactions I've observed, supplemented with information I've gathered from others. Hopefully, after finishing this article, you'll be equipped to write believable responses from your characters as the plot twists and turns.

Three Rules for Avoiding Unrealistic Reactions

Have you ever read a scene that should have been powerful but instead felt contrived? What about a scene that should have been a tear-jerker but instead came across as melodramatic? Maybe it involved a character's death, a betrayal, or the final piece of the villain's plan snapping (obnoxiously) into place. These kind of scenes serve as cornerstones—but when they're faulty, they can cause the story to collapse and distance readers.

Before you can reach readers' hearts, you need to realize that emotional pressure doesn't always result in an explosion, yet complete calm isn't natural either. That's how two-dimensional characters behave, and your goal is to create *people*.



Rule #1: Characters Shouldn't Overreact

Darth Vader yelled “Nooooooooooooo!” once, and that was too often. Only fictional characters protest catastrophe with an echoing wail. Other potential overreactions include “This can’t be happening,” any long (or short) explanation of why the situation is horrible, and too much chatter in general. Trauma usually leaves people too shaken to speak—or act.

Allow your characters to slowly digest troubling events. A real person won’t say much in the face of disaster because he doesn’t *know* what to say. Less talking is better.

When your character does open his mouth, don’t insert clichés. His dialogue should be brief but distinct. The specific pain the situation causes him will have the strongest emotional pull for readers. So, when he’s undergoing stress, he needs to sound the most like himself. If he parrots phrases readers have heard before, they’ll lose interest. They don’t care about a random person suffering—they care about their favorite character suffering.

“Mr. Stark, I don’t feel so good” reminds us who Peter Parker is. None of the other Avengers call Tony “Mr. Stark,” nor would they admit weakness. The scene achieves its purpose because Peter is clearly the one venting, not some guy in a Spider-Man outfit.

Lastly, don’t be sappy. If readers aren’t feeling it, you can’t fix that by overselling the characters. Estimate how much emotional impact an event will have on *readers* and don’t overplay it. If your characters react more intensely than readers do, either the scene will seem fake or your characters will seem silly and cartoonish.

Rule #2: Characters Shouldn't Underreact

Characters can’t take a beating, then suddenly be okay a few hours or days later, even if they try to pretend. Outward composure is a sign of inward struggles. They’ll need *time* to heal, and the scars that remain will be subtle but meaningful. An outgoing person may become more reserved. A careless person may become paranoid. An amiable old mentor may become gruff and bitter. These fluctuations in personality, which tie into the concept of nurturing that Hope mentioned in her chapter, demonstrate deeper emotions than an outburst of anger or grief.

Major losses and turmoil should change your character for the rest of the story, not just a couple chapters. Tony Stark suffers from panic attacks for an entire movie before he begins a slew of Avengers-influenced choices: Ultron, the Sovokia accords, finding an heir. You can’t kill your character’s parents for a gut-



wrenching scene, then let his quippy remarks continue as if nothing happened. People are never the same after trauma. Write like it.

Rule #3: Characters' Reactions Shouldn't Be Predictable

When real people are under emotional strain, their coping mechanisms may contradict the circumstances. Sometimes happy people don't crack a smile. Sometimes hurt people rant and rave. People mask their true emotions. If your hero is dealing with his brother's death, maybe he starts blaming others and hunting them down. If your heroine's best friend is getting married, maybe she covers her jealousy with flamboyance at the wedding.

Characters with stereotypical reactions will feel flat and underdeveloped. Instead of restricting a character to one overarching emotion, such as sadness, divide it into rage, fear, loneliness, cravings for attention, and depression. This enables you to write multiple reaction sequences for a single event without repetition.

Three Tips for Crafting Emotional Prose

Depicting the right *emotions* is the first part of the process. The second part involves choosing the right *words*. Even if your characters are lifelike and your story is gripping, rough prose will yank readers out of the moment.

Tip #1: Aim for Clarity

Don't get too poetic. Emotions are supposed to be raw. If your descriptions are flowery, the scene's focus will shift from the emotions to the prose itself. Readers will sense that you're trying to sound impressive and be turned off.

However, you shouldn't rely on clichés either. Clichés ruin a scene by reminding readers that they're sitting in a chair holding a book instead of living an adventure. A villain who "disappears into the night" will derail readers' emotional journey. Be concise and clear but not cliché.

Tip #2: Slow Down

Readers can't physically see your book unfolding on a stage, but they *will* notice its pace. They need time to digest events, just like the characters. If your story rushes on after a cataclysm, you'll give readers whiplash and reduce your characters to plot devices.



Sometimes our need to step back and recover from a blow disrupts our lives. That's how stories work too. Without space to grieve and search for the strength to keep going, your characters will stay locked within the story, and you forfeit an opportunity to connect with readers. A well-written scene causes readers to mirror the character's emotions. If the character pauses to sort through his messy thoughts, readers will identify with him on a deep level, because they'll be as undone and confused as he is.

When you're striving to bring readers into the scene emotionally, don't inundate them with internal or external dialogue. Readers prefer to be guided, not pushed, toward a conclusion they reach on their own. And that requires a prolonged transition from the trigger to the reaction, as in the excerpts below.

Version #1:

"I don't think this is working out. We should...stop."

Jason blinked. Becca couldn't just break up with him. They'd been together for *two years*. How could their relationship fail? And how could she dump him *now*?

I guess it's time to return that ring.

Version #2:

Becca smoothed her cute flowered sundress as she sat down, and Jason caught a whiff of her perfume. She made eye contact, smiled, and then looked away. "I don't think this is working out."

The rest of the coffee shop faded. Jason didn't hear the barista grinding the beans, or the businessman two tables over hammering on his keyboard. All he heard was the squeak of Becca's chair as she scooted away from the table. She walked to the door, and it swung shut behind her.

He ran his hand over the small lump in his jacket pocket and imagined its contents glittering on Becca's finger. His stomach twisted into a knot. *What?*

Granted, without being emotionally invested in Jason and Becca's relationship, neither of those excerpts are soul-crushing. But the second version allows readers to breathe and fill in their own reaction instead of forcing them to think exactly like Jason.

Tip #3: Show, Don't Tell

Describing emotion is not the same as eliciting it. You need to show the reason your character is wringing his hands or growling under his breath. Otherwise readers won't understand why they should sympathize with him. Place readers fully in the character's shoes so they experience the scene *together*. If you accomplish that, they'll view your character as a fellow traveler instead of an actor on a pretty set.



Compare these three approaches:

Telling: Haylee was scared to enter the alley.

This sentence is lame. It provokes nothing but boredom.

Showing the character's reaction: Haylee's heart thundered against her ribs as she tiptoed into the alley.

This sentence is better because it highlights the character's reaction and provides a sensory detail that draws us into the story. But we're left wondering why she's frightened.

Immersing readers in the character's perspective: Haley crept into the alley, and as she neared the largest shadow, it slithered into an even darker corner.

This sentence puts *both* the character and the reader on edge. Though Haylee's heart doesn't beat out loud, the danger is tangible.

Characters Who Shine in Dark Moments

Connor from *A Monster Calls* is probably the best example of an emotional character I could name. His mom has been diagnosed with terminal cancer, and the story revolves around his struggle to accept that hard truth. Patrick Ness recognized that a parent's death is tragic and life-altering and demands more than one reaction scene. Whole chapters pass in silence. Connor expresses sorrow in unusual ways, such as smashing up expensive furniture. The story progresses gradually and uses real as well as fantastical elements to help Connor process his grief, then offers bittersweet hope in the end.

Trials put a character's depth (or lack of it) on display. If you want your characters to be more than shallow imitations of homo sapiens, they need to glow the brightest during your story's emotional climaxes. And that's the instant they'll form an unbreakable connection with readers.



Chapter Five – How Gender and Age Should Affect Characters’ Emotions

By Maddie Morrow, Staff Writer

“Gah! This book gave me *all the feels*.” We love when a story leaves a lasting impression, and we hope our own writing garners a similar response.

Emotions have such a huge influence on our relationships, choices, and habits. And our society is obsessed with learning about the human psyche. Kids are introduced to gender identity and taught emotional awareness at increasingly younger ages. A quick Google search opens the floodgates to advice on helping small children control their emotions, blog posts about understanding one’s own emotions, and scientific studies on a plethora of subtopics all related to emotion.

But how is any of that relevant to writing? We all know that our characters should be complex, but to achieve that goal, the emotions they display must be appropriate. If we’re targeting a middle-grade audience, yet our characters experience emotions that resemble an adult’s, readers will disconnect. Or, if a football player’s romantic longings sound like an entry from a teenage girl’s diary, everything he does will be implausible.

Accurate portrayals of emotion break the barrier between fiction and reality, gripping readers harder than the events the characters are reacting to. Three primary factors impact how people handle emotion, and if we pay attention to the nuances, we’ll be able to craft realistic characters.

1. How Gender Can Affect Characters’ Emotions

Many of the studies I read while researching this article seemed to be looking for stark contrasts between men and women. The analysts expected the data to prove that “boys don’t cry” and “sugar and spice, and everything nice, that’s what girls are made of.” Instead, the studies repeatedly revealed only minor differences between men and women’s emotions.

Hays Daily News summarized these findings in their article “Emotions Different for Men and Women” and concluded that men and women experience the same emotions. The emotions each



gender *expresses* or *suppresses* is where they noticed a distinction. Men are more prone to exhibit negative emotions, whereas women exhibit positive emotions.⁷

We've probably all witnessed this in real life. Most guys respond to exciting news with a quick smile and a dry, "That's cool." But if you're in a crowd of women, you'll need hearing aids by the time they've finished screaming, laughing, and maybe even crying tears of joy. When a man is angry, he'll say so or indicate it through his body language. But a woman hides behind the vague "I'm fine" until she feels safe venting whatever is bothering her.

Does this mean all male characters should be gruff and all female characters bubbly? No. At face value, the concept of grumpy men and cheerful women seems cliché, but it doesn't have to be. In *The Hunger Games*, some might classify Katniss as crabby and Peeta as chipper. But is that true? Throughout the book, Peeta discusses his regrets and fears. Katniss, however, rarely vocalizes her inner turmoil, instead focusing on the tasks at hand. She isn't a ray of sunshine, but she's definitely internalizing negative emotions like the studies suggest, except in a unique way.

I suspect *The Hunger Games* is popular because readers can empathize with the main characters. Though none of us have fought for survival with a bunch of other kids, we've all grappled with anger, fear, and loneliness. As writers, we should follow Suzanne Collins' example. Get crazy with the settings and plot. But weave in familiar emotions. Readers don't need to have experienced the same situations to feel for the characters.

2. How Age Can Affect Characters' Emotions

Though studies haven't unearthed major variances between male and female emotions, the results fluctuated widely when age entered the equation.

As toddlers, boys and girls showed a tendency to display identical emotions. Aggressive emotions are higher in girls at this age than any other time. Kristen Lindquist, an associate professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of North Carolina, attributes this to young children's inability to express themselves coherently.⁸ Think about it—a three-year-old has a limited vocabulary. Her brain is still developing, and she's trying to communicate her needs or desires to an adult who can't make sense of her gibberish. That would bring out the frustration in anyone.

⁷ Judy Caprez, "Emotions Different for Men and Women," *The Hays Daily News*, May 13, 2017, accessed December 19, 2019, <https://www.hdnews.net/e098f562-203d-5b82-90c5-fd52cca81079.html>.

⁸ Daniel Kolitz, "Do Kids Feel Stronger Emotions Than Adults," *Gizmodo*, September 10, 2018, accessed December 19, 2019, <https://gizmodo.com/do-kids-feel-stronger-emotions-than-adults-1828933152>.



As children grow, however, they begin to conceal the emotions that are “unacceptable” to their gender. Boys grasp the social expectations placed on them to be tough. Girls pick up on the notion of being soft and sweet (although that trend is fading, so we’ll see how girls act fifty years from now). This is one of the reasons depression and anxiety rates are higher in teen girls than boys—because they’ve been conditioned to bottle up negativity instead of airing it. By the time kids reach junior high, they’re mostly aligned with the emotional patterns of adults, after which the changes seem to level out.

Depicting childlike traits can be tricky because we don’t remember how our minds functioned during that stage of our lives. But knowing that children are an emotional free-for-all until they mature is a starting point. It leads us to write a five-year-old girl who has temper tantrums in a store, a three-year-old boy who unabashedly doles out hugs and kisses, and preteens who restrain their emotions under peer pressure.

When a character’s age and emotions correspond with the targeted reader’s, the story is more likely to resonate. That’s why most YA protagonists are between sixteen and eighteen, and early children’s books rarely star adults. Readers have to work harder to understand characters who think and feel differently from them. Authors can remove that friction through characters who accurately reflect the behaviors of the intended demographic.

3. How Environment Can Affect Characters’ Emotions

As if the above information isn’t complicated enough, this last section can override all of it. Tara M. Chaplin of Yale University noted that children in a loving and trusting atmosphere don’t withhold their emotions.⁹ When boys and girls are comfortable with the people surrounding them, stereotypes lose their grip.

Upbringing and home life also play key roles. A boy raised by a single mom will be more in touch with his positive, “feminine” emotions. And, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, kids from stable, supportive homes are open about their feelings. What kind of home life does/did your character have? Did his parents encourage him to embrace his emotions or conform to the status quo?

Culture is another contributing factor. In years gone by, gentleness and decorum were associated with femininity (keep that in mind, writers of historical fiction). Nowadays, though, society promotes a form of feminism that’s fierce and assertive. The older generation might still shake their heads at a loud and reckless young woman, but none of her peers will flinch if she bares emotions that are far from cheerful.

⁹ Tara Chaplin & Amelia Aldao, “Gender Differences in Emotional Expression of Children: A Meta-Analytic Review,” *Psychological Bulletin* 139 no. 4: 735-765, <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/a0030737>, accessed December 19, 2019.



All this raises the question: Are emotions the product of nature or nurture? Scientists haven't come to an agreement, but my opinion is that it's both. God created emotions, but our fallen world has warped how people express themselves. In the Old Testament, men exhibited more of the softer emotions. Jacob ran to Rachel, kissed her, and wept. David danced and sang before the Lord. We might raise our eyebrows while reading about these middle-aged men who acted so carefree in public (David's own wife did). But neither man would be considered feminine, and based on how Scripture describes them, I think we can conclude that God views the total expression of emotion as good.

God provides guidelines for our negative emotions, yet He never commands us to stifle them completely. He doesn't restrict positive emotions to women or negative emotions to men. Those expectations come from society—whether on the small scale of family relationships or the large scale of our nation's worldview. Jacob, David, and other biblical heroes were closer to Eden—God's ideal. The Bible states that our world has been progressively deteriorating since the fall of mankind, and that applies to emotions as well. Old Testament heroes were probably instilled with a more godly perspective than our society's treatment of emotions today.

Evaluate the culture your character lives in. The values of her world will have a strong influence on the emotions she lets others see. You can get more detailed by taking her family into account, as well as whether she has a relationship with God (or a God figure).

Tying the Strings

So, how do you transform this mess into a cohesive plan for developing characters? Here are a few tactics to make the process less overwhelming:

1. Narrow your focus to one character at a time and decide which stereotypes to twist or

imitate. Is your protagonist a thirty-year-old real estate agent who grew up in a broken home with unhealthy leadership models? Maybe he struggles with bitterness over his absent father and his mom's numerous boyfriends. Or, because his mom was the only consistent parent in his life, he could be outwardly upbeat but inwardly depressed because he wasn't trained to release his negative feelings.

2. Do intentional research. A slew of articles are available at the click of a mouse. You can also buy or borrow self-help books about emotions, trauma, and even child raising to gain insight on specific scenarios you're throwing your characters into.



3. People watch. What can you tell about the people you pass on the street? What emotions are the toddlers in the grocery store displaying? What about their parents? How do they differ?

4. Remember that you're writing fiction. Ultimately, the possibilities are endless. People are all designed by the same God with the same set of emotions, though how we express those emotions varies. As long as your characters have a reason for being puffy-eyed in the morning or snapping at a coworker, their reactions will be believable.

When readers finish one of our books, we want them to post five-star reviews that begin with “I can’t put into words how much I loved this!” A story’s emotional arc carries the power to move readers like that. We shouldn’t skimp on it. Even the coldest heart feels emotion, and if we dive in and show it, the messages we’re striving to convey will be more meaningful.



Conclusion

“Friendship,” said the famed C. S. Lewis, “is born at the moment when one man says to another, ‘What! You too? I thought I was the only one.’”¹⁰

As complex individuals with a myriad of thoughts and feelings, we feel close to others who share similarities with us. When understanding flows both directions, bonds form. The same phenomenon happens with fictional characters.

However, building empathy between readers and characters with black ink on a page isn’t easy. But it doesn’t need to be a mystery either. If you study human psychology, apply the different tips we’ve given here, and strive to create characters who are realistic and complex, you’ll stumble upon the secret to relatability as well.

To borrow from the professor, relatability is born at the moment a reader looks at a character and realizes he isn’t the only one who’s thought or felt a certain way.

As a storyteller, you can show readers they’re not alone and craft stories that deeply resonate with and transform them.

How are you going to use that power?

¹⁰ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1988), 78.