



MASTER THE REWRITE
MODULE 2: CHARACTERS

by Script Society



Module 2: Lesson 2

REFINING CHARACTERS

Characters are the vessel of *any screenplay*.



They are *vital* to the success of the screenplay and the interest of the viewer. Properly developed characters are necessary for your screenplay to succeed. Likewise, poorly developed characters can ruin even the more original ideas. Avoiding character development is one of the biggest mistakes aspiring screenwriters make as they pursue subsequent drafts of their screenplay.

And honestly, it's not surprising that they do.

Most critiques tend to be very “plot heavy”. When there are plot holes and inconsistencies within your screenplay, the focus is usually geared towards fixing those *first*.

It makes sense, right? What is the point in working on your characters until you have figured out your plot?

But, here's the thing...



Characters are not just another element of your screenplay. They are the main element.

Their personalities, voices, stakes, motives and goals have a *direct impact* on your plot. For that reason (and that reason alone), they should be properly developed *before* you write your treatment and/or make any concrete decisions about your next draft.

Now, you may be thinking: “But wait... this course began by focusing on the plot! You’re contradicting yourself!”

It may seem that way, but in reality it’s not. We began this program by establishing the strong and weak aspects of your screenplay (some of which may have been character!), and then we established strong, neutral and weak scenes. We brainstormed solutions for those problems. In essence, Module #1 is all about brainstorming! Module #2 is about developing and applying those changes.

In this lesson we are going to make sure your leading characters are 3-dimensional *people* that audiences care about.

First, I want you to ask yourself a few questions about your leading protagonist (and any other leader characters):

1. What does your character look like?
3. What kind of person is your character?
2. How does your character speak?
4. What is your character trying to overcome?
5. What about your character is flawed?
6. What does your character want & why?
7. What does your character stand to lose if they fail?
8. How will your character change over the course of the screenplay?

Using the **Character Development Worksheet** provided with this course, you will a) determine if your character is properly developed and b) improve their development where needed. If you took Script Society’s **Screenwriting Mentorship Program** you may recognize parts of this worksheet and be very well versed in the process!



STEP 1: APPEARANCE

Fill in the blanks below in as much detail as you can. Once complete, go over the list and choose a maximum of 5 elements that are the most unique about your characters. These are the key words you will use to describe your character in their bio and in the screenplay.

Type: _____

Height: _____

Weight: _____

Personal Style: _____

Favourite Colour: _____

Hygiene: _____

Sexuality: _____

Hair: _____

Flaws: _____

Piercings/Tattoos?: _____

Other: _____

Note: Unless it is important to the story, I wouldn't mention things like race in your character description as it's unlikely you will have any control over who is cast in your film.

Film is a visual medium. The description of your character is a very important aspect of your screenplay. Physical attributes tell us about your character. With that in mind, my advice is to only mention what is *different* about your character in this section. There is no need to mention exact heights or weights. And to be honest, we don't really care if your character has blue eyes or brown one (unless it's important to the script!). We want to know how to tell your character apart from others.

For example: which character sounds more interesting?

JOHN, 34, tall, brown hair, blue eyes, business suit, strolls to work.

JOHN, 34, scarred knuckles, million-dollar smile, wearing an immaculate suit, strolls to work.

Character #1 is kind of boring. We don't have any reason to be interested in him or his story. Character #2 is intriguing. Immediately we want to know more. Why are his knuckles scarred? Is his million-dollar smile the result of years of smooth talking criminals? Is he leading a double life, or is he just a rough and tumble guy? We don't know... but we *want* to know. This is the power appearance can have.



STEP 2: PERSONALITY & BACKSTORY

Give your character a key attribute (generous, funny, crazy, noble...etc.) and write it in the slot below. Then, expand on it by answering the questions below. Once you've done that, fill out their backstory. Again, go into as much detail as possible!

Personality

KEY ATTRIBUTE: _____

Why is your character like that?

What matters most to your character?

Give your character a positive trait.

Where does that stem from?

Describe the perfect day for your character.

Personality & backstory makes up a huge part of your character. It defines their choices, their actions and their reactions. This is usually the one area that aspiring screenwriters have established about their characters (which is good!). But if you haven't, or are worrying that your characters are falling flat, take a moment to determine their personality.

At Script Society, we do this by posing a series of questions to you about your character. We recommend going into as much detail as possible here. Try to avoid providing generic responses to the questions (otherwise you will end up with a generic character).

EXAMPLE:

What is your character scared of and why?

Good response: John is scared of commitment and powerful women. His mother was a force of nature that did not have a single maternal bone in her body. In her eyes, John was a slave. That neglect caused him to fear women in positions of power.

Bad response: John is scared of the colour blue.

Can you see the difference here? The good response gives us insight into who John is. The bad one tells us nothing, as there is no explanation to accompany it.



STEP 3: VOICE

Fill in the form below in detail to determine your characters individual voice. Be as creative as you can.

Native Language: _____

Accent: _____

Education Level: _____

Slang: _____

Humor: _____

Imperfections: _____

Volume: _____

Frequency: _____

Test out your characters voice by filling our out "Character Interview" worksheet.

The next thing you need to establish about your character is their voice.

All the leading characters of your screenplay should have their own distinct way of speaking (just like people do in real life!). A good way to find out if you characters have strong voices is to cover all the characters headers in your screenplay and read out some samples of dialogue. Can you tell who is who just based on how they are talking? If you can't, it's time to refine those voices.

Either way, we suggest you go through the provided worksheet in order to be certain that your characters do have distinct voices.

Here are some things to consider when developing voices for your characters:

- What is their native language? Do they speak with an accent?
- What is the volume of their speech?
- How do education and slang play into their speech?
- Do they have flaws like, stuttering, pausing, or muttering?
- What is the frequency of their speech (chatterbox? Silent-type?).
- Are they confident? Nervous? Hesitant? Humorous?



STEP 4: INTERNAL CONFLICT

Draw from your characters backstory to determine what their fears are. What struggles will they have to overcome over the course of your screenplay? Try to come up with 3 – 6 conflicts, most small and 1 or 2 big ones (hint: those are the ones they will overcome!). Be sure to include *where* this conflict originates from.

CONFLICT #1: _____

CONFLICT #2: _____

CONFLICT #3: _____

CONFLICT #4: _____

CONFLICT #5: _____

CONFLICT #6: _____

Internal conflicts are a huge part of what makes screenplays succeed.

It adds depth to the story while providing your characters with something to overcome. This is what gives your characters their journey (more on that later!) and provides them with the opportunity to change. Every protagonist *should* have several internal conflicts to provide them with obstacles. They should overcome at least one of these conflicts by the end of the screenplay.

Examples of Internal Conflicts:

1. Fears (heights, water, animals, relationships...)
2. Insecurities (weight, appearance, confidence, intelligence...)
3. Mental Health (depression, bi-polar, schizophrenic...)
4. Addiction (drugs, alcohol, sex, food...)
5. The Past (unable to overcome a past event)
6. The Future (worrying about something that has yet to happen)
7. Love (family, friends, children...)
8. Negative Traits (perfectionist, stubborn, selfless to a fault)

This list could go on and on, but these are the biggest categories we have found to exist within screenplays. If you are stuck, hopefully it will provide you with some inspiration.



STEP 5: MOTIVES & STAKES

By now you should have a pretty good idea of who this character is. It's time to determine their motives and stakes. What do they want and what do they stand to lose if they fail? Fill out the chart below with motives and their corresponding stakes.

MOTIVE	STAKES

Everyone has a motive, if they don't, there is nothing to drive their actions. Your characters must have a motive behind everything they do. Likely they will have an overall motive (that will lead them to climax) and a series of smaller motives to accomplish the steps needed to get there.

But motives mean nothing if there are no stakes attached to them. In order to drive your characters to accomplish their goals, there need to be consequences if they fail. That is what "stakes" are. What does your character stand to lose and how does that motivate them to push on?

In this part of the worksheet we want you to write down all of your characters motives and the corresponding stakes.

EXAMPLE:

MOTIVE	STAKE
For John to find his daughter...	...if he fails she could be killed



STEP 6: THE JOURNEY

The last step of this worksheet is determining your character's journey. How will they have changed by the end of your screenplay? The easiest way to determine this is to choose an internal conflict for them to overcome. Then, using the space below, describe how your character changes from the beginning of the script to the end:

Last but not least, is the journey.

This point doesn't necessarily have to be applied to all your characters, but it is definitely important for your protagonist. The protagonist needs to have a character arc that results in some kind of change or development by the end of the story. That change doesn't have to be huge, but it does need to exist.

Essentially, this change is the result of the journey they've just embarked on. Because of it, a part of their life may never be the same again. Without this moment of change, we are left to wonder what the importance of their journey was.

It's likely that this change will come naturally once you establish your character's internal conflicts. If they overcome one (or several) by the end of the screenplay, you have already introduced that change!