

# Characterization Psychology Of Creating Characters

by

Laurie Schnebly Campbell

We all want a happy ending for our characters, but on the way they need conflict. This conflict can be caused by the situation (she didn't tell him she was pregnant before he went off to war, he wants to take over the land her grandfather left her) but the conflict is even stronger when it comes from within them...when it's due at least in part to their own personalities, the kind of people they are.

What makes your characters the way they are is the same thing that makes real-life people the way they are. Today we're going to look at four different ways of finding out what a person is like...or of making any character a certain type who's automatically going to come into conflict with another type.

These four things that determine people's character are: birth order, priorities, enneagrams, and personality scales. Each one of these has the potential for conflict, and conflict is what we need for a great romance novel! And for the real emotional drama, there need to be conflicts of character...conflicts in the way these people approach life.

One of the most important factors in determining your approach to life, according to Alfred Adler -- a disciple of Freud's who founded his own theory of counseling -- is that everyone makes up their mind by the age of five as to what kind of person they're going to be and how they can fit into the world. Everyone completes this sentence differently:

Life is a place where (blank) and the way I can best fit into it is (blank).

Your hero and heroine -- just like all of us -- have determined that a long time ago. The hero may have decided that life is a place where you have to look out for yourself and nobody else will do it for you. The way he can best fit into it is to never trust anyone. The heroine may have decided that life is a place where you only count as long as people are paying attention to you and admiring you, and the way she can best fit into it is by being ever so cute and precious. As you can see, there are millions of possibilities! But every character has already made that decision a long time ago, and when you're building conflict into your characters, those statements are an ideal place for the conflict to begin.

How do people determine their answers to that question of how they can best fit into life? It's never done consciously; it happens before age five. One important factor is birth order, the way a person fits into the family. Every child, even within a single family, is born into a different family.

The oldest, the firstborn, is usually a prize that the parents have waited for eagerly. This will be the perfect child, who will embody every value they've got, who will be the brightest, the smartest, the most popular, the most athletic. Everything that the parents hold dear, they'll expect to see recreated in this kid. As a rule, the oldest is the "good" child who does his best to live up to the family standards. They're usually more responsible, more serious about doing a good job. They tend to be doctors, lawyers, CEOs - something like 92% of

the U.S. astronauts and 94% of our presidents have been firstborn children. They tend to rise in areas where hard work will get you ahead.

Now, here's the firstborn child being just perfect when along comes the second child, and the oldest is dethroned. He's no longer Mom and Dad's whole world; he's only half their world; and the new baby is the star. At this point the oldest will do whatever he has to do stay on top. Their motto -- each birth position has a motto -- is "I was here first, and first I'll stay."

Meanwhile, the second child is faced with a Perfect Kid who has a few years' head start. No matter what the second child does, the firstborn has already set the path. The second children's motto is "We try harder" and they'll find some area to excel in where the oldest hasn't already shone. If the oldest is a great student, the second will be a great athlete, or a great socialite with lots of friends. The two children may be equally intelligent -- in fact, being from the same family they probably are -- but the firstborn is likely to get better grades, while the second is likely to be more popular and have more friends. They'll each seek out areas where they can get the most attention and recognition and feel the best about themselves.

When the third child comes along, the second is squeezed between the perfect oldest and the starring new baby. Middle children's motto is "Life is unfair," and it's understandable why they feel that way. The middle tends to become a peacemaker, very good at arbitrating and negotiating. It's been said that with so many families now having only one or two children, we're losing out on middles -- and our society will have fewer and fewer people who are good at negotiating and keeping peace.

When you're trying to figure out where someone belongs in the birth order, keep in mind that every five years the slate is wiped clean; we start over. So if you have a hero who is born first, then five years go by, and then he has a younger sister -- he's not going to be a firstborn, he's going to be an only. And if no other kids follow this sister, she won't be a second or a youngest, she'll be an only as well. Only children are "adults" by the time they're eight years old, and their motto is "To know me is to love me..." which makes for a pretty powerful character, a mixture of oldest and youngest.

The youngest child never has to grow up and take responsibility the way the other kids do. If it's Sunday morning and everyone's running around getting ready for church and they're all ready except for Junior's shoes, everybody will jump in: Mom and Dad and brother and sister will all be looking for Junior's shoes. Junior doesn't have to, because one of the big people will find them first, and Junior's never going to have to look for his or her own shoes. The youngest's motto is "I'm entitled." They feel that people will always look out for them -- and people do, because they're terribly charming! Anything that involves using charm and personality, they're great at. They make excellent actors, sales people and con artists.

Anyway, you can imagine the potential for conflict if you have a hero who's a youngest and assumes that people will cater to his every whim -- which doesn't necessarily mean that he's selfish, it just means that everybody's gonna love him -- and a heroine who's an oldest, very responsible, used to taking care of things, used to doing her part. They can get along very well if she looks out for him, and as they reach their happy ending that may be the way the relationship is going to work. On the way, though, there's going to be some conflict, because the heroine will be saying to the hero, "Why don't you take

some responsibility?" while the hero is saying to the heroine, "Why don't you loosen up and have some fun?" And they're both right.

Now of course there are exceptions to these standards of responsible oldests, competitive seconds, discouraged middles and pampered youngests. Sometimes, a child may decide to be best at being the worst. If another sibling is already getting all the attention for being good, this kid will be bad. Boy, will this kid be bad! You may get an oldest who's a bum, or a youngest who shoulders all the burdens of the family. But those are unusual, and you can bet there's something in their background which has caused them to decide that this is their best chance at fitting into the world.

By and large, though, if you stick to those basic characteristics: oldests who want to stay first, seconds who try harder, middles who know life is unfair, and youngests who feel entitled -- you're going to be right on target.

Another area to look at in developing characters is the matter of priorities. Everyone has individual priorities in addition to universal things like "family, job and world peace." These personal priorities influence every decision they make, and there are only four to choose from -- if you already took the test, you'll know what yours are.

People usually have one of these on top, and the others ranked somewhere below. The four choices are excellence, comfort, pleasing and control.

This choice is never a conscious one; it grows up with the character the same as it grows up with all of us. But regardless, your hero and heroine's choices of priority will have a significant impact on the way they deal with each other. Someone whose priority is control likes to be in charge, likes to have their ducks in a row. They feel like they really do have a better idea of how the world should be run, and if people would just listen to them and do what they say, everything would be a lot smoother. These people make great captains of industry, great foremen or forewomen, and they can also can be tough to live with if someone else is into control.

If your hero and heroine are both into control, you've got conflict. Who's going to decide where they live? Who's going to decide what movie they see tonight? Who's going to decide whether they take the carriage or walk? Really, it's a clash of who's going to be in control. It'll be tough for two people who have control as their top priority to have a harmonious relationship.

On the other hand, let's say the hero is into control and the heroine is into pleasing. Someone whose priority is pleasing wants to make other people happy. You can imagine how well things will work out for this hero and heroine: he'll tell her how he wants things to be, and she'll do her best to please him. Not much conflict there. Now if they're both into pleasing, they'll be bumping into each other in the kitchen at five a.m., both trying to fix the other one breakfast in bed.

Another priority is excellence, , and these people want to be excellent at what they do. It's not control, because they don't care what other people do: all they care about is being the best they can be at what they do. They may be beach bum artists in Tahiti, but they're going to paint excellent pictures. Excellence is usually the priority of firstborn children...and they generally won't do anything unless they can be excellent at it. I'm speaking from experience here - - you'll never catch me on a basketball court or a golf course or running a 10K;

because I wouldn't be excellent at any of those. I only like to do things I'm good at, and anyone with an excellence priority is going to feel that same way.

The other priority is comfort -- these are people who like everything to be nice. If you notice someone adjusting the thermostat every few minutes, it's someone who's into comfort. (Or else it's someone who's into pleasing, who's worried about someone else's comfort level -- but that someone else definitely has a comfort priority!) Comfort people like to have just the right soft chair; they like to have their reading lamp at just the right angle; they don't like long trips where you're going to be uncomfortable. I can't imagine a heroine whose priority is comfort having a very good time on the Crusades. I can imagine a hero whose priority is excellence being the best Crusader anyone ever saw.

When someone has an inner conflict, it's because of two priorities butting heads. Say your heroine's top priority is comfort, and her close second is pleasing. Now she's visiting the hero's Aunt Maude, and Aunt Maude's house is too cold. But if she turns up the heater, she might offend Aunt Maude. What's she going to do? She's going to stew -- "oh, this is so uncomfortable, but I don't want to displease Aunt Maude."

Anytime someone has an inner conflict like this, it's because of two priorities butting heads. Say your heroine is having a hard time trying to decide whether to marry the hero. Maybe it's a clash between comfort (she knows he'll give her a nice house) and control (she knows he'll insist that she give up her land, and she doesn't want to do that). Or say your hero is trying to decide between excellence (he has a chance to win the Indianapolis 500) and pleasing (his heroine doesn't want him to risk his neck). These conflicting priorities are going to create an internal conflict.

There are some other good ways of analyzing your characters to come up with conflicts. One of the most useful I've heard is described in books on Enneagram theory -- the idea is, there are nine basic personalities, which is where they get the name Enneagram (it's Greek for nine). There are some terrific books on enneagrams that practically spell out your character's entire personality and his or her conflicts with whatever type the other character is...and if you like having that spelled out for you, I recommend "The Enneagram Made Easy" by Renee Baron.

People used to say, "Oh, if you want a whole character description already written for you, just read an astrology book." I never did that, but I can imagine it working. And I think an enneagram book is even better, because I'm a counselor and it's based on psychology! Just the names of the nine types are intriguing, and different psychologists use different names -- you can probably spot characters you know just from the descriptions. Or to be really accurate, use the handout quiz. A word of warning -- enneagram specialists say that no one can determine anyone else's personality type. The only person who can determine your type is you! So if someone says, "Oh, you're obviously a Six" and you don't feel like a Six, know that you're right and they're wrong. (The downside is you can't go home and tell your husband, "Honey, you're a Nine if I ever saw one" because only he can decide what he really is.)

Anyway, #1 is called the Perfectionist or the Reformer...these are people who have very high standards for themselves and the rest of the world. #2 is the Helper, Nurturer, Giver, Caretaker...the people who love to be needed. #3 is the Achiever, the Succeeder, the Performer, always out there putting on a great show. #4 is the Artist, the Individualist, the Romantic, who loves drama and tragedy and falling in love. #5 is the Observer, Watcher, Thinker, who'd rather

be behind a book than out there in the world. #6 is the Trooper, Loyalist, Guardian, Defender, who is very aware of rules and determined to always keep them or always break them. #7 is the Enthusiast, the Adventurer, who loves excitement and experiences. #8 is the Controller, the Aggressor, the Chief, a self-confident "natural leader." And #9 is the Peacemaker, the Mediator, who wants to avoid conflict and keep everything nice and stable.

Now, when you're trying to develop a fundamental conflict between your hero and heroine, the enneagram's nine personalities can be boiled down even further. Twos, Threes and Fours are known as coming from the heart; Fives, Sixes and Sevens from the head; and Eights, Nines and Ones from the gut. And the best description I've heard of these classifications was from a romance writer, Susan Kalior, who talked about the three basic types of people: those who are governed by the mind, the heart, and the body.

Your mind person is going to be very logical, rational, analytical. They live in the future (analyzing possibilities), rather than in the present (experiencing whatever's going on around them) or in the past (remembering wonderful and awful moments). The most typical "mind" person would be Mr. Spock on Star Trek, and it's hard to picture him as a romance hero. But where you get the excitement is that this mind person hates to dwell on emotions. They don't want to feel; they just want to think. Almost all the heroes by Jayne Ann Krentz/Amanda Quick are this type. And when you see this logical, thoughtful person come up against raw emotion, it's very dramatic. Very powerful. Out of all the Star Trek characters, you know who got the most fan letters? Data, the android who has no emotions. Women were throwing themselves at him, wanting to be the one to release his emotions!

Now a "mind" character doesn't have to be a Data or a Mr. Spock. It can be a rancher or a businessman or an Avon Lady or anybody who prefers to dwell in the world of rational thought rather than the world of emotion. You'll get the most exciting fireworks when you pair this character up with one of the other two types: heart or body.

A body character lives in the here and now. They're very physical people, they love to move. Sports is great. Sex is great. These people tend to be wonderful lovers -- at least in terms of raw performance -- because they're completely at ease with their body. They know what they like; they know what works and what feels good. They don't mind thinking or feeling if necessary, but they're a lot happier doing. This would be your classic shoot-em-up kind of private eye, your basic action hero...your Captain Kirk. I can imagine a body character being very much at home on the wagon train -- watching for Indians or stirring up cornbread -- not spending a lot of time wondering what's over the next horizon or feeling sentimental about the home they left behind.

Body people are very much in the present. What gets them in trouble is if they're matched up with someone who wants to think and analyze...or someone who wants to be sentimental and emotional. That's not what they do. So again, you can have a great "awakening" when a body character is matched up with a mind or heart character.

Finally, the heart character. You guessed it; this one is the most romantic. The most emotional, the most sentimental, the most thoughtful and caring and also the most screaming/nasty/vengeful, should things go wrong. This person lives for feelings. Forget rational thought; forget physical reality. What matters to the heart character is feelings! They tend to spend more time in the past, enjoying memories of wonderful moments or sobbing over memories of awful ones. They can

tell you who sent them a nasty note in the eighth grade, or what they wore on their first date twenty years ago. They can't necessarily tell you what they got on their math test in eighth grade -- but the emotional memories are always there, because they're so deeply felt.

Here's somebody who will put a lot of effort into creating a romantic dinner for two...somebody who automatically assumes that sex equals true love...these are charming, delightful people for a romance novel. But you can see how they're going to run into trouble if they're paired up with someone else who doesn't put emotions at the top of the list.

Susan was talking about sex scenes with all three types, I remember, and I thought her descriptions were great. The heart person is going to be saying "I love you I love you I love you." The body person is going to be saying "Wow, yeah, great, go for it." The mind person is going to be saying "Does this feel good, or does that feel better?"

Now, none of these is the right way to be; none of them is wrong. Most people aren't just a mind, heart or body person; most are a combination of all three or at least of two. But you can see how matching different types can get them into some conflict. My mom and dad are a heart and a mind person, and it's taken them forty years to realize, "Wow, this other person doesn't have a clue where I'm coming from!" If two characters are the same type, they'll certainly understand where each other is coming from...but the more dedicated they are to where they're coming from, the more limited lifestyle they're going to have. Someone who can operate only from a head or heart or body position is going to have pretty limited options...and you can get a good "awakening" story as they discover there are other ways to be.

One final source of conflict -- the Jungian or Myers-Briggs character types. The best description of these is in a book called Please Understand Me by David Keirsey and Marilyn Bates. They measure four different traits -- introvert/extrovert, intuition/sensation, thinking/feeling and judging/perceiving.

Each person ranks somewhere along each of those four scales, and their choices go by initials. An ESFP person, for example, is someone whose choices lean toward Extrovert-Sensation-Feeling-Perceiving. An INTJ would be someone who chooses Introvert-iNtuition-Thinking-Judging. And you don't have to know all four of a person's initials to get some pretty clear clues about their personality. (Although if you want to find your own, or your Priorities or your Enneagram type, you can take the quiz at [www.authorspotlights.com/campbell](http://www.authorspotlights.com/campbell) -- go to the end of the Psychology speech.)

The judging/perceiving scale has nothing to do with whether a person is judgmental or perceptive. Instead it has to do with how they feel about closure: a J person likes to have things settled and finished up; a P person likes to keep all the options open. It's been said that J people have a "work" ethic as compared to the P's "play" ethic...and remember, neither one is right or wrong. The biggest difference between a P or J is whether they're more concerned about the process or the finished product, whether they're more like the grasshopper or the ant. A detective who's thrilled at wrapping up another case is more likely to be a J; one who's thrilled at embarking on the chase is more likely a P.

Thinking/Feeling relates to how people make their decisions. A T person goes by objective rules, impersonal logic; while an F person goes more for personal

value judgments. It's a question of which they value more: fairness or kindness. Both ways work fine, although F people tend to see Ts as cold-hearted and Ts tend to see Fs as muddle-headed. Again, this is handy when you need to build conflict between two perfectly wonderful characters.

Intuition/Sensation refers to how a character gathers knowledge -- by using the five senses, or by using intuition. "Sensible" S people are about 75% of the world; the rest are Ns who operate more by flashes of insight/hunches/imagination rather than by observation/history/experience. If your hero and heroine are opposites, they're likely to be baffled by how each other works...and that can only help your conflict.

And finally, the scale with the easiest potential to create problems for your characters is the Introvert/Extrovert scale. Extroverts, you know, are the people who love to be around other people. I read someplace that an extrovert will call you up and say, "Hi, I'm going to the drugstore to buy cotton swabs; you wanna come?" Introverts are the exact opposite; they'd far rather be by themselves.

In America we tend to assume that extroversion is the way to go, while in the Far East they tend to idealize introverts. Again, neither one is right or wrong, and everyone fits somewhere along the scale. The best test question I've heard for determining where along the scale you fit is "Which would you find more exhausting -- spending four hours at a party with other people, or spending four hours at the library by yourself?" (Just out of curiosity, who here would rather spend four hours at a party? And who'd rather spend four hours at a library? So, what does that tell us about romance writers?)

Okay, now imagine an extroverted hero and an introverted heroine. It's Sunday afternoon, and he wants to go to the pool party while she wants to sit home and read the paper. He's saying, "But honey, this'll be fun! I ran into this guy yesterday at Circle K and he says there'll be lots of people; we'll have a great time!" While she's saying, "But sweetie, here, there's a whole new travel section, and we haven't even looked at the editorial page yet!" Does this sound like people you know? You wonder why they wound up together, don't you?

I'll tell you why. We all wind up with people who are different from ourselves. We may have similar backgrounds; we may have similar values; but guaranteed, somewhere along the line we're going to have some pretty fundamental differences. And I think the reason for that is, if we all wound up with someone who was just like ourselves...it'd be pretty bad. I've told my husband that if he'd married someone like himself, they'd both have been strung out on drugs and dead by age twenty-five. And if I'd married someone like myself, eventually the landlord would have broken down our door and found us both sitting fossilized on the couch.

So be glad there are differences between your characters. It keeps them from stagnating, it keeps the gene pool fresh. Meanwhile, though, it also generates some conflict...which is what we need for a great romance novel.

Or for any novel! This works just as well in a mystery. For instance, imagine the conflict when you've got an introverted character -- say, a detective like Kinsey Millhone - in a party setting surrounded by people. She's not going to be too happy. She's going to be out of her element. And that makes it all the more likely that she's going to be off balance, she's going to make a mistake, she's going to wind up in some kind of trouble.

And you see, what makes this so good for the writer is that the trouble she's getting into isn't just trouble-because-you-needed-an-external-event...it's trouble-that-arises-from-her-own-character. There's a perfectly good, clear reason for it.

Or let's say you've got a sensation/thinking character, who goes by raw data, working with an intuition/feeling character, who operates in a completely different framework. They might complement each other at times, but there are also going to be situations when they're completely at odds -- and it's not just because the writer felt like it was time for these characters to clash. The conflict is built right into their personalities.

That's the beauty of using psychology in creating your characters. It gives you a clean, plausible reason for whatever they do -- they're not just doing whatever the plot demands; they're behaving like real, true-to-life people. Even when they're doing something stupid, like the detective walking out the door of the party right past the suspect she's been wanting to question, they're doing it for a reason the reader can understand.

And it makes your book so much more interesting than just a series of external events. Of course you're going to have the external events; you couldn't have much of a story without some action somewhere. But what gives your book its memorability is the real-ness of your characters...the believability, the vividness that makes your reader think, "Yeah, I'd know this person if I met 'em on the street."

That's what we want them to think about our characters. And the other thing we want for our characters is -- what? Right, the happy ending.

Okay, so how are your characters going to resolve their conflicts and live with each other happily ever after?

Compromise. This is what every marriage counselor preaches, and it's the only way both people can be happy. Say our extroverted hero and our introverted heroine alternate Sundays: one week they'll go to the pool party, the next week they'll read the paper. It's not going to kill her to go to a party once in a while; it's not going to kill him to read the paper once in a while. They're both going to learn from each other -- they both need something in their lives that they can only get from the other person. That's why this is a romance!

Let's go back to our youngest-child hero and oldest-child heroine. Once they recognize that her pattern in life has been taking responsibility for everyone else, and his pattern in life has been "everybody loves me, everything's great" -- as long as there is still some love between them, they'll be able to laugh at themselves and recognize these traits in themselves. If she uses her sense of responsibility to plan some fun vacations for them, they both come out ahead. They just have to recognize and appreciate and use their differences -- because she'll have a lot more fun, and he'll have a lot better-planned vacations. They both need each other, and that's where the happy ending comes in.

As long as they understand and appreciate the differences between them, they're going to have a great relationship. Same thing with a mind-hero and heart-heroine...as long as they recognize that their priorities are flat-out different and agree to respect where the other one is coming from, they've got it made.

Summing up, everybody has a view of life and how they can best get along in life, everybody has different priorities, and everyone is some different



combination of mind/body/heart. It offers lots of opportunity for conflict; and (with a little understanding) it offers lots of opportunity for resolution. And that's what we want for our characters!

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Laurie Schnebly Campbell writes for Silhouette Special Edition while working as a video producer for a Phoenix advertising agency...coaching newly diagnosed diabetics...teaching a catechism class...mentoring other writers...playing with her husband and teenage son (who helps her solve plot problems)...and using her master's in counseling to work as a therapist with couples, women and families on basic psychology and self-esteem. "People ask how I find time to do all that," Laurie says, "and I tell them it's easy. I never clean my house!"

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