

Build a character who acts

How to build characters for a novel - begin with a goal, a reason, and a choice. Use short answers, then test them in a scene.

How to use this PDF: Type into the boxes in a PDF reader that supports forms, or print and write by hand. Save a new copy for each character. Keep answers within the visible space; continue longer notes in your writing document.

Character and story

Name, role, genre, and the point of view you plan to use.

An outcome the reader can recognize

What does this character want to do, obtain, prevent, or protect? Include a deadline only if your story needs one.

Why this person cares

Which value, obligation, hope, or fear makes the goal matter to them?

Pressure and stakes

What resists the goal? What becomes different if the character fails or walks away?

Make traits affect choices

Build depth through useful abilities, habits, and contradictions. An ordinary experience can shape a character; a traumatic past is optional.

Try it: A careful planner catches an error that others miss. Under pressure, the same habit makes them delay a necessary decision. Write the action and its consequence.

A strength in action

Name one ability or quality, then show a situation where it helps.

The cost of a familiar habit

When does that strength or habit become unhelpful? What does the character do, and who pays for it?

A past experience with a present effect

Choose one experience. What did the character conclude from it? How does that conclusion influence a decision now?

A contradiction the reader can see

Write two qualities that coexist. What context brings out each one?

Put relationships under pressure

Give supporting characters priorities of their own. Each relationship can reveal a different side of the protagonist.

Example: June wants to preserve a library. Theo, her treasurer, wants honest costs before he asks donors for money. Their shared goal creates friction because they disagree about the method.

Ally or close relationship

What do they want? What do they need from the protagonist? Where do their priorities differ?

Person or force creating opposition

What outcome does the opposition seek? What power or practical obstacle makes their resistance matter?

What is difficult between them?

Choose a boundary, debt, secret, expectation, or unequal responsibility. How does it change what each person will ask for?

A relationship-changing choice

Which action changes trust, dependence, respect, or cooperation? What follows?

Find the voice on the page

Voice grows from attention, judgments, habits, and what the character is trying to accomplish. Work within the point of view you have chosen.

Try one room, two viewpoints: A volunteer notices empty chairs and worn books. A property manager notices a leaking window and a repair estimate. The setting stays the same; attention changes.

What they notice

In a room full of people, which detail catches their attention first? What does that reveal?

How they speak when they want something

Do they ask directly, soften the request, negotiate, joke, or change the subject? Write a short line.

What they say and what they mean

Write one spoken sentence and the private thought beneath it. Let the difference fit their motive.

A short voice test

Write 40-60 words: the character enters a familiar place and notices a change. Let their attention and next action guide the passage.

Turn the profile into a scene

A scene gives your character an immediate aim and a response that changes the situation. Begin with one manageable encounter.

Example: June needs Theo to approve a fundraising announcement. A repair quote makes her target too low. She can hide the quote or disclose it and delay the campaign. Either choice has a cost.

Immediate scene goal

What does the character want from this particular encounter? What would success look like?

Resistance or complication

Who, what, or which conflicting desire makes that goal difficult?

A consequential response

What options does the character see? What do they choose, and why?

Consequence and next move

What changes because of the choice? What does that result require them or someone else to do next?

Map change through decisions

Use these landmarks flexibly. A character may grow, decline, or keep a core value while changing the world around them. The prompts do not prescribe chapter counts.

Opening response

What familiar approach works at first? Where does its limit appear?

First costly commitment

Which choice makes walking away harder? What is at risk?

New evidence or understanding

What experience changes their approach or tests a value? What response follows?

Setback and response

Which cost or failure tests them again? How do they respond now?

Decisive choice and aftermath

Which choice confronts the central pressure? What does the aftermath reveal?

Use the example, then revise

This fictional teaching example is original to Publish Smarter. Adapt the questions to your genre and manuscript.

June, volunteer library coordinator: She wants the board to renew the library lease. Keeping the library matters because it connects the neighborhood. Her careful preparation helps, but she treats every difficulty as her responsibility alone.

Present pressure

A repair quote makes the planned fundraiser too small. The renewal vote is approaching.

Relationship friction

Theo needs an accurate target before he asks donors to contribute. June fears that sharing the problem will make her look unreliable.

Consequential scene

June shows Theo the full quote and asks him to help rebuild the plan. He postpones the announcement, so they lose a promotion slot, but he accepts responsibility for the donor calls.

Visible arc

Early June silently fixes others' tasks. Later she delegates a task with a clear brief. At the decisive meeting, she presents the limits and asks the board to share the responsibility. The story must show the costs and outcomes of those choices.

Revision check

- ☐ Can I point to a scene where the goal affects a decision?
- ☐ Does the motive explain why this person chooses that response?
- ☐ Does a trait create a visible benefit, cost, or complication?
- ☐ Do supporting characters pursue their own priorities?
- ☐ Does voice reflect attention and motive as well as wording?
- ☐ Does the ending have evidence in earlier choices?

Next step: draft the scene from page 5, then update the profile with what you discover.