

Deeper People: Putting Yourself into Your Characters

[By Holly Lisle](#)

A lot of fiction by beginning writers, and unfortunately a significant amount of fiction by published writers, is plagued by **paper people** characters who never really come to life on the page. The published writers who still get away with this do so because they've learned to tell a story so compelling that editors will buy from them anyway. Beginners really don't have that luxury, and **paper people** will kill a sale as fast as anything.

Paper people fall into categories, and that is much of their problem. You have Evil Villains, Oppressed Virginal Heroines, Naive-But-Stalwart Heroes, and Smart-Ass Sidekicks, among other common types. (Depending on genre, you'll meet Hookers-With-Hearts-of-Gold, Strong-But-Silent Sheriffs, Nubile-Young-Secretaries-Who-Always-Think-They're-Too-Thin, Brilliant-But-Distracted Scientists, Ever-Dedicated Cops, and the inescapable Fearless Soldiers.) You recognize them as I list them, and can probably name as many novels where they feature prominently as I can.

They're recognizable as types, but **they aren't recognizable as people**. Real people have interests both broad and deep, friends and enemies from as far back as when they were two years old, hobbies that have absolutely nothing to do with their current Quest for the Silver Nematode, and the occasional pet, favorite book, and favorite song.

More than anything else, living

characters have passions, hungers and desires, and they aren't all related to the story of the moment.

Flat characters begin and end with whatever they're doing in the story.

Here's how to test your character to see if you have any hope of breathing some life into him as he stands. Write down the characteristics he has to have to successfully complete the story you've plotted out for him. You'll probably have things in there like "Intelligence," "Deep knowledge of spaceship construction and navigation," and "The ability to fire weapons accurately even while hanging upside-down by the ankles and with hands bound."

Hey, my characters can do some nifty things, too. Part of the fun of writing is writing people who are better at cool things than you are.

But if your character starts and ends with the things that will help him get through his mission, you have created **Yet Another Paper Person**.

YAPP. Bad. YAPPs dont sell books.

I'm going to show you the method I use to make my people real. It gets a bit personal; when I occasionally complain about writing being like dancing naked on your rooftop, this is the part of writing that most closely fits that description. This takes some courage. But it works.

You're going to put yourself into your characters. Not just the public things that you're proud of, like having won the fifth-grade statewide spelling bee, or being president of your graduating class and the person voted Most Likely To—but the things you wish you never had to admit to anyone, like the

fact that you screwed up four marriages and three of the four were almost entirely your own fault.

Or that fact that you had a teenage pregnancy, and a teenage abortion. Or adoption.

The fact that you had an affair you never told anyone about.

The stupid stuff, too, like the fact that you couldn't carry a tune on a stretcher with two paramedics helping you. The fact that you whistle La Bamba in the shower. Like the fact that you absolutely, positively refuse to look at your butt in a mirror, clothed or unclothed, because you just hate it. The fact that you wear glasses, or are balding, or have dimples on your thighs and stretch marks from four pregnancies in which you frequently mistook yourself for the Hindenburg.

This workshop is private. In this voyage of discovery, you're going to have to be brutally honest, and you'll do that better with no one looking over your shoulder. Don't panic. Once you've been honest, I'll show you how to lie to disguise the truth and still have it be true to the story. First though, you have to be honest.

Here we go.

Part One of the Workshop

A. Write ten things about yourself that you think are fantastic things that you don't think other people really appreciate fully about you, or that they haven't noticed, or that they simply don't know about. Ten. Really.

B. Write ten things about yourself that would embarrass you terribly if anyone else knew about them. These can be things you have done, things you have wanted, things you have thought, fantasies you have entertained, or secrets you have been keeping. Doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is that you tell the truth. If it doesn't hurt and make you

uncomfortable to write each of these, you aren't digging deep enough.

C. Describe your body as honestly as you can what you like about it, what you hate about it, and what you hope no one has noticed.

D. Describe five of the most wonderful moments of your life things you still look back on with pleasure and joy.

E. Describe five of the most painful moments of your life mistakes you've made, people you've hurt, things that you will probably regret until you die.

F. Write the ten things you are most passionate about. These can be religious, political, philosophical, personal, romantic—these are your causes. You can be in favor of them, or against them, but they have to matter to you. They don't have to be big; they just have to be yours.

Part Two of the Workshop

Okay. Enough soul-searching. You'll have to do this from time to time, but if you've done the exercise honestly this time, you now have enough goodies to give a whole novel or three full of characters some resonance and depth.

Obviously, you are not going to transfer any of this stuff directly into your novel. You're going to change it, transform it, invert it, spread it out around a whole bunch of people who are not like you. Yes, to do good work, you have to put yourself into your writing, but no, **you don't have to put yourself in recognizably.**

Lets say that one of the really tough-to-deal-with moments in your life came when you caught your girlfriend of five years cheating on you with **her** girlfriend. Ouch. You aren't going to get over that one any time soon. You've spent time wondering

what was wrong with you, how many other people knew what was going on, if you were a laughingstock, if shed ever done this before, with whom . . . and those questions aren't going to go away.

So give them to one character. Give them to a character who is otherwise unlike you: different gender, or different sexual orientation, or different interests. Make the situation in which he or she finds out about the cheating entirely different. If you're writing a novel about a female vampire-hunting space captain, and shes carrying around these feelings of yours, they aren't going to be your feelings anymore. They'll be hers.

Give her relationship with the cheater some backstory, make it as closely or distantly related to the plot as you wish, but get it in there. She has a life outside of chasing vampires through space, and sometimes her anger at what this person has done to her is going to find itself displace onto innocent people who for one reason or another will remind her of the cheater. This will affect, to greater or lesser degree, her movement through the story. And it will, because it is personal and true even if disguised resonate with your readers.

For you to be able to use the events from your own life effectively in fiction, you must, then, do the following things:

- 1. Search out those events in your life that have meaning to you;*
- 2. Honestly explore how each of those events affected you;*
- 3. Disguise the events and your reactions to them while still maintaining their essential, emotional truth;*
- 4. And give these altered events to your characters, both good and bad, as part of their personal histories.*

And a final, essential point.

**If this isn't hard for you to do,
you aren't digging deep enough.**

The things that matter are never easy. Including the things that matter in your fiction, though, will help you get sales, reach your readers, and write something that isn't just the next Paper Hero Goes on A Quest doorstep novel. Say goodbye to Evil Villains, Oppressed Virginal Heroines, Nave-But-Stalwart Heroes, and Smart-Ass Sidekicks forever. Because once you put yourself into your characters, they become Deeper People. They become real.

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NOTE: To learn a Shadow Room exercise that invites the right character for your story to show up, do good character interviews that will bring your characters to life while writing them, and master the process of committing the Sins of Characterization *well*, see [Holly Lisle's Create a Character Clinic](https://hollylisle.com).

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