

SECTION ONE: ASK THEM ANYTHING

Character & What It Isn't

My first character—at least the first one I actually remember writing with an eye toward selling the story he was in—was Draegan Dankmire. Feel free to snicker. I do.

I remember two things about poor Draegan, and the **other** thing was the fact that he had a hat like those worn by the Three Musketeers. Except it was purple.

Draegan was supposed to be a serious character in a serious fantasy novel. He was planned as the hero. He made it thirty pages, more or less, before he turned into a puddle of mush in the middle of the page and I realized the story wasn't going to work.

Now, not everything about that first failed novel effort was a total loss. The world that Draegan Dankmire inhabited showed up in **Hunting the Corrigan's Blood**, as Cadence Drake's home world. It was, if I say so myself, a damned cool world. But Draegan never made it to the land of published—or even finished—fiction, because a character

cannot make it through the world with nothing going for him but an unfortunate name and a pimp hat.

He needs to have character.

Here are all the things that character isn't. It isn't a catch phrase said at stressful moments in the story. It isn't an interesting scar, or a habit of twisting hair around a finger, or a propensity to dress in yellow.

Character in your fictional character is precisely the same thing that it is in you. It's who you are when no one is looking, and who you are when someone is looking, and how those two people are different, and why.

Do you need to have a story already in mind to use this book? No. If you do, you can use the techniques and points given here to strengthen your work. If you don't, the act of creating characters will spawn more stories than you could write in a lifetime.

With that in mind, then, onward.

What Character Is, and How to Get Some

People start out untried, untested, and essentially unformed. When we're small, we have basic needs. Feed us, love us, and keep us safe, and we're happy.

- **Character does not form in the moments when we're happy. Character forms when things start to go wrong.**

Character is how we deal with hardship, how we react when challenged, how we think when tempted, how we flee when hunted, how we pursue when hunting. It is how we want what we want, and what we are willing to do to get it.

All of us have moments in our pasts when we failed a challenge, when our choices reflected poorly on our characters. All of us have moments when we prevailed against a temptation, and came away looking good, and feeling good about ourselves, and deservedly so.

Every fictional character should have those same moments; places where he was weak or dishonest, places where he was strong and did the right thing in spite of personal cost or the temptation of personal gain.

And—here's the tricky part—both your good guys and your bad guys have to have these same moments. We can safely assume

that your villains (or antagonists) have made more wrong choices than right ones, have acted out of self interest far more often than altruism. Odds are good that your heroes (or protagonists) will have done the opposite.

- **If you want your characters to be fully fleshed-out human beings, you will not make them perfect.**

The sins you've committed will work well for your characters—amplified or lessened to suit your needs and your characters' places in your story, and disguised more or less depending upon how much of yourself you want to inject into your story.

How do you find out who your characters are?

I ask questions. I've found in my own writing that one good question is worth a hundred answers, and that just a handful of questions will give me a good feel for the character I'm writing.

I've also discovered—and this can save you a lot of time and frustration—that I don't need to know everything about my character before I start. In fact, I generally know very little. By not overworking the character's background before I get into the writing, I leave the door open for surprises.

I do, however, know enough to get me from one chapter to the next. Here's where I start.

SEVEN CRITICAL ELEMENTS OF CHARACTER

Why Maslow Matters

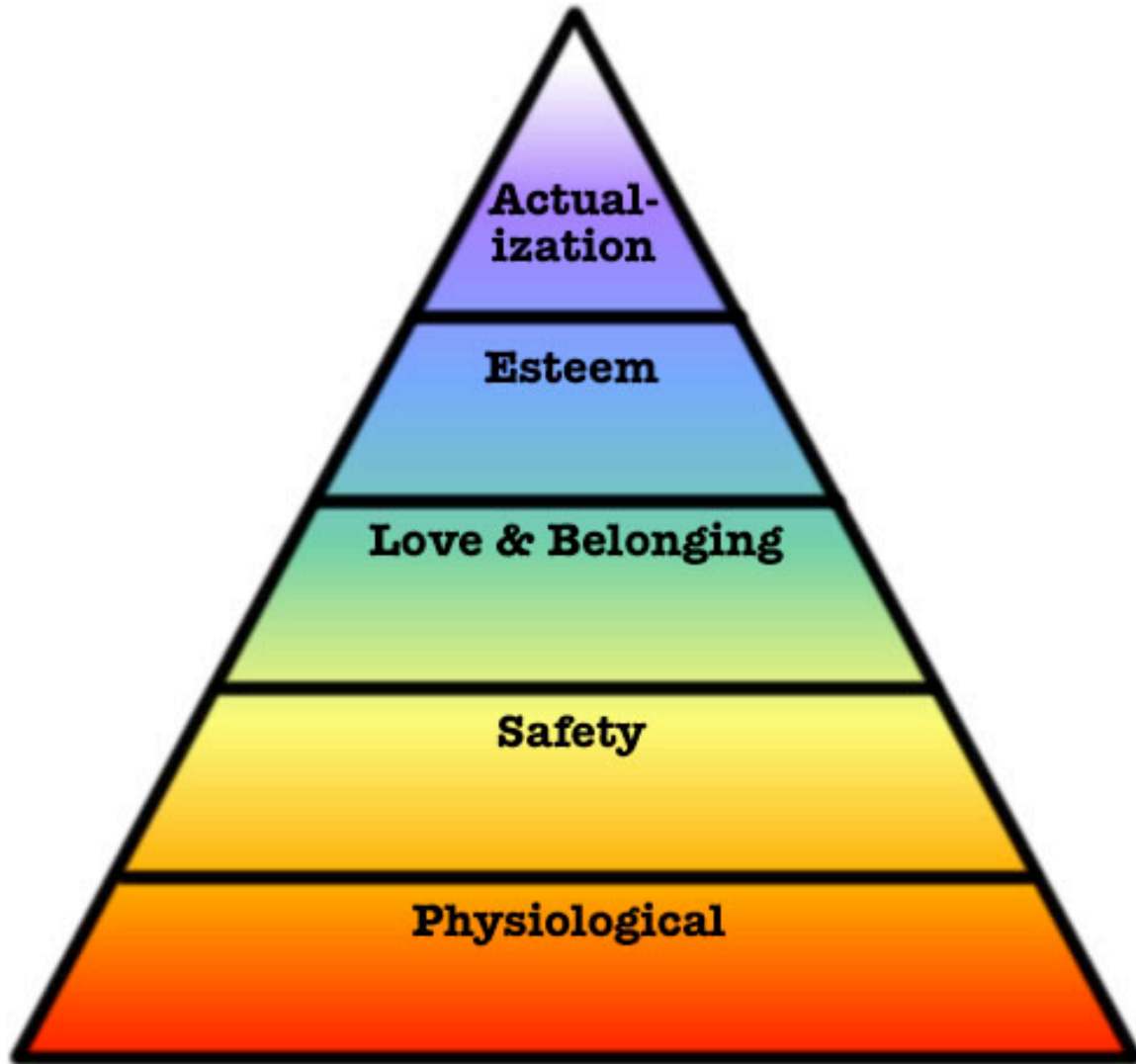
I love Abraham Maslow. He makes my job so much easier.

I met him first in nursing school, in my Introduction to Psychology textbook. He was a psychologist who sought the elements of humanity in psychology. He developed a now-famous Hierarchy of Needs, which I’ve reproduced below, and he sought the elements that lead to a healthy personality.

His work is wonderful in its own right—it also, however, creates a fantastic shortcut for writers who need to figure out what drives their characters, both the healthy ones, and those driven by neurosis, psychosis, or simple desperation.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs is deceptively simple, and on the face of it, sort of obvious.

Figure 1: Maslow’s Hierarchy of Need



You use the hierarchy by working from the bottom to the top. The individual will struggle to meet bottom needs before moving up the pyramid to higher needs.

Physiological needs are air, water, rest and sleep, nourishment, survivable climate, pain avoidance, and sex, pretty much in that order. We'll die without the first

five (and frequently the sixth, as well, since feeling pain protects us from making deadly errors), while lack of the seventh would wipe out the species.

Air is absolutely the most critical. You can do without it and hope to survive as yourself for about four minutes. Water—three days. Rest and sleep—about the same. Food—about a month. Climate depends. You fall into the water in a polar region, and you have almost no time to get to safety. Ditto being trapped on the bright side of the moon without an air-conditioned suit. Lesser extremes confer longer potential survival times. If your survival need are basically assured, you'll move on to trying to meet your next set of needs.

Safety needs follow physiological needs—shelter, income, self-defense, better neighborhood, cleaner air and water, safer schools, lights for dark corners, more reliable transportation, and much more. After we meet bare survival needs, we start working to make ourselves more comfortable, we seek to protect the things we acquire, and we seek to guard ourselves and those we love from predators.

Love and Belonging comes next. We need to know we are cared about; we need to care about others. We need to have a place where we belong, where we know our ideas and

actions will be accepted or at least considered seriously and without animosity.

Then we reach **Esteem**, which is tricky. Maslow suggested two levels of esteem: The lower level encompasses the varieties of need for the respect of others—everything from the needs for status and dominance to the need for fame. The higher level encompasses the need to respect ourselves. We meet this when we live by the rules we set for ourselves, when we do things for others, when we exceed our own expectations, when we strive.

Finally, Maslow places **Actualization** at the pinnacle of the pyramid. Unlike the previous four varieties of needs, which (if we are psychologically healthy) no longer drive us once we have satisfied them, with actualization we will continue to feel these needs even after we meet them. They provide a reliable engine that moves us through our lives.

Our actualization needs become our mission in life; they inspire us, and we inspire others by pursuing them.

- **So ... why is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs a great shortcut for writers?**

Because you can throw a dart at that little diagram, and just by noting where it lands, you will understand what is driving your character. More importantly, you'll be

able to make that need compelling and understandable to your reader.

Say your dart lands on the bottom rung. You have a character who is struggling for his very survival—we might meet him as he's about to drown following a shipwreck (he needs air); or, when he's scrambling across a deserted island seeking a waterfall, a spring, a rivulet, even a few drops of dew cupped in a leaf (he needs water); or, when he is one man among many men working along the Alaska pipeline, and all he can think about is meeting a woman (he needs sex.)

Say your dart lands near the top. You already know that this character has food, clothing, shelter, a way of meeting his survival needs, and a partner, a family, or a group that cares about him enough that he can function. What he may need is to win his place in the tribe, to pass his manhood initiation, to become a rock star loved by millions, to take over a corporate empire, or to be able to look himself in the eye when he's shaving each morning and know that he hasn't let himself down by cheating on his wife, stealing from his business partner, or humiliating himself through bad behavior.

If you’d like fuller explanations of the hierarchy of needs and Maslow’s theory of self-actualization, you can find them in the following Internet articles:

- **Abraham Maslow:**
<http://www.ship.edu/~cgboeree/maslow.html>
- **Self-actualization:**
<http://psikoloji.fisek.com.tr/maslow/self.htm>

These two essays are excellent, and the second one is inspirational.

With Maslow in mind, then, and with our thoughts firmly focused on what human beings need (and how those needs drive fictional characters), we’ll start asking the questions that will allow us to create one fully-fleshed-out story character after another. We’ll characterize our people by asking questions in seven areas:

- Need, Pursuit & Avoidance
- Work & Play
- Past, Present & Future
- Friends, Enemies & Lovers
- Life & Death
- Culture, Religion & Education
- Moral Stance

The rest of *Holly Lisle’s Create-A-Character Clinic* is available at
<http://shop.hollylisle.com/>