Principles

Principles are way for you to *express your character's personality and motivations*, by writing up to three paragraphs on your character sheet labeled **Goals**, **Habits**, and **Creeds**. **Each one can only be a sentence long**, but you can write as many as you feel the need to; so long as they all fit on the lines you're given. There is a bit of a technique, then, to writing *succinct and punchy principles*.

Ultimately, **principles help you to find your agenda**.

You can generally only write new principles during character assembly and at the end of every chapter thereafter[1]. *Changing one mid-session is usually only done when you want to heal*. Though, re-wording a principle before a session starts without changing it's core message is acceptable *if your Peers agree*.

Goals

These are the **things that your character wants to achieve** over the course of the next few game sessions, or before the end of the current arc.

They should be fairly *direct and promissory*, not wishful, and are best written in first person with the future tense. For example:

> ◇ "I *will* get my revenge…" not, "I would like to get revenge…"
> ◇ "We *must* escape…" rather than, "We should try to escape…"

Try to avoid adding qualifying statements unless they help you to clarify a general motive, and still fit within a single sentence.

Write SMART Goals

By writing 'Specific, Motivating, Achievable, Relevant and Testable' goals, you provide yourself with a target to aim for a pathway to get there. The **SMART** acronym was originally a business development mnemonic written by George T. Doran for *Management Review* (c. 1981), but it can be adapted to writing goals in Agora too, as follows:

- **Specific:** Target something to improve or change in your character's life: be that something about their current situation, their circumstances, local environment, or their wider society.
- **Motivating:** Make sure that this is something that you — *the player* — are interested in doing too and think would be fun. There's no point in spending *literally hours of your life* acting in a way that you don't really want to. If you lose motivation to complete a goal at any point, then discuss it with your Peers and change it.
- **Achievable:** Ask your FC how realistic your goal is, and whether they think it's a good idea? Because they will be the one who has to make plans to challenge it. Even *a goal doomed to fail* can be fun to play though, for the dramatic irony.
- **Relevant:** Check that the goal won't take you too far of course from your other principles, that it won't disrupt the campaign's current theme too much, and that it is likely to be something all your friends are going to enjoy seeing you try to accomplish.
- **Testable:** Think about how long it will take to achieve, how you can track progress, what features, jobs, and assets you'll likely use along the way, and how you will quantify success by the end.

Important: Some of this advice also applies to writing creeds and creeds.

You don't have to follow this guide exactly, of course — and not every goal will match all five criteria exactly — but SMART can be a useful starting place if you're writing a new goal, or if you're just new to the idea of writing your character's intentions out so explicitly in a game like this.

There are other mnemonic acronyms you could use instead or as well, like **CLEAR** (Collaborative, Limited, Emotional, Appreciable, and Refinable) or **PURE** (Positive, Understandable, Relevant, and Ethical), but that comes down to personal preference at that point.

Advancing Goals Earns Lots

Whenever you advance one of your goals during play, in a measurable fashion — usually by rolling dice — **you gain a Lot**.

If you get to the end of a chapter and you realize you've accidentally advanced a goal, or that the nature of a goal has changed, or that a goal has been completed and can be retired; then discuss it with your Peers in the debrief and potentially take another Lot.

Habits

These are **things that your character repeatedly does**, or ways that they always act when certain conditions arise, or things that they do so frequently (or as part of a routine) that they do them without really noticing.

Despite the limited space that you're given to write habits, try to write them from a first-person perspective and use natural language, instead of writing them like pseudo-code. For example:

> ⬦ "If I ever feel I'm in danger, I secure my sidearm and ready it." instead of, "If in danger, then draw weapon."
> ⬦ "Whenever we set out on the road, I like to strike up a song and keep spirits high!" not, "While travelling: sing."

Habits Are Versatile

Habits have a few uses, and *the way that you intend to use a habit usually informs the way you should write it*. A single habit will rarely be useful in all of the following ways at once (so try writing a variety of different habits to cover more of these use cases):

- The main use is to **automatically pass a standard Check** when you have a habit that precisely handles[2] whatever the current situation is, *so long as the Check is relevant*. (You must still roll for *challenging* Checks though, and the habit *doesn't make them easier*).

- Another use is to avoid questions about logistics and provisions, or to **ensure you always have what you need, on hand, to do the things you're best at doing**. These kinds of habits preclude your Peers from otherwise scrutinizing such things. That is, *if you have a habit for it, then it must be true*.

- Next, *once per session* a habit can **get you in trouble to earn you Ego**; if using it ever puts you (or another) under duress, when certain conditions arise that would conflict with it, or when it just creates *interesting drama*.

- Finally, *some habits just build character;* though even these can almost be **used as proto-traits**. Meaning that you can test the waters with a certain play-style that you intend to try to turn into a trait the next time there's a development session.

The first two uses of habits (as listed above) are mainly supposed to cut out some of the busy-work and minutiae of adventuring, exploration, or downtime, by letting you write habits like:

> ⬦ "I always carry enough rope."
> ⬦ "Make time to read at least one book every week."
> ⬦ "I keep my tools sharp and my workshop tidy, so I'm always ready to work."

The choice to invoke a habit is always *yours and yours alone*, they don't execute automatically; though your Peers may remind you of them, and you still have to roleplay out the consequences and roll any dice if they result in a Check or a Task.

Retroactive Habits or Flashbacks

It's also possible for a habit to briefly cut back to an earlier point in the current scene, *or even cut to a previously-nonexistent scene:* When something happens, and you realize that one of your habits would have been useful and that it should've changed the way that you behaved, or would change what your current plans are. *Though this only works if you have your FC's approval.*

> Flashbacks should be focused on problems that *do* happen, not on problems that *might* happen.
>
> **A flashback isn't time travel.** It can't "undo" something that just occurred in the present moment.

The technique of using 'flashbacks' was popularized in John Harper's hit game Blades in the Dark. Not everyone finds them useful or engaging, though, so it's worth discussing with your Peers whether you want to allow habits to be used in this way during session zero.

Creeds

These are **things that your character believes in absolutely**, as well as oaths they have sworn, doctrines they adhere to, and motivations or morals that are unwavering.

They are best written as unqualified statements of fact — even if they're not actually true — without a hint of doubt or irony in the tone, *even if that makes them sound righteous or arrogant*. For example:

> ⬦ "Nothing can break our love." not, "My love won't falter unless..."
> ⬦ "My faith will protect me!" instead of, "I hope my god is real..."

This is because part of your FC's duties includes testing and prodding at these convictions over the course of a campaign, to give you opportunities to prove how ironclad their philosophies really are, or to see how readily and steadfastly your character defends them.

Adherence is Rewarded

During a debrief or a development session between arcs, you should read aloud and discuss with your Peers which ones you feel are still intact.

For each one that is still standing, unchanged, you earn a point of Fidelity. And for the first Fidelity you earn each arc, you *also* gain a new gambit. Alternatively, with the unanimous agreement of your Peers, this earning may signal the point at which you rise to a new tier instead.

Hold your horses!

A side-effect of the process of challenging Principles means that if there is something that you think your character *really does* believe in without question, *and you don't want it to be questioned*, then consider adding it to your background circumstances or adding it as a trait instead of a creed.

Remember: **By writing a creed, you are making a target for your FC.**

You can always change a trait or a background into a creed at a later date, by voting it off and/or re-writing your backgrounds, but you can't so easily change a creed *without playing the game*.

Similarly though, try to avoid offering any advice to your FC on how your creeds could be challenged. This is part of the fun of the game, for both of you — since if your beliefs hold true, *you will be rewarded* — though your relationship should not become antagonistic.

Oaths

An oath is a *special kind of creed* that is usually **sworn during play**, or in your character's backstory if you're starting the game with an oath. *An oath must be written into your creeds as a direct quote of what you said in play,* alongside who or what your swore it to.

An oath must be followed to the letter, *or else it is broken*. If you ever break an oath then your Honor regresses by 1 step, if you're using that capability in your campaign, and any chance of earning Fidelity is invalidated.

The only *honorable* way to remove an oath is to have it annulled by the character you swore it to, or their superior, or to *complete the conditions of the oath as you swore it*.

If an oath is honorably removed or completed, then it counts as *valid adherence*[3] for the purposes of earning Fidelity.

The only way to change an oath is to swear over it with a new oath that will replace it, if whoever you swore the first one to agrees. If they do not agree, then swearing a new oath counts as breaking the previous one.

Duds

Your Peers can veto any goals, habits, or creeds that you present to them that they think would either be too disruptive or wouldn't go anywhere; or which are *too easy* to complete, trigger, or uphold (respectively); or any which they suspect you have written purely with the intention of changing later in order to recover Health.

These kinds of principles are called 'duds', meaning that they are ineffectual, misfits for the campaign, or will fail to *narratively explode* as intended.

Retired Principles

It can be productive and useful to keep a notebook or list somewhere of all the previous Principles you've written; so you can mark which ones were completed, which ones failed, which ones changed (and how they changed, or why), and which ones were duds.

Old Instincts Die Hard

If you're new to this *style of game*, or new to roleplaying games in general, then it's possible that you're not used to this much agency and creative liberty over the direction of a story and the personal destinies of your characters.

If this is you, then that's okay, there's just a good chance that your first few Principles will be duds (or at least not as good as the ones you'll learn to write later). Don't worry too much! If you're still learning, or *unlearning*, then you may end up playing several sessions with a dud without realizing it. You'll still be rewarded for this, as per the Kismet rules, *if none of your Peers notice*, and that's fine too.

> "Mistakes aren't failures *unless you don't learn from them*."
> — Ethan Becker

To took me — Seraaron, *the writer of this game* — about five years of running and playing these kinds of games to learn to how to write good Principles, and even then I still write occasional duds. **The key is to recognize them, and then move on.** Hopefully you learn quicker than I do, now that I've imparted this knowledge.

Every game requires it's own set of skills, and as with all skills, the more you practice the better you get: So get out there, go make a character, write some Principles, play the game, *possibly die* (or retire?), and then do it all again!

Notes

1. This is because your FC probably has something planned for your current principles, and they may have to extra planning which would delay the session if you suddenly change your mind.
2. This doesn't mean you can write a habit like "always succeed at everything" and instantly pass every standard Check in the game!
3. Oaths are useful for this reason as a way to ensure that you earn Fidelity for doing something you promised to do. In this light, an oath may be seen as a 'greater goal' that you complete over the course of many chapters.