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Risus Master Pulp Cliche List

While exhausting, this list is by no means exhaustive. If you think up a cliché you would like to play, write out a clear, clever description (“what it’s good for”) and ask your GM to consider it. If it’s well-done and does not unfairly tip the balance of the game, he just might go for it!

This list was cobbled together from a number of sources, including members of the [Risus Talk List](#) (especially [Guy Hoyle](#)) and members of the [Pulp Games List](#), (especially [Joe Coleman’s list](#) of Pulp-Style Archetypes). Any similarity between this list and the others is purely intentional (after all, why should I reinvent the wheel, right?)

Academics

Cliché For

What It’s Good

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|--------------------------------|--|
| <i>Absent-minded professor</i> | Forget head if it wasn't attached, invent miraculous but troublesome device or substance, leave isolation chamber doors ajar, accidentally shrink the kids |
| <i>Anthropologist</i> | Know aboriginal folktales, know tribal customs, eat disgusting things, speak obscure languages |
| <i>Antiquarian</i> | Quote from obscure authors, know obscure facts, cite reference |
| <i>Archeologist</i> | Discover/explore ancient ruins/burial chambers/temples, read hieroglyphics |
| <i>College student</i> | Party, chase girls, cram for test, go to class, write home for money |
| <i>Ghost Chaser</i> | Know all about ghosts, set up cameras to catch ghosts on film, disprove fake ghosts, get rid of real ghosts |
| <i>Librarian</i> | Sort books, find newspaper articles, “shh!”, find obscure information, repair books |
| <i>Linguist</i> | Know obscure languages, translate ancient inscriptions, pronounce the unpronounceable |
| <i>Occult Scholar</i> | Know weird phenomena, remember strange names, find ancient incantation |

Professor's Aide

Pull books for Professor, do research for Professor, teach classes for Professor, give credit to Professor

Psychic Investigator

Study psychic phenomena, test subjects for ESP and Telekinesis

Adventure**Cliché
For****What It's Good*****Aviator/Aviatrix***

Fly plane, tinker with engine, storm barns, make an emergency landing

Big Game Hunter

Shoot wild animals, interpret native drums, speak native languages, survive in the wild

Explorer

Drive dogsled teams, climb mountains, push back the frontiers of the known world, map uncharted areas, get antsy when you're home too long, go somewhere nobody else has ever heard of, meet people you can't talk to, stumble on lost civilizations, collect exotic memorabilia, tell stories about how you got that scar, learn scandalous phrases in foreign languages

Human Fly

Climb skyscraper without gear, walk across tightrope, tip off photographers

Jungle King/Queen

Raised by animals, keen sight and smell, great strength and agility, communicate with animals, survive in the wild, swing from vine, wrestle alligator

Mountain Climber

Rappel down sheer cliff faces, wear spikes on your shoes, have lots of rope

Noble Savage

Be confused by technology, spout ancestral wisdom, not be corrupted by modern values

Treasure Hunter

Follow treasure maps, explore sunken wrecks,

Athletics**Cliché
For****What It's Good*****All-American Athlete***

Run, swim, jump, throw, wrestle, be a good sport

Baseball Hero

Pitch, field, throw, bat, slide, chew

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|-------------------------------|---|
| <i>Boxer</i> | Punch, jab, jump rope, work on footwork |
| <i>Football Hero</i> | Tackle, kick, throw, catch, block |
| <i>Golf Pro</i> | Drive, chip, putt, wear gaudy pants |
| <i>Swimmer</i> | Dive, hold breath, cross English Channel |
| <i>Tennis Pro</i> | Serve, volley, wear white |
| <i>Track and Field</i> | Run, jump, put shot, throw javelin/discus |
| <i>Wrestler</i> | Grapple, pin, throw opponent |

Business

Cliché For

What It's Good

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|--------------------------------|---|
| <i>Accountant</i> | Cook the books, add columns, calculate interest rates |
| <i>Antique Dealer</i> | Know value of antiques, discuss characteristics of old craftsmanship, haggle with sellers, outbid competitors at auctions |
| <i>Bookshop owner</i> | Obtain obscure titles, dust shelves, know where any book in the shop is, know what's in all the books |
| <i>Financier/Banker</i> | Wear suits, calculate interest/mortgage rates, invest in companies, make loans |
| <i>Industrialist</i> | Build factories, mass produce goods, buy smaller companies |
| <i>Salesman</i> | Convince people to buy, travel, smile reassuringly, apply pressure |
| <i>Stockbroker</i> | Wear suits, read ticker-tape information |

Crime

Cliché For

What It's Good

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| <i>Bankrobber</i> | Wear masks, "Stick 'em up!", |
| <i>Bootlegger</i> | Make 'shine, drive fast on rural, mountain roads |
| <i>Burglar</i> | Break into houses, find hidden safes, walk quietly |

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| <i>Con Artist</i> | Convincing other people to give you money, evading cops. |
| <i>Counterfeiter</i> | Make phony money that looks real |
| <i>Criminal Mastermind</i> | Conquer the world, devise fiendish tortures, utilize exotic devices, create elaborate plots, explain plan to enemy before you kill him, hire henchman without explaining what happened to the dozens of other henchmen you hired, secret escape route, destroy secret base |
| <i>Femme Fatale</i> | Trade money for love, seduce the rich and elderly, disguise true nature, fall in love for real with hero. |
| <i>Fugitive From Justice</i> | Disguise oneself, hide in shadows, protest innocence, |
| <i>Gangster</i> | Dark suit with black shirt & white tie, execute squealers, carry out the orders of Mr. Big |
| <i>Gun Moll</i> | Heavy makeup, sexy in a cheap and tawdry way, cynical |
| <i>Henchman</i> | Follow orders without wondering what happened to other henchmen |
| <i>Hit Man</i> | Not talking much, wearing a cheap suit, looking intimidating, stalking targets, telling people to go out in the alley but still not talking much. |
| <i>Oriental Mystic</i> | Hypnotize do-gooders, be inscrutable, create illusion, quote Confucius and Lao Tsu |
| <i>Reformed Gangster</i> | Old contacts, streetwise, keep nose clean, frequently suspected by police, not trusted by other crooks |
| <i>Thug</i> | Pistol-whip victims, brutalize victims, take it on the lam, never squeal, plan heist, steal things, have no personality |

Engineering

Cliché For

What It's Good

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|--|--|
| <i>Crackpot Inventor/Mad Scientist</i> | Come up with amazing device/plan to revolutionize the world, have weird/crazy/menacing laugh |
| <i>Inventor/Gadgeteer</i> | Fix almost anything but it looks weird, invent half-baked contraptions, put together intricate gadgets |

out of common objects, stammer and sweat around women

Espionage

Cliché For

What It's Good

Gentleman Spy

Master of disguise, ladies' man, marksman, sophisticate

Spy

Cross enemy lines, infiltrate enemy territory, collect vital information, attend swanky parties, sit in smoky taverns, collect latest rumors and gossip, use cover identities, plan escape route, sneak around, decode secret messages, eavesdrop, stay out of the way, disguise, know foreign languages, get back with information

Fine Arts

Cliché For

What It's Good

Painter

Wear beret & smocks, stretch canvases, mix paints, live in a loft

Sculptor

Work with clay, use chisels, make busts/statues

Government

Cliché For

What It's Good

Ambassador

Negotiate treaties, enjoy immunity from petty crimes, throw formal balls,

Bored Civil Servant

Insist on filling out paperwork *in triplicate*, refuse to rush

Diplomat

Carry important messages, be an emissary, pal around with foreign courtiers, indulge in intrigue, keep your eyes and ears open, know what to kiss and when, know about what's in vogue

Politician

Kiss babies, shake hands, make promises, negotiate compromises,

Journalism

**Cliché
For****What It's Good*****Ace Reporter***

Sniff out a scoop, drink like fish, smoke like chimney,
bang out a story, protect sources, transcribe
conversation

Crusading Journalist

Have a cause, write about cause, make up facts in
support of cause, get other people to join cause

Foreign Correspondent

Live in exotic locales, know best restaurants and bars,
send reports to home office, have contacts in local
government

News Photographer

Have a big camera, flash bulbs in people's faces,
make dark jokes at murder scenes

Tabloid Hack

Be nosy, be pushy, crank out sensationalized stories to
sell more copy, be insensitive

Law Enforcement

**Cliché
For****What It's Good*****Agency Detective***

Tail suspects, gather information/evidence, intimidate,
pick locks

Amateur Detective

Trouble magnet, find clues professionals overlook

Beat Cop

Walk beat, direct traffic, find donuts, drink stale
coffee, chase fugitive

Costumed Vigilante

Wear strange costume, foil dastardly crime, track
criminal to lair, duke it out, escape from certain
death, protect secret identity, drive flashy vehicle,
send clueless assistants on senseless tasks, rescue
clueless assistants

G-Man

Agent of FBI/Treasury Dept/Federal Bureau of Narcotics,
smoke like a chimney, snappy black suit,
trenchcoat,

Hard-Boiled Private Detective

Broke all the time, never give up on a case, drink
gallons of bad coffee, incorruptible, doggedly
pursue clues

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| <i>Police Detective</i> | Interrogate suspect, deduce, flash badge, drink gallons of stale coffee |
| <i>Policeman</i> | Arrest criminals, interrogate criminals, drink gallons of bad coffee, smoke like a chimney, find donut shop |
| <i>Private Investigator</i> | Weakness for attractive women, dark sense of humor, cynical worldview |
| <i>Scientific Detective</i> | Observant of smallest detail, condescending |
| <i>Vigilante</i> | Seek to bring justice and law and order by whatever means necessary |
| <i>Western Lawman</i> | Wear cowboy hat, ride horses in city, promote the Code of the West |

Legal

Cliché For

What It's Good

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| <i>Judge</i> | Wear robes, pound gavel, know the law, sentence crooks, be distinguished member of community |
| <i>Lawyer</i> | Make deal, interrogate, know the law, twist the law, find loophole, "Objection!" |

Medicine

Cliché For

What It's Good

| | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| <i>Dedicated Physician</i> | Work long hours in hospital, work miracles at the 11 th hour, treasure Hippocratic oath |
| <i>Dentist</i> | Brushing, cleaning, drilling, causing pain |
| <i>Family Doctor</i> | Diagnose illness, make house call, treat disease, stitch up wound, prescribe remedy |
| <i>Forensic Specialist</i> | Know poisons, know telltale signs of causes of death, |
| <i>Jungle Doctor</i> | Concoct medicines out of exotic plants, champion cause of native peoples |
| <i>Nurse</i> | Assist doctors, care for patients, wear white uniforms, take temperature, dispense medications, push people around in wheelchairs |

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| <i>Orderly</i> | Push people around in wheelchairs, look tough for agitated patients |
| <i>Plastic Surgeon</i> | Look at people for ways to “improve” them, have a project girlfriend/wife, maybe have underworld contacts |
| <i>Psychiatrist</i> | Ask pointless or infuriating questions, analyze neurosis, prescribe mind-altering drugs, make everything relate to sex |
| <i>Psychologist</i> | Same as Psychiatrist, but can't prescribe drugs |
| <i>Surgeon</i> | Cutting, stitching, sweating in operating room |

Military

Cliché For

What It's Good

| | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| <i>Flying Ace</i> | Fly planes, dogfight, diving out of the sun to surprise opponents |
| <i>Foreign Legionnaire</i> | Have past to forget, march out into desert, fight Arabs, |
| <i>Marine</i> | Red-blooded patriot, drive tanks, one-man army |
| <i>Military Veteran</i> | Use rifles and bayonets, reminisce about the Great War, nightmares |
| <i>Sailor</i> | Swab decks, tie knots, “Aye, aye, Captain!” |
| <i>Soldier</i> | Clean rifle, fire rifle, know about tactics and strategy, sleep whenever you can, stay awake during guard duty |
| <i>Soldier of Fortune/Mercenary</i> | Overconfident, have contacts with gunrunners, use military training to make a living |
| <i>Stalwart Lieutenant</i> | Loyal, carries out orders from commander |

Nautical

Cliché For

What It's Good

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| <i>Deep-Sea Diver</i> | Wear lead shoes, hold breath, explore sunken wrecks, salvage sunken ships, fight off sharks |
| <i>Sailor</i> | Swab decks, tie knots, raise sails, stow cargo |

Ship's Captain

Wear captain's hat, have three-day stubble for beard

Other**Cliché
For****What It's Good*****Cowboy***

Ridin', ropin', brandin', spittin', and shootin'.

Gambler

Betting, cheating, winning, running very fast.

Hobo

Hop freight train, sing mournful songs, panhandle, do odd jobs, hobo code, drink anything alcoholic

Race Driver

Drive fast, tinker with car engines,

Trusty Grease-Monkey

Work on engines, fix engines with chewing gum and bailing wire, face and hands always smudged with grease

Performing Arts**Cliché
For****What It's Good*****Acrobat***

Jumping around, doing lots of flippy things, having a gift for finding naturally-occurring uneven bars in urban sprawls

Circus Performer

Walk tightrope, get shot out of cannon, swing from trapeze

Concert Pianist

Virtuoso performance, nimble fingers, impeccable evening wear

Escape Artist

Dislocate shoulder to escape straitjacket, hide key/lockpick in mouth, mystify audiences

Film Crew

Operate camera, rig lights,

Jazz Musician

Play in smoky clubs, improvise music, play in band, be late for a gig

Movie Star

Look glamorous, idolized by millions, sign autograph, memorize lines/blocking, party into the wee small hours, seduce

Musician

Read music, perform, be temperamental/perfectionist, write music, wear hair long

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|-----------------------------------|--|
| <i>Radio Announcer</i> | Use radio voice, mimic other voices/accents/dialects, “And now, a word from our sponsor!” |
| <i>Stage Actor/Actress</i> | Learn lines/blocking, chew scenery, hang out at swanky nightspots |
| <i>Stage Hand</i> | Raise/lower curtains, move scenery, keep track of props, operate trap door, sweep stage |
| <i>Stage Magician</i> | Sleight of hand, misdirection, the hand is quicker than the eye, sawing people in half without hurting them, make dramatic gestures, wear tuxedo and top hat, pull rabbit out of hat |
| <i>Stunt Man</i> | Survive a great fall, throw fake punch, escape from crashing vehicle, slide along a bar, look kinda like a movie star |

Personal Services

Cliché For

What It’s Good

| | |
|--|---|
| <i>Aging Friend/Servant/Attendant</i> | Speak confidentially with employer/family friend, worry, give sage advice |
| <i>Bartender</i> | Mix drinks, listen to other people’s problems |
| <i>Driver</i> | Wear uniform, tinker with car engine, |
| <i>Native Guide</i> | Know path through desert/wilderness/jungle, carry burdens |
| <i>Secretary</i> | Take dictation, type, make phone calls, make appointments |
| <i>Short Order Cook</i> | Wear grease-stained t-shirt, make classic American cuisine, ring bell, “Your order’s up!” |
| <i>Taxi Driver</i> | Know back alleys, drive fast, scare tourists/pedestrians, yell at other drivers |

Public Safety

Cliché For

What It’s Good

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|-----------------------|---|
| <i>Fireman</i> | Have a pet Dalmatian named “Sparky”, use an axe, slide down poles, wear big boots, climb ladders, |
|-----------------------|---|

pull hoses

Religion

Cliché For

What It's Good

Clergyman (should specify faith/denomination) Long-winded, preachy, forgive sinners, sermonize

Missionary Live among “the people”, try to “civilize the heathen,”

Social

Cliché For

What It's Good

Bon Vivant/Dilettante/Socialite Throws around lots of cash, seen it all, drink gallons of champagne, expect to be waited on