

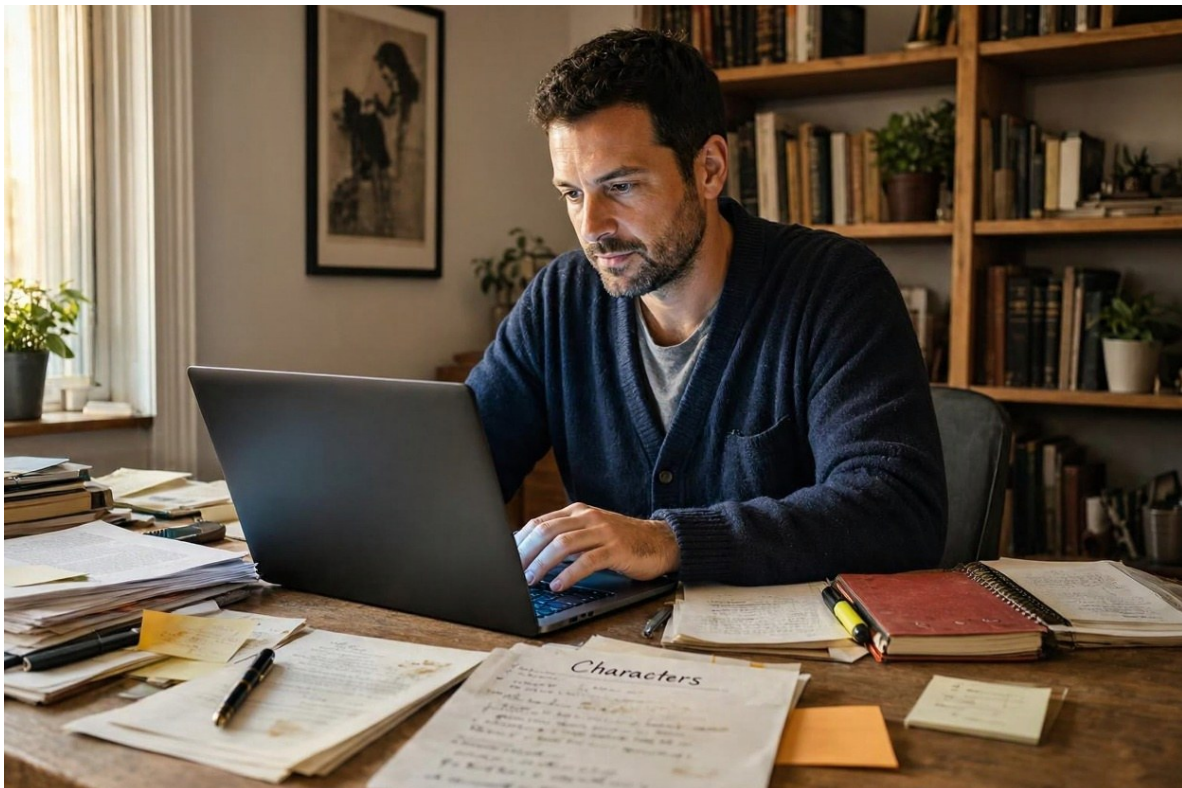


CHARACTERS WHO WANT SOMETHING

Building people whose choices give a story somewhere to go

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Edith Bell had a birthday, a favourite biscuit and a complicated relationship with mustard. Her author knew where she had gone to school, what she kept in her handbag and why she disliked the name Clive.

Unfortunately, when the novel began, Edith had nothing much to do.

She admired the weather. She remembered school. She ate one of the biscuits. Somewhere around page fourteen, a visitor arrived and explained the plot to her.

Knowing a character's details can help you write them convincingly. But a collection of details is not yet a person acting under pressure. To make Edith matter on the page, her author needed to discover what she wanted, why it mattered and what she would do when getting it became difficult.

You do not need to begin with a complete psychological file. You need enough understanding to put someone in a situation where their responses become interesting. The rest can develop as you write.

START WITH A WANT YOU CAN PUT IN A ROOM

"Edith wants happiness" may be true, but it is difficult to stage. How will we know whether she gets closer to it before lunch?

"Edith wants the committee to keep the community kitchen open" gives her something to attempt. She can attend a meeting, recruit supporters, examine the accounts or conceal the fact that the kitchen's ancient oven is making a noise like an approaching tractor.

A concrete goal creates possible actions. It also gives readers a way to understand progress and setbacks.

The goal does not have to be enormous. Someone may want a particular job, an apology, one uninterrupted evening or a place beside their daughter at a wedding. What matters is its importance to that person and the difficulties surrounding it.

Try completing this sentence: "Before this situation is over, my character wants to ____."

If the answer is mostly an emotion, ask what they would actually do to pursue it. A person seeking belonging might volunteer, host a dinner or pretend to understand a game with an unreasonable number of wooden pieces.

FIND OUT WHY THIS WANT BELONGS TO THIS PERSON

Two characters can pursue the same goal for different reasons. One wants the kitchen preserved because people depend on its meals. Another wants it preserved because closing it would mean admitting that a lifetime of unpaid work has become unsustainable.

Edith may hold both motives. That gives you more to explore than a simple declaration that she is community-minded.

Ask what success would mean to her privately. Would it prove she remains useful? Restore a relationship? Protect someone from a difficulty she once experienced?

Then ask what failure would seem to prove. The answer may be unfair. Edith might believe that accepting help means she has become a burden. The story need not endorse that belief for it to influence her choices.

You can discover these connections through drafting rather than deciding everything beforehand. When a response surprises you, investigate it. Why does Edith accept a stranger's criticism calmly but become furious when her niece offers to carry a saucepan?

That difference may lead you closer to the character than another page about her school uniform.

GIVE THE WANT SOME RESISTANCE

An obstacle matters because it interferes with the pursuit. A closed kitchen, a reluctant committee and an impossible budget all bear on Edith's goal. A sudden escaped parrot may be entertaining, but it should affect the situation if you give it much room.

Resistance can come from circumstances, other people or the character's own habits. Edith may need volunteers while refusing to let anyone change her methods. She wants help, provided it behaves exactly like an additional pair of her own hands.

This creates opportunities for action. A new volunteer suggests a simpler menu. Edith rejects it. The volunteer leaves. Now Edith has protected her standards and made dinner harder to produce.

Notice that the obstacle is connected to something she values. Pride in doing the work well can be a strength. Under pressure, the same pride can prevent cooperation.

You do not have to assign every character a single fatal flaw. Look for responses that help in one situation and cause trouble in another.

LET READERS MEET THE CHARACTER THROUGH CHOICES

You can tell us Edith is generous. You can also show her quietly packing an extra meal for someone who insists he only came to fix the tap.

Both methods have uses. Direct description can establish something efficiently. A choice lets readers experience how a quality operates, especially when it costs the character something.

Suppose Edith has time either to finish a funding application or to sit with a frightened volunteer. Which does she choose? Can she find another solution? What does she neglect, and who notices?

There need not be an obvious correct answer. Divided responsibilities produce convincing pressure because people cannot always honour every value at once.

Small choices help too. Does she correct a mistaken compliment? Keep the last clean apron for herself? Pretend not to hear a hurtful remark? Such actions can reveal priorities without stopping the story for a formal character announcement.

When writing a scene, look for the point at which your character has to respond. Give that response enough specificity to belong to them.

AGENCY DOES NOT REQUIRE COMPLETE FREEDOM

Agency is a character's capacity to make choices and influence what happens. It does not mean they control the circumstances or can overcome every barrier through determination.

A character trapped in a room, dependent on an employer or caring for someone else may have narrow options. Choosing what to reveal, whom to trust, what to notice or which small refusal to make can still affect the story.

Be careful not to confuse limited power with weak characterization. Show the actual constraints. Then explore the choices available within them and the consequences of those choices.

Edith cannot vote the funding into existence by being sufficiently spirited. She can decide whether to share the accounts, seek another arrangement or admit that her present plan will not work.

Other characters should respond according to their own positions. The treasurer need not become foolish so Edith can look capable. A convincing disagreement may require her to understand a real concern before she can answer it.

MAKE THE STAKES PARTICULAR

Stakes are what may be gained, lost or changed through the outcome. They can be material, emotional, social or some combination.

If the kitchen closes, people may lose a reliable place to eat. Edith may lose her daily work, familiar company and the role through which she understands herself. Her niece may worry that keeping it open will exhaust her.

Specific stakes give an apparently modest goal weight. You do not have to threaten the entire village with destruction. Losing a place where someone is expected and welcomed can be enough.

Establish what might be lost before demanding that readers fear its disappearance. Let us experience a meal, an ordinary kindness or a conversation Edith would miss. Otherwise the kitchen is merely a building the narration has called important.

Avoid raising stakes only by adding more misfortune. Sometimes the sharper development is a choice between two valued outcomes: preserve the kitchen unchanged, or accept a partnership that saves the service while ending Edith's control.

USE RELATIONSHIPS TO REVEAL DIFFERENT FACETS

People do not behave identically with everyone. Edith might be brisk with officials, patient with children and unexpectedly timid around an old friend whose opinion still matters to her.

These differences need not make her inconsistent. They can reveal history, status and vulnerability.

Choose two important relationships and ask what each person wants from Edith. Her niece wants reassurance that Edith is eating properly. The treasurer wants accurate figures. A volunteer wants permission to become useful without being supervised every eleven seconds.

Now ask what Edith wants from each of them. If the desires differ, conversations have somewhere to go. Edith may offer the treasurer cake when he wants a receipt, and offer her niece an account of the receipts when she wants an honest answer about loneliness.

Let supporting characters have concerns beyond helping or obstructing the protagonist. The volunteer may leave early because she has another responsibility, not because the plot needs to punish Edith. That independent life makes the relationship feel less arranged.

ALLOW CONTRADICTIONS TO HAVE A PATTERN

A capable person can be frightened. A generous person can be possessive. Someone who speaks confidently in public may avoid one necessary conversation at home.

A useful contradiction has context. It becomes understandable through what the character values, fears or believes. Randomly changing behaviour to surprise the reader usually weakens trust.

Edith might campaign fiercely for affordable meals while refusing to accept a free one herself. The contradiction suggests that she divides the world into people who help and people who need help, with no comfortable place between them.

You do not have to explain that pattern immediately. Show it operating. Later events can challenge it.

As you draft, note responses that seem incompatible. Ask whether they expose a meaningful tension or whether you have made the character behave conveniently for a scene. If it is convenience, find an action that fits the person, or revise the circumstances so a different response becomes believable.

BACKSTORY SHOULD EXPLAIN PRESSURE, NOT OCCUPY THE WHOLE HOUSE

Backstory is the relevant past behind the present action. It can help explain a reaction, but readers do not necessarily need the full history at the moment you discover it.

Perhaps Edith once needed a meal she could not pay for. That experience might explain why she notices who is trying to leave before food is served. You could reveal it through a remembered detail, a later conversation or a brief passage of narration.

Choose the point where the information changes our understanding. Do not assume the first appearance of Edith requires a tour from infancy onwards.

Also avoid making one past event explain everything about her. People can have several influences, conflicting memories and habits that no longer serve their original purpose.

Write private exploratory material if it helps. Knowing why Edith dislikes Clive may enrich a line of dialogue even if the entire regrettable incident never enters the book.

DECIDE HOW CHANGE WILL WORK

A character arc is a pattern of development across the story. A character may change a belief, learn a skill, become less willing to compromise or fail to change when it matters. Some stories centre on a relatively steadfast person whose actions alter others.

You do not need to give Edith a new personality. A meaningful shift might be her willingness to accept help without treating it as surrender.

Prepare that shift through attempts and consequences. She rejects a volunteer's idea, struggles alone, accepts a small adjustment and discovers that sharing responsibility has both benefits and discomforts. By the final decision, she has reasons to act differently.

A single wise speech can prompt reflection, but it should not automatically erase a long-established habit. Let the changed behaviour cost her something. Agreeing to a new management arrangement may save the kitchen while leaving her sad.

Growth can contain loss. That mixture often makes an ending feel more earned than a reward in which every difficulty conveniently disappears.

TRY A THREE-SCENE CHARACTER EXERCISE

Choose one character and one immediate goal. Write a short scene in which their usual method almost works but creates a complication.

For Edith, the method might be doing everything herself. She produces a splendid meal, but misses the funding deadline while washing up.

Next, write a scene in which someone offers a different method. Give the offer a real disadvantage. Sharing kitchen space might reduce costs, but it also means accepting another group's schedule and menu. If the alternative is obviously perfect, the decision tells us less.

Finally, write the moment when the character must choose. Do not begin with an explanation of what the choice symbolizes. Write the physical action: Edith takes her name off the duty rota, then asks who will cover Tuesday.

Read the scenes together. What does each one reveal? Does the later choice grow from the earlier experience? Can readers understand both the desire and the reluctance?

The exercise can serve writers who plan in advance and those who discover through drafting. You are testing possibilities, not signing a contract that forbids the character from surprising you later.

WHEN YOU RETURN TO THE MANUSCRIPT

Look for places where characters wait while events happen around them. Sometimes waiting is the situation, and their response is the point. Elsewhere, a meaningful decision may be missing.

Check the supporting cast as well. Can you explain what an important secondary character wants without using the protagonist's name? Does the opposition have a credible concern? Are you showing qualities through action as well as describing them?

A trusted reader can help by answering simple questions: What do you think this person wants? Which choice surprised you? Did that surprise feel convincing? Their answers reveal what reached the page.

Keep the birthday and the biscuit if they help. But when Edith enters the committee room, let her want something enough to try, risk, conceal, reconsider or refuse. Readers will learn far more about her while she pursues it.

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