

RESOURCE: Character Deep Dive

Created by Fiona Ella (YWP 2015-19) for YWP, 9/22/2019

Note from [Fiona Ella](#): This is a template for the questionnaire I use when I'm at a stage of revising a project where I already know my characters and narrative fairly well but need to get to the next level. It shouldn't be used for developing new characters, because it leaves off a lot of things you'll need to get to know a new character and should know before starting this. Their voice, their attitude, their past, how they act in different scenarios.

This questionnaire is designed to help you get a fully formed sense of your character as being more than someone who serves your narrative, as someone who was living a life and was a real and complicated human with goals and hobbies even before the story began, and is a combination of analysis and biography. I use it for screenwriting, but it should work for other forms of fiction as well.

If you find yourself wandering into anecdotes only tangentially related to the questions being asked, embrace it. The purpose of the questionnaire is to give you a greater sense of who your character is and who they have been over time so telling these stories will only give you a greater sense of your character having been a fully formed entity before the story began and help you see the world through their eyes.

Ideally by the time you finish it you will be able to say with certainty what drives your character both internally and externally, the purpose of all their major relationships, the components missing from their internal landscape that the story will provide or not provide, and their character arc.

The questionnaire begins guided but can be personalized extensively to fit the particular character you are developing as it goes on--in fact, after a certain point you should start to personalize it because you should have gotten the hang of how it works.

It is intended for adult characters, but for child or teenage characters you can complete the "early life" section and then skip directly to "relationships" and get more or less the same results.

Early Life

This section covers the details of the character's childhood and any significant or formative instances in their childhood. Not only will it help you nail down the details of their history and upbringing, you should find yourself coming up with anecdotes from their childhood that show you how they interacted with the world in more mundane scenarios.

Full Name

First, middle(s), last

Reason for Name

What does their name mean? Why was it given to them? If they have a nickname, how did they get it?

Date of Birth

Day, month, year, optional time of day

Place of Birth

Hospital, Town, State/province/county, country

Mother

Full name, age, job, personality and a bit of history

Father

Full name, age, job, personality and a bit of history

Parents' Relationship With Each Other

How did they meet? Are they still together? Was it a marriage of convenience, an impulse marriage, or a well-thought affair between two romantically inclined best friends? Are they both still living?

Relationship with Mother

How they interacted with their mother, activities they shared, evolution of this relationship over time

Relationship with Father

How they interacted with their father, activities they shared, evolution of this relationship over time

Siblings (if any)

Name, age, career and a bit about personality

Relationship with Sibling (if any)

How did they get on as children? How do they get on now? Are they mortal enemies, best friends, partners in crime?

Grandparents on Mother's Side

Names, where they live (if they're still alive), interactions the character may have had with them

Grandparents on Father's Side

Names, where they live if living, interactions the character may have had with them

Earliest Memory

What is the first thing they remember? Where did it happen? Is there an emotion associated with it? Other people? Is it significant or mundane? How old were they?

Health as a Child

Were they fussy? Did they disregard their own safety? Many broken bones or none? Any disabilities? Mental diagnoses or issues can go here or can be given their own section depending on their significance.

Childhood Romantic Dalliances

First crush? How old were they at the time? First time they dated? Were their early relationships serious or 'going through the motions'? How did breakups happen? Or did they not date? Why?

Childhood Academic Performance

How were their grades? Good, bad, mediocre? Were they an instinctively good student, a lazily mediocre, did they push themselves to the limits to succeed—or push themselves to the limits and still fail most of their classes? How did they behave in school?

Family Finances as a Child

Rich, poor or in between? Were there any significant changes in their finances? Did the character have to get a job as soon as they were of age in order to afford conveniences or did they have all they could ask for? Was money a stress, a just-so-fact, or something they weren't really aware of?

Emotional State Throughout Teenagehood

How did they see their world? Did they have any mental health issues in teenagehood? Were they prone to drama or did they keep their head down and their nose clean? Were they happy with their place in the world, want to stay somewhere different, or just bide their time until they were an adult? Did any significant events during this time change their emotional state? For the better or worse?

Late/early bloomer (aka the awkward details)

When did they go through puberty? When was their sexual awakening? When did they lose their virginity, and with whom? Did they not? Was this a personal choice or a failure?

Age of Coming Out (optional)

If the character is queer, when did they realize? How? Was it an instinctive realization, an epiphany, or a tortured path to acceptance? When did they tell their parents? How did their parents react? Did they tell their parents? If not, why?

Interests in Childhood

What were they passionate about? What activities did they love? What activities did they do, but not really enjoy? What activities did they try and just couldn't like? Did they have any fleeting hobbies? Lifelong obsessions?

Best Subjects in School

Where did their academic talents lie? With none, or all of them? Which class was their favorite, and did they get their best grades in this class? Why or why not?

Attitude Towards Rules

How do they feel about laws and restrictions? Are they a do-gooder who follows without question? Do they flaunt rules for the hell of it? Do they follow the rules, but only when it's convenient? Do they prefer to make their own rules? Or a combination of all or none of the above? How do they feel about their attitude towards rules? Is it an inconvenience or a chosen strategy?

Childhood House

Detached or a flat? How many bedrooms? What color was it? What did it smell like? How did they feel about it? Are their memories of it positive, negative or neutral? (If they lived in more than one different house at different times or at once, answer the questions for each house, including the reasons for the move.)

Bedroom as a Child

Big or small? What was their bed like? Did they share the room with anybody? Was the room bland, or highly personalized? Did they like it or spend as little time as possible there?

Best Friend(s) as a Child

Who were they close to? Did they find each other naturally or did their parents push them together? What drew them to each other? What kind of a friendship did they have—argumentative, businesslike, thick as thieves, etc? Did the friendship end in a fiery blaze or did they just slowly drift apart? Or is it still going strong? Was their friend group large or small? Did it change as they got older? Did they have friends at all? If not, why?

Favorite Movie as a Child

Movie's name, when they first saw it, what they liked about it. Memories associated with it. If they didn't have a favorite movie, why not? Did they not watch movies?

Favorite Bands as a Child

Band names, why they liked them, how attached—did they listen casually, did they hang posters, were they a downright groupie? Do they still like these bands?

University

This section deals with the time of their young adulthood when your character left home. If they didn't attend university, this section can be filled out for a job or whatever else occupied their time during this period. As this section proceeds, it will become increasingly personalized until you can more or less fill in the gaps for yourself to tell the character's story. This will vary depending on how conventionally this time of your character's life went on, but there is no one-size-fits-all for how their life went on and by the end of this section you should feel less as though you are answering questions and more as though you are telling your character's story.

Level of Secondary Education

How much school did they attend? What did they study? Did they change their area of study? Did they drop out? If they did not attend school at all, what did they do instead?

Where Secondary Education was Gotten

What college did they go to? Or, failing that, where did they work?

Academic Performance at Uni

Were their grades good, bad, mediocre? Was there a significant change from their academic performance in primary and secondary school? Did they enjoy school or was it a slog? If they changed their major, did their grades improve or get worse after the change? Or maybe they stayed the same?

Friends at Uni

Did they have many, or few? What were their names, and what were they like? What did the character get out of these relationships? Were they close friendships, businesslike friendships, purely intended for ascending the social ladder or genuinely emotionally fulfilling? Were they more focused on their friends than their schoolwork? Or more focused on their schoolwork than friends? Did they have friends at all? If not, why?

Romantic Dalliances at Uni

Did they have many relationships or few? Or none? What were the names of their partners, and what were the relationships like? How did they meet? Was the breakup mutual and lowkey or a disastrous affair? How did these relationships impact them going forward?

What Else?

If something significant happened to them at college, tell us about it. How did it start? Who was involved? How did they feel about it?

Graduation

When did they graduate? What was it like? Was it triumphant, a relief, or disappointing? Did they have big plans for the future or feel unmoored?

OR

Why They Dropped Out

If your character didn't finish university, tell us why. Was it their own decision or were they forced by circumstance? Were they relieved or did they feel like a failure? Was it dramatic or did it just sort of happen?

Post College Period

This section can be personalized considerably, depending on how old the character is and how many things of note happened after they graduated college. If they are in their fifties and have held down twenty jobs since graduating college, there's no need to go into the details of every single one—just tell us what jumps out at you or is important to your character's history and then where they are now, in as much or as little detail as you feel you need. If this is your character's first job after college, then go into detail for this time. The main purpose of this section is to figure out where your character is, emotionally and materially, at the time of the story's inciting incident.

Job

Where do they work? Do they work? How do they feel about their job? Is it a simple nine-to-five sort of thing or something more exciting? Are they where they always imagined they'd be at this time, career wise, or not quite there? Or beyond? Or even utterly failing? How much do they earn?

Social Life at Work

Do they have friends? How do they get on with their coworkers/boss? Do they have a crush on anyone? Any close friends? Any enemies? What drew these people to each other?

Accommodations

Where do they live? A flat, a detached house, a rental or a roomshare? What do they think of their living situation? How does it smell, look, feel etc? Is it decorated to their tastes or bland? Do they like their living situation, or do they want something better? Or are they just happy to have a place of their own?

Anything Else?

Anything else relevant that's going on—a conflict that will soon spark into relevance, something they've been wondering about, something that has recently happened that primes this character to experience the inciting incident—really anything that you feel needs to be mentioned that hasn't been yet.

Relationships

This section covers how the character feels about and interacts with the other major characters in the narrative. It is connected to the character arc but more concerned with the character's interactions than their internal composition. Filling out this section, it is useful to have a general idea of the progression of your plot so you know how its events might impact character relationships, but it can also be used to figure out a framework of events with characters and their relationships to build your plot off of.

With Character A At Start

If they meet this character as a part of the story, what is their first impression? Are they attracted, put-off, intimidated, suspicious, endeared, annoyed, or none or all of the above? What kind of a person do they think Character A is? Does this change drastically very early on in the narrative?

or

If they already know this character, what state is their relationship in at the start of the story? Are they close, drifting apart, estranged, or otherwise? How do they feel about each other? Does your character feel that they know Character A well or that they are still an enigma? Does your character secretly or openly dislike Character A? How complicated is their relationship?

Evolution of Character A Relationship

As the story progresses, how does your character come to see Character A differently? Do they grow to like them more or less? Do they develop romantic or platonic chemistry? Do they gain a renewed understanding of what makes Character A tick? Are there specific events, specific or general, that drive the relationship to a new place? If they learn a secret that Character A has been holding back over the course of the narrative, how do they feel about this secret? How does it make them see Character A the same or differently? If Character A makes a decision your character disagrees or is outright repulsed by, how does this change their relationship? If you know your plot well, how do various intense events impact this relationship, specifically?

With Character B at Start

-

Evolution of Character B Relationship

Do the same for your second main character

Primary Drivers

This is probably the most difficult part of the questionnaire. Here you will delve into your character's psyche and the deepest things that make them tick, using your knowledge of who they are in your story as well as what you have learned from your examination of their history and relationships here. Think carefully about each answer as this is the deepest components of your character and the answers may not be immediately evident.

Greatest Fear

Not 'heights' or 'needles' or those things. Instead, this refers to the more abstract worst thing that could happen to this particular character in terms of their life and situation. What do they actively avoid, whether

they know it or not, with every action they take? Ideally this is something that will happen to them over the course of your story.

Character Deficit

This is somewhat like a character flaw, but rather than being something like “stingy” or “impulsive” it is something that your character lacks or is closed off to, internally, that is holding them back or making them miserable. This is the wrinkle in their worldview that actively sabotages them every time they try to get something, and will often be linked to both their internal want and their greatest fear.

Internal Want

What does this character want or crave, internally and emotionally? What emotional and existential fulfillment are they seeking? It may not be what they really need or what is good for them—indeed, often it is actively bad for them—but it informs their actions and worldview.

External Want

What are they concretely pursuing, at least at the start? What concrete material goal or reward propels them into the story and keeps them going when things get weird? This can conflict with their internal want, or it can be in tandem with it but they should be related somehow.

Driving Emotion

The urge or emotional urge that informs their actions. When they react to something unexpected, what emotion or urge is coming to the forefront? It may be difficult to articulate, but it clarifies the lens through which your character sees the world.

Character Arc

Here you will put together everything you have learned and articulated about the character with what you already know about the events of your plot. Where do they start, how do their interactions with other characters and narrative events change their world view, what is their worst case scenario and what do they do about, and where do they eventually end up? If you are writing a movie or a novel you can write only one of these but for a book series you will want to cover both first book and overall arc, and for a television series you will have to go even more in-depth, covering overall series arc, first season arc, and pilot arc. This section is the most likely to be updated as the plot changes, but try and use it as a reference for the events of the plot if your story is at all character driven.

Enjoy and happy deep dives!