

MASTER LISTS FOR WRITERS

THESAURUSES, PLOTS,
CHARACTER TRAITS,
NAMES, AND MORE



BRYN DONOVAN

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MASTER LISTS FOR WRITERS

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CHARACTER TRAITS,
NAMES, AND MORE



BRYN DONOVAN

Master Lists for Writers

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *Master Lists for Writers!*

A couple of years ago, I started making lists to help me with writing projects. They included titles I might use someday, words for love scenes, medieval figures of speech, and ways to describe emotions. Essentially, they were specialized thesauruses.

When I started my blog, I shared some of my writing lists, and lots of people told me how useful they were. That inspired me to create this book.

To tell the truth, even as a little kid, I always loved making lists. They are exercises in thinking about all the possibilities, and as an optimist, that appeals to me. Additionally, I've always had the strong urge to help other people's creative projects succeed.

Some people have referred to my lists as "cheat sheets." I'm happy that they make writing faster and easier, because that was my intention. However, I don't think you're cheating by using this book! We all get inspiration and solutions from many sources—TV, movies, books, websites, conversations, and observations of real life. This book is just one additional resource.

If you find the perfect solution in here when you're stuck, please feel free to apply it directly. That's what the book is for. Chances are, you'll have to either change it a bit or expand upon it to fit your writing. Even if you don't, it's a drop of water in the big sea of your story. It will blend in, and you'll make it your own.

On the other hand, reading a list may make you think of a new solution that isn't even on the page. That's how lists work. For instance, when someone posts a top 10 list online, others usually chime in to ask, "But what about this one?" "How could you leave that one off?"

None of the lists in this book is comprehensive. In most cases, it would be impossible to make a complete list. You'll probably think of additions, which is

part of the value of the book.

I want to make a note about pronouns. At first, I tried to use “they” as a singular, non-gendered pronoun everywhere. Because of the succinct format of lists, the use of “they” sometimes made things confusing, particularly in the section on plot ideas. I’ve chosen to use “he” and “she,” mostly at random. Please remember that in every list, you can substitute any pronouns you like.

I hope this book is an inspiring, time-saving reference for you. Happy writing!

1. DESCRIPTIONS

It's very important for most readers to be able to picture characters and items in a scene clearly in their heads. Writers also need good descriptions of facial expressions, body language, and gestures to convey emotions and to set up lines of dialogue without always having to write "said" or any of its synonyms. Sometimes, we need fresh ways to describe emotions directly.

It's easy for us to rely on the same handful of descriptions. We can also lose our writing momentum when we take a long time trying to think of the right word or phrase. This section can make that process quicker and easier.

DESCRIPTIONS OF FACIAL EXPRESSIONS

I've categorized these expressions under "positive and neutral" (neutral meaning things like surprise and curiosity) and "negative." I haven't organized them according to particular emotion, because so many of them work for more than one. A person might narrow his eyes out of vindictiveness or skepticism, for instance, and his face might turn red out of anger or embarrassment.

Some of these require a little more explanation on your part. You'll have to say what she's glaring at, or if his face is contorting in rage, or grief, or what. And not all of these will work for every character—it depends on what the character looks like and how she generally reacts to things.

Some of these aren't *exactly* facial expressions, but still useful for dialogue tags. In many cases I've given several ways to describe the same thing. While I have included some longer phrases, they are not proprietary and it's fine to use them.

POSITIVE OR NEUTRAL EMOTIONS

These include, but aren't limited to, happiness, love, desire, amusement, and surprise.

she raised a brow

he lifted an eyebrow

his right eyebrow shot up

his eyebrows waggled

his eyes widened

her eyes bugged

his eyes lit up

her eyes darted

he squinted

she blinked

her eyes twinkled

his eyes gleamed

her eyes sparkled

his eyes flashed

her eyes glinted

his eyes burned with...

her eyes blazed with...

her eyes sparked with...

her eyes flickered with...
affection glowed in his eyes
lust glittered in her eyes
the corners of his eyes crinkled
she winked
his lashes fluttered
she batted her lashes
she gave him a once-over
he sized her up
she took in the sight of...
he eyed her
she gave him a come-hither look
she slipped him a curious glance
he looked askance at her
she slid him a guarded look
she peered
he gazed
she glanced
he stared
she scrutinized
he studied
she gaped
he observed

she surveyed

she gawked

he leered

he gave her a puppy-dog look

his pupils (were) dilated

her pupils were huge

his pupils flared

he licked his lips

her lips parted

she smiled

he smirked

she grinned

he simpered

she beamed

a smile danced on his lips

her mouth curved into a smile

the corners of his mouth turned up

the corner of her mouth quirked up

a smile tugged at his lips

a corner of her mouth lifted

his mouth twitched

he gave a half-smile

she gave a lopsided grin

.

he pursed his lips
she stuck out her tongue
her mouth fell open
his jaw dropped
her jaw went slack
her whole face lit up
she brightened
awe transformed his face
relief suffused his features
recognition dawned on her face
his expression softened

NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

These include, but aren't limited to, sadness, anger, disgust, fear, anxiety, exhaustion, and embarrassment. Embarrassment can sometimes be positive, such as when a person gets a compliment that makes her blush, but I think it's more often negative.

his brows knitted

her forehead creased

his forehead furrowed

her forehead puckered

a line etched between her brows

his brows drew together

her brows snapped together

his eyebrows rose

sweat beaded her forehead

perspiration shone on his brow

her face glistened with sweat

her eyes went round

terror flashed in his eyes

her eyelids drooped

his eyelids sagged

his eyes narrowed

she rolled her eyes

he looked heavenward
she glanced up at the ceiling
he avoided her gaze
his eyes had a haunted look
tears filled her eyes
his eyes welled up
her eyes swam with tears
his eyes flooded with tears
her eyes were wet
his eyes glistened
tears shimmered in her eyes
tears shone in his eyes
her eyes were glossy
he fought back tears
tears ran down her cheeks
his eyes closed
she squeezed her eyes shut
he shut his eyes
her eyes bored into him
she pinned him with her eyes
he stared
she gave him a frosty look
he cast her a veiled glance

her eyes shot sparks

he glared

her nose crinkled

his nose wrinkled

she sneered

his nostrils flared

she stuck her nose in the air

he sniffed

she sniffled

his mouth twisted

her upper lip curled

he plastered on a smile

she forced a smile

he faked a smile

her smile faded

his smile slipped

she pouted

his mouth snapped shut

her mouth set in a hard line

he pressed his lips together

she bit her lip

she nibbled on her bottom lip

he chewed on his bottom lip

his jaw set
her jaw clenched
his jaw tightened
a muscle in her jaw twitched
he gritted his teeth
he ground his jaw
he snarled
her lips drew back in a snarl
she gnashed her teeth
her lower lip trembled
his lower lip quivered
she paled
he blanched
she went white
the color drained from his face
his face reddened
her cheeks turned pink
his face flushed
she blushed
he turned red
she turned scarlet
he turned crimson
a flush crept up her face

heat stained her cheeks
he screwed up his face
she scrunched up her face
he had a hangdog expression
he grimaced
she winced
she gave him a dirty look
he frowned
she scowled
he glowered
his face went blank
her face contorted
his face twisted
her expression closed up
his expression dulled
her expression hardened
his expression sobered
she went poker-faced
a vein popped out in his neck
fear crossed her face
sadness clouded his features
terror overtook his face

DESCRIPTIONS OF GESTURES AND BODY LANGUAGE

Many of these can mean different emotions in different contexts. Your heroine might lift her chin in confidence or in angry defiance. Your villain might rub his hands together because he's planning evil things or because it's cold in his lair. For that reason, I haven't attempted to separate these into positive and negative emotions.

Some of the things in my list are not exactly body language or gestures, but are useful for setting up dialogue. As with the list of facial expressions, I've included some different ways to say the same thing.

Each of your characters may have one or two gestures that are typical of him or her. While you wouldn't want to overdo it, this can make the people in your story feel more real.

she nodded

he bobbed his head

she tilted her head

he cocked his head

she inclined her head

he jerked his head toward...

she threw her head back

he lowered his head

she hung her head

- - - - -

he ducked
she bowed her head
he put his head in his hands
he covered his eyes with a hand
she hid behind her book
she pressed her hands to her cheeks
she raised her chin
he lifted his chin
her hands squeezed into fists
his hands tightened into fists
she clenched her fists
she balled her fists
he unclenched his fists
her arms remained at her sides
his arms dangled at his sides
he shrugged
she gave a half shrug
he lifted his shoulder in a half shrug
she gave a dismissive wave of her hand
she raised a hand in greeting
he waved
she held up her hands
he lifted his hands

.

sne held up her palms
he threw his hands in the air
she brushed her palms together
he rubbed his hands together
she made a steeple of her fingers
he spread his hands
she gesticulated
she fanned herself
he flapped his hands
he waved his hands
she clapped her hands
he snapped his fingers
she held up a finger
she wagged a finger
he pointed
she gestured with a thumb
he jerked his thumb toward...
she extended her middle finger toward him
he gave her the finger
she flipped him the bird
she gave him the thumbs up
he gave him the okay sign
she flashed a peace sign

she drew a finger across her throat

~~she drew a finger across her mouth~~

he twirled a finger next to his temple

she gave a mock salute

he pretended to shoot himself in the head

she waggled her hips

he thrust his pelvis

he put his hands on his hips

she rested a hand on her hip

she jutted out her hip

she shoved her hands into her pockets

he jammed his hands in his pockets

she folded her arms

he crossed his arms over his chest

she hugged herself

he wrapped his arms around himself

she rubbed her forearms

she spread her arms wide

he held out his arms

she held out her hand

he extended a hand

he shook his head

she turned her face away

he looked away

~~his breaths quickened~~

the breaths quickened

she panted

she was breathing hard

his chest rose and fell with rapid breaths

she took in a deep breath

he drew in a long breath

she took in a sharp breath

he gasped

she held her breath

he let out a harsh breath

she exhaled

he blew out his cheeks

she huffed

he sighed

she snorted

she laughed

he giggled

she guffawed

he chuckled

she gave a bitter laugh

he gave a mirthless laugh

she tittered

he cackled

she rubbed her shoulder

he kneaded his shoulder
he rolled his shoulders
she tensed her shoulders
he massaged the back of his neck
she rubbed her temples
she rubbed her hands on her thighs
she ran her hand through her hair
he threaded a hand through his hair
he raked his fingers through his hair
he shoved his hair away from his face
she toyed with a lock of hair
she played with her hair
she twirled her hair
she wrapped a curl around her finger
she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear
he undid his ponytail
she shook out her hair
she tossed her hair
he buried his hands in his hair
she tugged at her hair
he stroked his beard
he scratched his beard
she tugged at her earlobe

--

he bit a nail

she chewed on a cuticle

she picked at her nails

she inspected her fingernails

he plucked at the cuff of his shirt

she picked lint from her sleeve

he adjusted the lapels of his jacket

she fiddled with her earring

he twisted the ring on his finger

she played with her cell phone

he tugged at his shirt collar

he adjusted his tie

she smoothed down her skirt

she scratched her nose

he scratched his head

she rubbed her forehead

he blotted his forehead with a handkerchief

she slapped her forehead

he smacked his forehead

he facepalmed

she rubbed her eyes

she pinched the bridge of her nose

he held his nose

she slapped a hand over her mouth
she covered her mouth with her hand
he slapped his knee
she pressed her fingers to her lips
he tapped his fingers against his lips
she held her finger up to her lips
he rubbed his chin
she pressed a hand to her throat
she touched her hand to her heart
he pounded his chest
he clutched his chest
he leaned against the wall
she bounced on her toes
he danced in place
she jumped up and down
he tapped his foot
he stomped his foot
her toes curled
she folded her hands in her lap
she drummed her fingers on the table
he tapped his fingers on the table
he slammed his hand on the table
she pounded her fist on the table

she set her palms down flat on the table
he rested his hands on the table
she set her hands on the table, palms up
he leaned back in his chair
she hooked her feet around the chair legs
he gripped the arm of the chair
she put her hands behind her head
he put his feet up on the desk
he fidgeted
she jiggled her foot
he swung his leg
she crossed her legs
he uncrossed his legs
she crossed her ankles in front of her
she stretched out her legs in front of her
he sprawled out
she cringed
he shuddered
she flinched
he recoiled
he shivered
she trembled
his body shook

she cowered
he shrank back
she huddled in the corner
he pulled away
she jerked away
he turned away
she stilled
he froze
she jolted upright
he stiffened
she straightened
he tensed
he jumped
she jumped to her feet
he stood up
she rose from her seat
she relaxed
he hunched
she slouched
her shoulders sagged
his shoulders slumped
her shoulders rounded
his chest caved

he drooped
she wilted
he went limp
he rolled his shoulders
she squared her shoulders
she clasped her hands behind her back
he puffed out his chest
she thrust out her chest
he propped his chin on his hand
she rested her chin on her palm
he yawned
she stretched
he turned around
she whirled around
he pivoted
she reeled
he staggered
her knees buckled
she stepped away
she drew nearer
he leaned closer
she inched forward
he loomed closer

he paced

she shifted from one foot to the other

she rocked back and forth

he shuffled his feet

he swayed on his feet

she dragged her feet

she pumped a fist

he thrust his fists in the air

she punched the air

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTIONS

Sometimes it can be hard to find the right words to describe individual facial features, faces in general, bodies, and even hair. This list can be a good resource for describing the looks of the characters in your story.

Remember that when you're in a character's point of view, his attitude toward someone else's appearance may change over the course of the story as his relationship to that character changes. A classic case in point: Mr. Darcy goes from saying Elizabeth Bennet is "tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me," to "one of the handsomest women of my acquaintance." Conversely, the cute guy in Spanish class might not seem cute at all once your young adult heroine figures out he's a jerk.

Some of these phrases on this list are more expected than others, and you can always put your own spin on them.

EYES - GENERAL

large

small

narrow

sharp

squinty

round

wide-set

close-set

deep-set

sunken

bulging

rheumy

protruding

wide

hooded

heavy-lidded

bedroom

bright

sparkling

glittering

flecked

dull

bleary

cloudy

red-rimmed

beady

birdlike

cat-like

jewel-like

steely

hard

fringed with long lashes

with sweeping eyelashes

with thick eyelashes

EYES – COLOR

Brown is the most common eye color by far. Green is quite rare.

chestnut

chocolate brown

cocoa brown

coffee brown

mocha

mahogany

sepia

sienna brown

mink brown

copper

amber

cognac

whiskey

brandy

honey

tawny

topaz

hazel

obsidian

onyx

coal

raven

midnight

sky blue

sunny blue

cornflower blue

steel blue

ice blue

Arctic blue

glacial blue

crystal blue

cerulean

sapphire

electric blue

azure

lake blue

aquamarine

turquoise

denim blue

storm blue

slate gray

silver

chrome

platinum

pewter

smoky gray

ash gray

concrete gray

dove gray

shark gray

fog gray

gunmetal gray

olive

emerald

leaf green

moss green

EYEBROWS

arched

straight

plucked

sparse

trim

dark

faint

thin

thick

unruly

bushy

heavy

SKIN – COLOR

Descriptions of the skin tones of characters of color can be a sensitive issue, which is hardly surprising, given the course of history. Many people object to comparing skin tones to food. “Coffee” and “chocolate” probably carry the most negativity, and may be the most overused besides. As is so often the case with language, whether one is a part of the group or outside of it makes a big difference.

amber

bronze

cinnamon

copper

dark brown

deep brown

ebony

honey

golden

pale

pallid

pasty

fair

light

creamy

alabaster

ivory

bisque

milky

porcelain

chalky

sallow

olive

peach

rosy

ruddy

florid

russet

tawny

like gingerbread

like strong tea

like weak tea with milk

SKIN – GENERAL

Some of these are better for the face, and some are better for other parts of the body.

lined

wrinkled

seamed

leathery

sagging

drooping

loose

clear

smooth

silken

satiny

dry

flaky

scaly

delicate

thin

translucent

luminescent

baby-soft

flawless

poreless

with large pores

glowing

dewy

dull

velvety

fuzzy

rough

uneven

mottled

dimpled

doughy

firm

freckled

pimply

pockmarked

blemished

pitted

scarred

bruised

veined

scratched

sunburned

weather-beaten

raw

tattooed

FACE - STRUCTURE

square

round

oblong

oval

elongated

narrow

heart-shaped

catlike

wolfish

high forehead

broad forehead

prominent brow ridge

protruding brow bone

sharp cheekbones

high cheekbones

angular cheekbones

hollow cheeks

square jaw

chiseled

sculpted

craggy

soft

jowly

jutting chin

pointed chin

weak chin

receding chin

double chin

cleft chin

dimple in chin

protruding Adam's apple

NOSE

snub

dainty

button

turned-up

long

broad

thin

straight

pointed

crooked

aquiline

Roman

bulbous

flared

hawk

strong

MOUTH/LIPS

thin

narrow

full

lush

thick

plump

Cupid's bow

rosebud

dry

cracked

chapped

moist

glossy

straight teeth

crooked teeth

gap between teeth

gleaming white teeth

overbite

underbite

FACIAL HAIR (OR LACK THEREOF)

clean-shaven

smooth-shaven

beard

neckbeard

goatee

moustache

sideburns

mutton chops

stubble

a few days' growth of beard

five o' clock shadow

HAIR – GENERAL

long

short

shoulder-length

loose

limp

dull

shiny

glossy

sleek

smooth

luminous

lustrous

spiky

stringy

shaggy

tangled

messy

tousled

windblown

unkempt

bedhead
straggly
neatly combed
parted
slicked down
slicked back
cropped
clipped
buzzed
buzz cut
crewcut
pixie cut
mullet
bob
afro
natural
braids
cornrows
dreadlocks
pigtais
ponytail
bun
updo

bouffant

comb-over

bald

shaved

bushy

frizzy

wavy

curly

straight

lanky

oily

greasy

dry

layers

corkscrews

spirals

ringlets

widow's peak

thick

luxuriant

voluminous

full

wild

untamed

bouncy

wispy

fine

thinning

HAIR – COLOR

black

blue-black

jet black

raven

ebony

inky black

midnight

sable

salt and pepper

silver

charcoal gray

steel gray

white

snow-white

brown

brunette

chocolate brown

coffee brown

ash brown

brown sugar

nut brown

caramel

tawny brown

toffee brown

red

ginger

auburn

Titian-haired

copper

strawberry blonde

butterscotch

honey

wheat

blonde

golden

sandy blond

flaxen

fair-haired

highlighted

bleached

platinum

HANDS

delicate

small

large

square

sturdy

strong

smooth

rough

calloused

elegant

plump

manicured

Stubby fingers

long fingers

ragged nails

grimy fingernails

BODY

tall

average height

short

petite

tiny

compact

big

large

burly

beefy

bulky

brawny

barrel-chested

heavy

heavyset

fat

overweight

obese

flabby

chunky

chubby
pudgy
pot-bellied
portly
thick
stout
lush
plush
full-figured
ample
rounded
generous
voluptuous
curvy
hourglass
plump
leggy
long-legged
gangling
lanky
coltish
lissome
willowy

...

lithe

lean

slim

slender

trim

thin

skinny

emaciated

gaunt

bony

spare

solid

stocky

wiry

rangy

sinewy

stringy

ropy

sturdy

strapping

powerful

hulking

fit

athletic

toned

built

muscular

chiseled

taut

ripped

Herculean

broad-shouldered

sloping shoulders

bowlegged

EMOTIONAL DESCRIPTIONS

As writers, we're always looking for vivid ways to describe emotions. If we only write things like, *He felt sad, she felt angry, he was devastated, she was elated...* the reader won't feel much at all.

We can convey many feelings through facial expressions, body language, and gestures. However, you're limited in how much you can describe the facial expressions of your point-of-view character. She can't see her own face, so you can't go much beyond the occasional "she smiled" or "she could feel herself blushing." And if your character is hiding her emotions, she may be feeling something deeply without conveying it through gestures or body language at all.

This list focuses on two other ways we can make emotions more vivid: assigning an active verb to them, and describing how the emotions physically feel in the body. The latter can be done directly, or you can use metaphorical language to evoke reactions like an adrenaline spike or a dopamine rush. Descriptions of how emotions physically feel should be used judiciously, because they indicate unusually strong feelings, but use them when appropriate because they're a good way to elicit a reader response.

There are, of course, endless ways to describe emotions. If something here feels too familiar, you can always alter it slightly to make it your own.

Please note that you can turn almost any of these into a supporting phrase in your story. For instance, *humiliation overcame her* can become *overcome with humiliation*.

I've focused on some basic, primal emotions: desire, anger, fear, disgust, shame, sadness, and joy. You may find inspiration here for describing other feelings as well.

DESIRE

her knees weakened

his knees turned to water

her knees wobbled

she felt breathless

his breath caught

her breath hitched

he stole her breath

he felt dizzy

her flesh tingled

her skin flushed

warmth spread through her

longing whispered through her

his desire flickered to life

heat curled down her spine

every inch of him craved her

her body sizzled

her heart skittered

his heart thumped

her heart nearly stopped

passion ignited her

she electrified her
desire radiated between them
desire percolated between them
passion took hold of him
heat coursed in his veins
lust blindsided her
his body came to attention
heat pooled in her
his body throbbed
he ached for him
she ached with need
her body begged for his touch
she melted

ANGER

her annoyance flared
he quivered with indignation
his every muscle tensed
her body locked up with rage
rage bottled up inside her
she simmered with anger
he trembled with fury
his blood boiled
anger seared through her
her pulse slammed in her neck
he shook with fury
anger roared through him
rage swept over him
anger rolled through her
her temples throbbed with rage
his brain exploded with fury
fury blinded her
rage poisoned her veins
anger swelled up in him
rage fueled her

flames of anger shot through her
fury poured through her
she choked on her anger
anger crashed through him
rage flashed through her
anger thundered through him

FEAR

his breath shook
she was barely able to breathe
an alarm rang in her mind
she bit back a scream
his heart pounded
her heart drummed
his heart thudded
her chest stuttered
his heart was in his throat
fear splintered his heart
his chest tightened with fear
worry snaked through her
worry gnawed at her
anxiety swirled around her
fear clawed through her
he shivered
fear twisted her gut
his stomach knotted
the pit of her stomach fell
sweat trickled down his spine

her blood ran cold
a chill went through him
it chilled his soul
fear hit her like icy water
fear paralyzed her
panic assailed him
her mouth turned dry

DISGUST

he battled the urge to recoil
she forced down a sick feeling
he suppressed a shudder
she fought the urge to throw up
a wave of nausea hit him
she wanted to puke
he tasted bile
bitterness filled her mouth
she gagged
his gorge rose
it turned her stomach
her stomach roiled
his stomach revolted
her stomach heaved
his stomach churned
her skin crawled
his flesh prickled

SHAME

embarrassment stirred in her
shame spiraled through him
embarrassment seized her
he burned with humiliation
his scalp prickled with shame
heat crept into her cheeks
she cringed inwardly
embarrassment racked her
guilt tormented him
guilt consumed her from within
shame corroded his insides
humiliation overcame her
shame engulfed him
she wanted to curl up in shame
inwardly, he winced
embarrassment coiled around him
she floundered in embarrassment
shame washed over him
guilt flooded over her
he wanted to disappear

she wanted to die on the spot

SADNESS

sorrow closed up her throat
his throat clenched
her throat thickened with sobs
his vision blurred
his throat tightened
pain gripped her chest
sadness tore at his chest
her heart wrenched
it felt like a knife to his heart
a weight settled on her heart
he crumbled inside
his mood plummeted
her spirits fell
his hopes disintegrated
he descended into depression
disappointment sagged through him
it plunged him into despair
she was drowning in her grief
sorrow shredded her insides
his body felt leaden

despair dragged her down

dejection burdened her

grief hollowed her out

grief shattered him

he felt empty inside

she felt cold

sadness crushed him

his bones ached

he could hardly move

numbness infused her body

she felt numb all over

JOY

joy bubbled up in her
he glowed inside
joy overwhelmed her
it lifted her mood
it buoyed her spirits
her hopes rose
happiness flowed through her
warmth filled his chest
joy filled him like sunshine
happiness sparkled inside her
joy warmed him from within
her heart felt light
his heart leaped
she got a warm, fuzzy feeling
joy welled up in her heart
hope fluttered inside her
joy danced through her heart
her hopes kindled
happiness bloomed inside her
joy blossomed within her

fresh energy filled him
exultation surged through him
happiness coursed through her
excitement raced through her
elation suffused his being
she felt fully alive
his spirits soared
she felt weightless
he felt light on his feet
she felt like she was floating
he felt giddy
it felt like a caffeine buzz
she felt drunk with happiness

EVOCATIVE IMAGES

The right visual can carry a real emotional punch. It can serve as foreshadowing or characterization, or it can underscore the impact of the action.

Poetry and film make the most use of evocative images, but many novels hinge upon them as well. Most people who have read F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, for instance, remember the ominous eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg on the billboard, the green light at the end of Daisy's dock, and Gatsby's beautiful multicolored shirts flung out on a table for Daisy's approval.

I almost put this list in the Settings section of the book, but I think strong images are often more about a character's moment of perception than about setting the scene in general. Sometimes focusing in closely on a single image can give the whole scene more impact.

This list contains visuals that I think have the power to resonate in your story. I have separated them into indoor and outdoor images, although technically, many could be either. They are in no particular order, though I've often put similar things next to each other. I hope they will help you think of many more.

INDOOR

An empty classroom.

A baseball glove: child or adult size, new or worn.

A mitten without a match.

A child's shoes.

Children in school uniforms.

A woman in a sundress.

A man in a three-piece suit.

A lady's hat for wearing to church.

A trucker hat.

A flannel shirt.

An unmade bed.

A bedroom plastered with posters.

A pile of dishes in the sink.

The view of a city from the top of a tall building.

Dust particles in the air.

Condensation on a glass of ice water.

A flickering candle flame.

A wedding gown hung on a door.

A diamond ring.

A pearl necklace.

A pocket watch.

A birthday cake.

A FedEx package.

Party balloons.

Flutes of champagne, with the tiny bubbles rising to the surface.

A dozen roses.

A dead houseplant.

A spider.

A cockroach with twitching antennae.

Drops of blood in the sink or on the bathroom tile.

A taxidermy animal head, or the whole animal.

A human skull, or a carved one.

A dirty or naked doll, or part of one.

A mannequin.

A shopping cart.

A Halloween or carnival mask.

An old road map.

A desktop globe.

Skeins of colorful yarn.

A pincushion full of pins.

A crocheted afghan.

A cross-stitched quote or picture.

Plastic bins full of stuff, in the attic or the basement.

Tropical fish in an aquarium.

A spiral notebook full of notes and scribblings.

A new box of crayons.

A “Help Wanted” sign in a storefront.

A claw-foot bathtub.

Shag carpeting.

A long row of high school lockers.

Stained glass windows.

A jar of homemade preserves.

An ice cream cone with rainbow sprinkles.

A leather jacket.

A pair of cowboy boots.

An elegant porcelain teacup and saucer.

Cream swirling in coffee.

Raw steaks or raw hamburger.

A delivery pizza in a greasy cardboard box.

A bowl full of M&Ms.

The glow of an open refrigerator.

A hairbrush full of hair.

A single eyelash on a fingertip or cheek.

A tampon or sanitary pad, used or not.

A box of condoms.

A bra on the floor.

An ashtray full of cigarette butts.

An empty whiskey bottle.

A row of perfume or cologne bottles.

A souvenir snow globe.

Bookcases full of books.

A tall ladder.

A winding staircase.

A ceiling fan.

A chandelier.

Piano keys.

A bare mattress.

A blanket fort.

Tarot cards.

Dice.

Scrabble tiles.

A chessboard and pieces.

Suitcases by the door.

Binoculars.

An umbrella—brightly colored or classic black.

OUTDOOR

Fall leaves swirling in the wind.

The skeleton of a desiccated leaf.

Gnarled tree roots.

A monarch butterfly, flitting among weeds and wildflowers.

An empty stadium.

The reflections of clouds on the glass windows of a skyscraper.

A reflection of the sky in a puddle.

A rainbow in an oil slick.

Sunglasses reflecting someone else's face or a landscape.

A vacant lot full of weeds.

A dead bird on the pavement.

A fire truck.

A police car.

Wet city streets at night.

Sunlight streaming through tree branches.

A hornet's nest or beehive.

A bird's nest.

A single feather.

A red cardinal on a snowy branch.

A flock of birds rising up and flying away all at once.

A crocus poking out of the snow.

A cherry tree in blossom.

A field full of sunflowers.

A dandelion ready to be wished on.

Horses grazing in a pasture.

Haystacks.

A weathered barn.

The framework of a house being built.

Wind turbines.

Ripples in a pond.

A road shrouded with mist.

A campfire, with sparks flying upward.

Fireworks.

A house lit up by a zillion lights for Christmas.

A porch light.

A night light.

The glossy fronds of palm trees.

Seashells and sand dollars.

Saguaro cacti in the desert with their arms in the air.

A canyon.

Carousel horses.

A Ferris wheel.

A pile of pumpkins.

--

Hand-lettered roadside signs.

Jet trails in a blue sky.

Rows of identical suburban homes.

A swimming pool.

A colorful city mural.

Sprawling graffiti on a wall.

A dumpster.

Smoke pouring from the smokestacks of a power plant.

An inflated flailing tube man in front of a used-car dealership.

Clothes hanging on a line.

A white picket fence.

A barbed wire fence.

A rusting wrought iron fence.

A garden gate.

An old neon sign for a motel, diner, or bar.

A mobile home or trailer.

A camping tent.

A hammock.

Waves crashing into a rocky shore.

Brightly painted toenails.

Sand dunes.

Footprints in the sand or the snow.

A splashing city fountain.

A sora set out on the curd.

A red wagon.

A blue bicycle.

Iridescent soap bubbles.

A harvest moon.

A streaking meteor.

A bolt of lightning hitting the earth.

A sleek sports car.

Cars lined up bumper to bumper on the interstate.

A dusty pickup truck.

A rowboat.

A metal tackle box or toolbox.

A suspension bridge.

A church steeple.

A castle, intact or in ruins.

MAKING METAPHORS

A metaphor is a comparison of something to something else. Some of us had teachers who drilled into our heads that a simile uses “like” or “as,” and a metaphor does not, but it’s not that important of a distinction. Both make a reader think of something in a new way. It might even stick with her for a long time.

In order to work, the metaphor needs to line up with the point of view and the tone of the story. A funny character’s wit may be expressed through the hilarious comparisons she makes in her mind, while poetic metaphors may underscore a soulful narrative.

I didn’t create a list of metaphors, since their power comes from their originality. Some writers seem to have a natural gift for creating them, and if you’re one of those writers, you probably don’t need to be reading this at all.

If creating metaphors doesn’t always come automatically to you, though, it’s still something you can improve on with practice. I want to share one method that can help you write them. I first used this when I was teaching a beginning poetry workshop at university, and I’ve shared it with other people since.

First, write down a few concrete images, like *blue jay*, *geode*, or *gymnasium*. Feel free to use any from the preceding list.

For each of these nouns, write a few adjectives that describe them. For *blue jay*, I wrote down *vivid* and *argumentative*. It’s okay if you write some phrases. For *geode*, I jotted down *sparkly on the inside*.

Now without thinking about it too much, write down some other things that those adjectives or descriptions can describe.

From this, you should begin to see a good metaphor or two. For instance, for *argumentative*, one of the things I wrote down was *children*. Now I could write something like, “Outside the window, blue jays argued like cranky children.” For the *geode*, I wound up with, “The geode sparkled inside, like a brain full of

daydreams.”

Some of these will work better than others, and some won’t work at all, but it’s a good way to get to ideas you might not have come up with otherwise. The more you practice coming up with comparisons, the more they will pop into your head on their own.

If you use clichéd metaphors in your first draft—“cold as ice,” “free as a bird”—it doesn’t mean *you* are unoriginal. It’s normal to think of those familiar phrases first. Just circle each one, give it some thought, and replace it with something fresher when appropriate. It doesn’t matter what a first version looks like. It’s the final draft that counts.

2. SETTINGS

The setting of a story is often an afterthought, but it has a big impact. The mood of a place can reflect the mood of a scene, or stand in ironic contrast to it. The setting can function almost as part of the supporting cast. An evocative place can even inspire a whole story.

Sometimes when you're feeling apathetic or cranky, getting out of the house and going somewhere new can make all the difference. The same can hold true for your writing. If you're stuck, your scene is falling flat, or your characters are stalled, think outside the house.

An interesting location or the backdrop of a particular event can add more flair to a first encounter, a showdown, or a breakup, breakdown, or breakthrough. Of course, your characters need to have a good reason to be there, but you're clever enough to figure that out. The first list in this section will give you some ideas.

As writers, many of us fall short in describing settings in sensory terms beyond the visual. This is because most of us are more consciously aware of what we see, whereas we often process stimuli like background noises and faint smells on an unconscious level—particularly if they are sounds or smells we encounter over a long period, or every day.

Nonetheless, sound and scent can create a strong sense of place in your story. Appealing to senses beyond the visual will make your readers feel like they're really there.

What's more, noises can have a strong emotional impact on your reader. One of my friends has a child who likes to watch scary movies, but when they get *too* scary, he covers his ears. He figured out that it's less intense without the soundtrack. While we can't impose a soundtrack over a page, we can still evoke sounds to affect the experience. Scent can be even more powerful, speaking to the most primal part of the readers' brains and triggering memories.

To help you incorporate aural and olfactory cues into your scenes, I've made these two lists of ambient sounds and smells. Most of these are contemporary, but I've included some vintage ones as well.

100 POTENTIALLY INTERESTING SETTINGS FOR SCENES

Some of these are merely locations, while others are events. The list of evocative images can suggest additional settings.

1. A coffeehouse.
2. A bar.
3. A church service.
4. A funeral.
5. A wedding.
6. A graduation ceremony.
7. A beauty salon or barbershop.
8. An airport.
9. A hotel.
10. A cruise ship.
11. A forest trail.
12. Under a bridge.
13. Along the side of a highway.

14. The route of a marathon.
15. An office holiday party.
16. A library.
17. A music festival.
18. The department of motor vehicles.
19. A basement.
20. An attic.
21. A Renaissance faire.
22. A cemetery.
23. A beach.
24. A public pool.
25. A lake or a river.
26. A campground.
27. A ball game—Little League, or major league.
28. A stock car race.
29. A hockey game.
30. An abandoned building.
31. A construction site.
32. A rooftop.
33. A parking garage.

34. A dentist's office.
35. A hospital.
36. A psychiatric ward.
37. An assisted living facility.
38. A gym or fitness center.
39. A locker room.
40. A city sidewalk.
41. A museum.
42. A tattoo parlor.
43. A lingerie department.
44. A grocery store.
45. A drugstore.
46. A home improvement store.
47. A giant discount store.
48. A flea market.
49. A farmer's market.
50. A tractor pull.
51. A backyard barbecue.
52. A convenience store.
53. A public restroom.

54. The post office.
55. A cave.
56. A subway.
57. A bus stop.
58. A theater.
59. A movie multiplex.
60. A children's recital or school play.
61. A children's birthday party.
62. A high school prom.
63. A family reunion.
64. A high school or college reunion.
65. A cornfield.
66. A riding stable.
67. A shooting range.
68. A mountaintop.
69. A casino.
70. A morgue.
71. A lighthouse.
72. A costume party.
73. A parade route.

74. A political demonstration.
75. A car dealership.
76. An automotive garage.
77. A courthouse.
78. A city council meeting.
79. A TV news station.
80. A tax office.
81. A bank.
82. A payday loan agency.
83. A thrift store.
84. A diner.
85. A five-star restaurant.
86. An executive boardroom.
87. An animal shelter.
88. A dog park.
89. A playground.
90. A golf course—public, or part of a resort or club.
91. An observatory or planetarium.
92. A food bank or community pantry.
93. A church potluck.

94. An awards dinner.
95. A charity gala event.
96. A laundromat.
97. A greenhouse, gardening center, or plant nursery.
98. A front porch.
99. A winery or a brewery.
100. A dark alley.

SOUNDS FOR SETTINGS

motorcycle engine revving

car motor running

scraping on windshield

seat belt buckle clinking

car door closing

car stereo bass

cars rushing by

cars honking

car crashing

construction equipment

vehicles beeping as they back up

tires or footsteps on gravel

police, fire, or ambulance siren

fire alarm

tornado siren

trains on tracks

helicopters

bicycle wheels spinning

bicycle bell

horseshoes on cobblestones

rattling carriages

factory whistle

buzz saw

chainsaw

hammering

sanding wood

carpenter drill

dentist drill

ice cream truck music

balloon popping

garage door opening

lawn mower

lawn sprinkler

shoveling dirt

weights clanking at a gym

drone of a treadmill

basketball bouncing

shoes squeaking on a basketball court

squeaky toy

cat meowing

cat purring

dog barking

dog whining
dog panting
rooster crowing
cows mooing
crickets chirping
locusts or cicadas droning
a fly buzzing
a mosquito buzzing
bees buzzing
frogs croaking
birds chirping
birds or bats flapping
owl hooting
rain on a roof
thunder
lightning strike
transformer blowing
trains on tracks
train whistle
warning bell at a train crossing
foghorn
ocean waves
seagulls

whistling wind
flag flapping
wind chimes
leaves crunching underfoot
snow crunching underfoot
raking leaves
crackling fire
fireworks
gun loading
gun cocking
gunfire
alarm clock
ticking clock
grandfather clock chiming
church bells
dinner bell
school bell
buzz of fluorescent lights
typing on keyboard
typewriter
stapler
scissors cutting paper or fabric
sewing machine

.. . . .

radio static

microphone feedback

marker squeaking on paper or a dry erase board

copy machine

elevator hum

elevator ding

hum of air conditioning and heating

announcements over loudspeakers

briefcase clicking shut

backpack or suitcase zipping

airplane taking off or landing

airplane bins clicking shut

airplane “unfasten seat belt” bing

footsteps in halls

phone ringing

busy signal on an old phone

dial tone

doorbell

knock on door

creaking door

slamming door

breaking glass

TV blaring

Writing off loss in a class

clinking of ice in a glass

clinking pocket change

jingling keys

buzz of conversation

laughter

cheering

clapping

crying baby

laughing baby

screaming children

coughing

blowing nose

sneezing

snoring

splashing in water

broom sweeping

vacuum cleaner

washer or dryer hum

squeak of cleaning a window or mirror

bath or shower running

splashing water

dripping faucet

toilet flushing

electric hand dryer

~~electric piano may~~

hair dryer

aerosol can spraying

chair scraping on floor

coffee brewing

tea kettle whistling

sizzling oil or bacon

popcorn popping

rustle of potato chip bag

slurping through a straw

aluminum can being crushed

garbage disposal

microwave ding

Styrofoam cooler squeaking

champagne cork popping

SCENTS FOR SETTINGS

There are thousands of food, flower, and plant smells, and I have included many that I think are particularly evocative or seem to carry a long way. Some of these are brand-name items, because their smells are that distinctive. I apologize for the disgusting smells on this list, but I'm sure your characters encounter gross things now and again.

Women in general have a significantly better sense of smell than men do, because they have so many more neurons in the olfactory bulbs in their brains. However, you could certainly write a male character with an acute sense of smell.

gasoline

pool chlorine

freshly mowed grass

wet earth

manure

ozone

salty ocean air

suntan lotion

lilacs

honeysuckle

jasmine

lavender

mint

sugar maple leaves

burning leaves

campfire

peat fire

pine trees

creosote bush

decomposing wood

skunk

mold

must

old asbestos tiles

dusty heating ducts

floor wax

new textbooks

fresh pencil shavings

crayons

markers

tempera paint

paste

Play-Doh

wet sidewalks

hot pavement

fresh tar
ripe garbage
rotting meat
car exhaust
jet fuel
diesel fumes from buses
air freshener in cabs
cigarette smoke
cigar smoke
urine
sewer gas (a rotten egg smell)
charred pretzels
hot dog stands
fresh coffee
burned coffee
barbecue
takeout pizza
fresh-baked bread
fast food French fries
movie popcorn
ripe peaches
lemon
sautéed garlic

bacon

toast

cinnamon

curry

cookies baking

chocolate

roasting chicken or turkey

just-blown-out matches

pipe tobacco

whiskey

beer

marijuana

incense

patchouli

candles

old books

fresh twenty-dollar bills

new carpet

new paint

fresh varnish

new vinyl shower curtain liner

wet dog

litter box

.. ..

diaper pail
feces
flatulence
sour milk
vomit
new clothing
fresh laundry
dirty laundry
stinky sneakers
Band-Aids
Neosporin
blood
rubbing alcohol
vinegar
Pine-Sol
Fabuloso (cleaner popular in Mexico)
furniture polish
ammonia
bleach
sawdust
fresh lumber
leather
gun oil

bouquet of roses

Chanel No. 5

perfume

cold cream

Vicks VapoRub

aftershave

Old Spice

deodorant

mouthwash

chewing gum

morning breath

sweat

body odor

soap

shampoo

hair dye

hairspray

nail polish

nail polish remover

shoe polish

wool coat

baby powder

the top of a baby's head

numby breath

բարեկամ

3. PLOTTING

You'll notice that all my plot ideas are about conflict. A story is boring without it, not to mention unrealistic. Shakespeare wrote, "The course of true love never did run smooth," and that's true of the course of almost everything else as well.

The right plot, of course, depends on your character. Let's say you have a story about someone who is compelled to spend a week at a nudist resort. That may not be a very interesting story if it stars a free-spirited bohemian type, but it's great for a conservative, modest character. You want the storyline to introduce obstacles that make people have to struggle, change, and grow.

Although I adore stories about friendship, I didn't make a separate category for it, because there are many storylines in the other sections that can be used for friends, too.

Some of the ideas here are more specific than others. However, every single one is so skeletal that it could be handled in countless different ways. They aren't entire plots, just thought starters, and the way you develop them is what will make them great.

50 ROMANCE PLOTS

Romance plots aren't just for romance novels. They are often central to young adult novels, literary novels, movie scripts, and even fantasy novels. Frequently, romance provides a subplot for other genres of storytelling as well. Love is complicated, and you might use more than one of these story ideas in your next work.

As you read these, please remember that the pronouns are just placeholders, and you can cast people of any gender or no particular gender into any role.

1. She's already ruled him out—she made up her mind a long time ago that she would only marry a doctor, or she would *never* date a biker again.
2. They are competitors for the same job or the same championship.
3. They are straight-up enemies. He wants to buy the land to build a resort, and she wants to see it turned into a nature sanctuary. He's the defense attorney, and she's the prosecutor. They're soldiers on opposing sides of the war... the possibilities are endless here!
4. He already won...he inherited an estate that should have been hers, or he got the job that she was hoping to be promoted into, and she's seething.
5. He broke her heart in the past. Maybe there was a good reason behind it, or maybe he was an idiot then and realizes it now. It's possible he just *ignored* her.

6. She did our heroine wrong in the past, or maybe she wronged the heroine's family member or friend.
7. He did something wrong in the past, period. Although she wasn't the victim, it was really bad. How can she be sure he's changed?
8. She has trust issues, because her last relationship ended in a terrible betrayal.
9. He has intimacy issues. Maybe because of a traumatic past, he feels too vulnerable if anyone knows about his real emotions or weaknesses. Maybe she's a psychic, a behavioral expert, or just the one person who can see right through him... and it makes him uncomfortable as hell.
10. She doesn't want to be in a relationship at all. She's taken a break from dating, or she vowed to never get tied down.
11. She believes no one can truly love her. Perhaps she made a terrible mistake in the past, or she's not attractive in the conventional manner, or she's a "fallen woman" in a repressive era.
12. They are good friends, and they don't want to risk ruining their friendship by taking it to the next level.
13. They are co-workers, and they don't want to make things weird at the office, bar, or school where they both work.
14. He has a secret. He might be in a witness protection program, for instance, or he might have an undisclosed medical condition.
15. She's freaked out by who he really is—a werewolf, ex-con, or a funeral director.

16. It was supposed to be sex only. They were going to be friends with benefits, or maybe he's a male escort. Falling in love goes against the original arrangement.

17. Their love was supposed to be fake. They were pretending to be in love or married, or they entered a marriage of convenience. It can't be real, can it? On a related note...

18. He was faking it at first. Maybe he made a bet that he could bed her, or he pretended to like her so he could learn her secrets and be the journalist who broke the story.

19. She was stuck with him. He's a partner on a job she wanted to do by herself, or he rescued her when she was actually pretty happy where she was. She doesn't want to admit she's actually falling for him.

20. He has moral qualms about getting into a relationship. He might be her teacher, her captor, or her employer. Alternatively, maybe she's his best friend's ex, and that gives him pause.

21. She's a mess. She's grieving the death of her husband, partner, or child, or she has PTSD from battle or being kidnapped.

22. He has a mental illness or addiction that causes problems in the relationship.

23. Their love is forbidden by others. It's against the rules, spoken or unspoken, of their family, organization, community, nation, or religion.

24. Our hero isn't sure if he wants to risk making a move, because the guy he likes might not be gay.

25. Our heroine is confused, because she thought she liked guys, but now she's crushing on a girl.

26. Their cultures clash. It could be that he's a modern man and she's from ancient Greece, or she's a big-city girl and he's a small-town boy. This may overlap with the next one.

27. They are from different social classes.

28. One of them is promised to someone else. The wedding might already be planned. She might have reasons for going through with a loveless or lackluster marriage.

29. One of them is actually married to someone else. It might be legitimate. On the other hand, maybe it is some weird legal, not-consummated arrangement, or maybe her husband is an abusive monster.

30. She is infatuated with someone else instead of our hero. It may be that she doesn't realize yet that this other person is awful.

31. She is interested in someone else in addition to our hero, and she's having trouble making a decision. Maybe she refuses to choose.

32. Their time together is limited. Possibly she's going abroad to study in the fall, his work visa is almost up, or she's about to go on a space mission to another planet, never to return. What's the point of getting serious?

33. Being together would require a big sacrifice. She would have to say no to her dream job, or he would have to live in New York City when his cowboy heart loves the Montana skies.

34. He's a danger to her safety. Maybe he's a vampire, or maybe he has enemies in the mafia.

35. She thinks she'll only make him unhappy, because she's dying of a disease, suffering under a curse, or can't have children. (Note

that in many cases, this conflict may be exaggerated in the character's mind.)

36. He's ugly, freaky, or scary-looking.

37. She's disguised as someone he would never fall for... a man when he's only into women, or a conservative when he's a die-hard liberal.

38. She may or may not be real at all. Maybe he is being catfished, or maybe he is meeting a fairy or alien in his dreams.

39. They can't get together in real life. There may be an ocean or a few centuries between them.

40. He is a suspect in a criminal investigation.

41. They have terrible first impressions of one another, and it's hard to admit they were wrong. They might have gotten off to an awful start by arguing about something.

42. Her family is the problem. Maybe they are obnoxious or immoral, and he doesn't want to get involved with that. Alternately, maybe she has a couple of kids, and while they are cute, this is not what he imagined for himself.

43. He has a reputation... as a heartless womanizer, a stone cold killer, or a greedy corporate lawyer.

44. She doesn't want distractions. She has one very important job to do, and she can't afford to get sidetracked.

45. He loves her, but she doesn't know him. Maybe he knows her from an alternate universe, or maybe she has amnesia.

46. He is too controlling, because he's trying to protect her. Maybe he doesn't want her to be ostracized by Victorian society or to be

in danger by becoming a firefighter.

47. He doesn't see her in a romantic way. For instance, she might be the younger sister of his best friend, and he still thinks of her as a kid.

48. They were lovers before, and it ended. Would it be crazy to try again? Would he take her back?

49. The job is getting in the way. It's hard to be romantic when you're working day and night on a political campaign or helping fellow victims of the airplane crash survive in the mountains.

50. Their personalities clash. Maybe he's driven, while she's very laid-back. Maybe he's an eternal optimist and she's a pessimist, so they get on each other's nerves. They will have to meet in the middle, or at least accept one another, in order to make it work.

50 HIGH-STAKES PLOTS

For suspense, thriller, mystery, and action-adventure stories, you want intense, life-or-death plots. Many other genres, such as science fiction, fantasy, horror, romantic suspense, and paranormal romance, often employ these kinds of story lines as well.

Remember that although we usually think of the heroes as the ones staying within the boundaries of the law and the villains as the ones operating outside it, that's not always the case. And of course, almost every villain is the hero in his own mind. Some of these stories may overlap a little in your next exciting project!

1. Someone wants to destroy the country, planet, or neighborhood and must be stopped.
2. Someone close to the heroine mysteriously disappears.
3. The protagonist, someone he loves, or a team member is kidnapped or taken prisoner and must be recovered.
4. Someone is trying to murder the hero or someone he loves, and he doesn't know why. He might or might not know who it is.
5. Someone is trying to murder the heroine or someone she loves, and she knows exactly why. Maybe the would-be killer has an old grudge, or maybe our heroine has secret information.
6. There's a serial killer on the loose who must be stopped. It could be a person or a monster.
7. A friend or family member has been brainwashed or possessed

and has turned into a killer.

8. The heroine, or a group, is escaping prison, slavery, or another kind of oppression.

9. Investigating a loved one's murder leads our hero to a foreign country or into a dangerous underworld.

10. People in a house or building have been taken hostage.

11. A person who has only imagined or played at being a warrior or hero now finds himself in a real battle or a game with big stakes.

12. Someone is lost or stranded in an enemy environment, a harsh wilderness, or some other place where survival is a challenge.

13. A natural or human-made disaster threatens to wipe out our heroine along with everyone else.

14. Someone is resolved to get revenge against the one who ruined his life or the life of a loved one—or at least bring the villain to justice.

15. Our hero is sure someone has been wrongfully accused or convicted of a crime and searches for the real culprit.

16. A community asks a stranger to help save them from outlaws, a dragon, or an alien invasion.

17. The hero is on the run from the law. He may be guilty or he may have been framed.

18. Someone must find, retrieve, or get rid of a magical, cursed, or dangerous object.

19. An ordinary person learns she has special powers that she must

quickly learn how to control.

20. The hero has special powers or secret knowledge he must hide, or else risk getting killed.

21. Someone is stealing something significant, such as a priceless painting or a huge amount of money.

22. Someone wound up in the possession of something valuable, dangerous, or important, which leads to trouble.

23. Rivals, enemies, or just seemingly incompatible people join together to take down a bad guy or rescue a mutual friend.

24. A hero is unwillingly turned into a threat—a bomb gets surgically planted in him, he is turned into a zombie, or he's carrying a deadly virus.

25. A criminal is recruited by the good guys so he can bring his unique knowledge or skills to an assignment or case.

26. A team is on a dangerous mission, but a personal conflict between two or more members poses the largest threat.

27. Lovers, brothers, or friends are pitted against one another, and only one of them can survive.

28. Through technology or magical means, someone's identity is wiped out or assumed by another person.

29. A spy, soldier, or assassin decides to help his target instead.

30. A spy or soldier falls in love with the enemy—but remains loyal to her duties.

31. A damaging secret letter or video is made public, and the heroine must deal with the aftermath.

32. A voyeur or fan becomes obsessed, with shocking consequences.

33. A person must travel to a certain point by a certain time—maybe with a prisoner or a treasure in tow—or there will be dire consequences.

34. A human-made creature becomes a deadly threat.

35. A plane, ship, bus, or train crashes or seems likely to crash.

36. Someone turns on his own organization once he discovers that they are actually evil.

37. Through training and determination, an unskilled person becomes an effective soldier, spy, or hero.

38. Someone with a violent past, or someone retiring from a dangerous career, gets pulled back into the fray again.

39. A person in the wrong place at the wrong time becomes an accessory or a witness to a terrible crime.

40. Someone appears to have killed herself, but our heroine is positive it was actually a murder.

41. A small group of people defend themselves against an attack by a much bigger or more powerful force.

42. Hundreds or millions of people are under attack by a small group, possibly via computer viruses or biological weapons.

43. A conspiracy theorist or psychic predicts something awful, but can't get anyone to believe him.

44. The heroine, or a group, wants to overthrow a government or other authorities.

45. Strange events lead our hero to believe that everyone in this seemingly nice family, company, or town is actually hiding some horrific secret.
46. Our heroine is a spy or imposter who has infiltrated a group, and they'll kill her if they discover her true identity.
47. A murder case has been cold for years...and suddenly, a new murder looks like it was committed by that same unknown suspect.
48. The hero must perform a difficult task or do something immoral, or else he or someone he loves will suffer.
49. The heroine must deliberately give up her own life in order to save the lives of others.
50. The hero must kill someone he cares about, or at least let that person die, in order to save a larger group of people.

50 FAMILY PLOTS

In a lot of mainstream fiction, young adult novels, scripts, and plays, family drama is front and center. It also might be a B story in your project, or a backstory for just about any character. A couple of these overlap with the romance plot ideas, but they play out quite differently within a family.

1. A family member is perpetually needy and manipulative, and now he has gone too far.
2. Someone in the family (not necessarily the parent) is emotionally or physically abusive.
3. A family member is having an extramarital affair...or at least, it sure looks that way.
4. She's divorced...and the kids prefer the stepmom.
5. He's their new stepdad...but the kids won't give him a chance.
6. Someone in the family has a mental health issue such as depression, addiction, obsessive-compulsive disorder, hoarding, or post-traumatic stress disorder, and this affects the others.
7. Someone in the family is just plain eccentric, and in certain situations, it's embarrassing.
8. Someone is dying...of cancer, a brain tumor, or another disease. A family member has unresolved issues with the person, or alternately, she doesn't know how she's going to go on without him.

9. Someone has already died...and the family is struggling to deal with it.

10. A family member is a criminal of some kind. Maybe everyone finds out immediately, or maybe he kept it secret for years.

11. Everybody in the family is a criminal, which causes all kinds of complications.

12. One family member, willingly or unwillingly, suffers punishment for another's misdeed.

13. Someone has converted to a new religion, joined a different political party, refused to work at the family business, or broken ranks in some other way that has the rest of the family upset.

14. A family member makes dramatic personal changes, and it's hard for the family to reconcile this with the person they once knew.

15. The parents are on the brink of divorce, and the kids (who may be adults) aren't dealing with it well.

16. The family faces financial difficulty: someone has lost her job, or the family business is dwindling.

17. A family member has a mental, physical, or learning disability that poses challenges for other family members as well.

18. The family has moved to a very different community or country from the one they were used to, and they are all struggling to fit in and feel at home.

19. Someone is pregnant, and others in the family disapprove...perhaps because she's a teenager, a single woman over forty, or has eight kids already.

20. Someone is *not* pregnant, and it's a problem. Maybe the couple's been trying for years. On the other hand, maybe they don't want kids, but their parents want to be grandparents.
21. Someone hid a pregnancy in the past, and now there's a half-sibling or grandchild who nobody knew about until now.
22. A person tracks down her birth mother, or the birth mother tracks down her (possibly adult) child.
23. A parent expects his child to be perfect and/or achieve amazing things, even if this is unrealistic.
24. A parent is over-protective of a child, which leads to conflicts between them or with others.
25. A child is becoming an adult—and a parent or guardian can't deal with it.
26. A child refuses to grow up—and it's making the parent or guardian despair.
27. A family member resents doing more than her share of the work. She might be doing all the housework even though she has a full-time job, or she might be the only one taking care of her aging parent even though her siblings live in town.
28. Someone is doing something risky—enlisting to go to war, for example—and a parent or someone else in the family is against it.
29. Someone has abandoned the family...or at least it feels like it. This could be literal abandonment, or it could just be long days at the office.
30. A family member was estranged because she behaved deplorably in the past, but now she wants reconciliation.

31. The whole family or a few members are on a journey or quest and meet up with obstacles along the way.
32. The stresses of long hours at a job, parenting, and caretaking are pushing one or more family members to the breaking point.
33. The family members are separated against their wishes, perhaps by war, financial necessity, or for legal reasons.
34. They have a visitor or house guest, invited or not, who poses challenges. (Note that this is the plot of many ghost stories.)
35. Members of the family are in a legal battle over something, such as the custody of a child or the settlement of a will.
36. Members of the family are in a physical battle—on opposite sides of a war, or in opposite corners of a boxing ring.
37. A family member has an interest or activity that other people in the family disapprove of—or they would, if they knew about it.
38. One family member, likely a sibling, is jealous of the other, because of her relationship, wealth, success, attractiveness, children, or some combination of the above.
39. Two or more siblings are leaving the other one out of discussions, get-togethers, or even group vacations.
40. A gathering of the extended family brings up old tensions and/or new revelations.
41. The high expectations of an occasion, such as Christmas or a wedding, lead to stress and conflict.
42. A lack of communication in the family has led to a huge misunderstanding.

43. Family members disagree about whether to keep or sell a home, land, or a business.
44. Someone is getting married to a person that nobody else in the family can stand.
45. The families of an engaged couple meet for the first time, and it doesn't go well—either because they are very different, or because some of the family members already have a history.
46. Two people in the family are in love with the same person.
47. Two people in the family are in love with and/or having sex with one another.
48. Parents refuse to have anything to do with their child because they disapprove of his lifestyle...or the child breaks things off with the parents, because he disapproves of them.
49. One family member loans a lot of money to another, who may not be able to pay it back after all.
50. The parents die, and one sibling has to take on the role of a parent.

25 WORKPLACE PLOTS

Not very many novels and scripts focus on the workplace, but workplace conflicts are a common subplot in all kinds of stories. Many of the conflicts here involve chain of command and teamwork, which make them appropriate for school stories and war stories as well.

1. A boss or employee is incompetent, stupid, rash, or lacks social skills.
2. Someone in a position of power is too demanding or just plain malicious and bullies subordinates.
3. The new person is different. Because of her gender, race, previous experience, or some other factor, she is ostracized or sabotaged.
4. The new boss is very young and/or inexperienced. No one trusts or respects her.
5. The new person has lied about his experience, and actually has no idea what he is doing.
6. The company is facing layoffs, which is freaking everyone out.
7. A person or team has been given a seemingly impossible assignment.
8. New procedures make it almost impossible to get even ordinary work done.

9. The work itself is so difficult, unpleasant, time-consuming, or dangerous that it's ruining people's lives.
10. Someone is asked to behave unethically in his job for the company's benefit.
11. Someone knows about her company's immoral actions. She either blows the whistle or debates whether she should.
12. Someone has behaved unethically in her job, and now it looks like she could be caught.
13. Someone is accused, rightly or wrongly, of behaving unethically or making a huge mistake, and he faces big consequences.
14. Family obligations, illness, addiction, or another factor makes it almost impossible for someone to meet the demands of the job.
15. A dramatic rumor, true or untrue, causes conflict among the staff.
16. A shocking or embarrassing secret about an employee becomes known to her co-workers.
17. An affair or a wanted or unwanted flirtation is disruptive to the team.
18. A romantic liaison between co-workers ends badly, causing problems.
19. Two co-workers are competing for the same promotion or plum assignment.
20. Two people vie for control over a group project.
21. Someone on the team isn't pulling his own weight. He hardly

does any work, and he's getting away with it.

22. An employee is difficult to be around, perhaps because of her negative attitude, inane chatter, or poor hygiene.

23. Something's been stolen—someone's sandwich, office equipment, or sensitive files. It looks like an inside job, but nobody knows who did it.

24. Someone gets caught bad-mouthing a co-worker or superior. For instance, she accidentally sends a scathing email to the wrong person.

25. Someone takes all the credit for another person's work. Maybe he presents her ideas as his own.

25 PLOT TWISTS

Unexpected turns and dramatic reveals are one of the great pleasures of novels and movies. They are the reason why some people hate spoilers.

A well-executed plot twist can keep readers riveted. When they didn't know it was coming but then look back and realize there were hints all along, it's really satisfying. Here are some classic plot twists for you to consider!

1. Someone who was presumed dead is still alive. In a supernatural or speculative story, he may have actually died and been resurrected.
2. Someone who was acting like an enemy reveals herself as an ally.
3. A trusted ally turns out to be an enemy.
4. A seemingly average and ordinary character reveals himself to be a genius, fabulously rich, or in possession of remarkable skills.
5. A character is actually a ghost or a figment of an unstable imagination.
6. The protagonist's entire reality is fake. It's a creation of someone in power, an alternate dimension, or his own extended hallucination.
7. A beloved character suddenly dies or is killed.
8. Someone murders or ruins the person who wronged him, long after it had seemed that he had forgiven the person.

9. A character unexpectedly seduces someone—possibly someone he has no business seducing.
10. Two characters that no one would have ever suspected have been sleeping together all along.
11. Two characters are revealed to be siblings, or parent and child. Depending on how these characters have been interacting, it may be a happy or a disturbing revelation.
12. Someone suddenly remembers his true identity.
13. Everyone finds out that a character has been possessed or controlled by some other person or entity.
14. The outlandish thing a “crazy” person kept insisting was real? It’s real.
15. The person who thinks he is the con man is actually being conned.
16. Someone has a twin or a clone.
17. An investigator of a murder, or an assistant to the investigation, is the murderer.
18. The main problem is revealed to be just part of a much bigger and more horrible problem.
19. Some small concern or aberration that nobody paid much attention to turns out to be the biggest problem of all.
20. Someone’s attempt to solve a problem winds up making it ten times worse.
21. A character faces a difficult moral choice—and decides to do the wrong thing.

22. A victory is so costly that it seems to set someone up for a final defeat.
23. Each character has double-crossed the other.
24. In his efforts to prevent something awful, someone actually helps it happen.
25. The whole story turns out to be a prequel to a movie or book that came before.

25 PLOT POINTS THAT CAN CRACK READERS UP

Humor is one of the most difficult things to write—a fact generally ignored by prestigious film, television, and book awards. People sometimes think that funny writing is an innate talent, and you either have it or you don’t. While some writers have a natural gift for comedy, it’s something you can practice and become competent at, just like most skills.

People often laugh when their expectations are subverted. There is something innately optimistic about this kind of humor, because it suggests that our lives are filled with more possibilities than we had considered.

With several of these situations, whether it’s funny or not is a matter of degree, just as it is in real life. A little teasing may be amusing, while a cutting remark is just plain mean. A tiny failure may be funny, while a huge one is tragic.

Of course, it all depends on your treatment, but here are some situations likely to make your readers laugh.

1. A character mistakes one person for another.
2. Someone misunderstands her immediate situation, which makes her behavior completely inappropriate. For instance, she believes she’s on a first date with a cute guy, when it’s actually a job interview.
3. A character is extremely proud or thrilled about something that most people would not feel that proud or thrilled about.
4. Someone is horrified by a situation or an aspect of another person that most people would appreciate.

5. Someone's wacky scheme is not playing out as he had hoped.
6. Someone is going along with an activity that is way out of her comfort zone.
7. After expecting to hate an activity, a character winds up totally getting into it.
8. Someone's attempt to lie his way out of trouble fails and makes things more complicated.
9. A nervous character keeps misspeaking and makes an ass of herself.
10. Under the influence of alcohol or medication, a usually reserved character is goofy or otherwise lets his guard down.
11. Someone who no one expects to be sassy and/or a badass is sassy and/or a badass.
12. A crass or free-spirited character socializes with refined or repressed people.
13. Someone puts an incredible amount of thought and effort into something that most people would consider no big deal.
14. A planned event or performance is a disaster, or just comically underwhelming.
15. A series of small things go ridiculously wrong for the character as she tries to accomplish a basic objective, such as get ready for work, drive to work, or give a presentation.
16. Someone tough is revealed to be a total softie in some way that nobody knew about.
17. A character uses an object, a service, or a public or private

space for a very different purpose than what it was created for.

18. Someone is pretending everything is fine, even though something has gone outrageously wrong.

19. A character keeps insisting that something doesn't bother her, but makes it abundantly clear that it does.

20. Intentionally or unintentionally, someone embarrasses her friend by sharing or inventing mildly embarrassing information about him or his past.

21. Two people who can't stand each other or are irritated with one another have to pretend to be in love.

22. An undemonstrative person has to deal with a very affectionate one.

23. Someone witnesses something he would have preferred to never see.

24. A character treats a serious situation in a playful way.

25. Someone breaks the rules in a spectacular fashion.

10 PLOT POINTS THAT CAN MELT READERS' HEARTS

It's not hard to think of tragedies and losses that will break your readers' hearts. If you want to make readers cry in a good way, however, something here might do it.

1. Someone forgives a penitent person for a big transgression.
2. A character or team with significant limitations or challenges finally triumphs.
3. A person (or a dog) nearly dies but makes a recovery or gets a reprieve.
4. Someone finally confesses his love—or two people finally admit it to each other.
5. A character gets a large or meaningful gift, or a touching letter (or a bunch of them), from a person who died or is separated from her.
6. Someone helps heal another person's long-buried hurt or grief.
7. A misfit or an overlooked character is accepted or recognized by an individual or a group.
8. A character chooses to take a heroic action that seems fated to ruin him.

9. Someone makes a grand gesture of love that makes her vulnerable.

10. Two people who love each other and have been separated for a long time are finally reunited.

50 GOALS AND ASPIRATIONS

One of the simplest ways to craft a story is to give your character a clear goal, put obstacles in the way of this goal, and watch her struggle. Your protagonist may eventually succeed or fail, or she may discover something better than her original vision along the way.

On the other hand, dramatic events in the story may supersede your character's goals. Some goals and aspirations may not fuel the story, but may help show who the character is and what he values.

So what do the people in your story really want? Many of the ideas here are very widespread aspirations. And hey, if you wind up getting ideas for your own bucket list, no extra charge.

1. Find a job.

She may be out of work, or she may just be stuck in a job she hates.

2. Find a partner.

Depending on his age, his history, and his comfort with commitment, he might be looking for a husband, or he might just be looking for a boyfriend. In some eras and some situations, love may have nothing to do with your character seeking a spouse.

3. Get a divorce.

It's not always easy for people to get out of unhappy marriages.

4. Have a baby.

This common goal could be thwarted by many factors, including the lack of a willing partner, economic challenges, age, health issues, and infertility.

5. Adopt a dog or cat from a shelter.

This is a little like a very light version of #4. Your character's living situation may be an obstacle, however.

6. Earn a degree or certification.

Graduating from high school, a vocational school, college, or grad school is a very relatable goal.

7. Travel to a particular destination.

It could be somewhere in his own country or a foreign nation.

8. Buy a house.

This might be your character's first house, or one she feels compelled to own for some reason.

9. Run his own business.

Many people dream of striking out on their own. Maybe your protagonist dreams of it, too.

10. Hang on to her business.

In tough economic times, a person might be focused on keeping her bridal shop, ranch, or online store afloat.

11. Give up an addiction—drinking, smoking, gambling, or drugs.

This is a really difficult goal for most, though it can be done.

12. Win a competition.

It could be a basketball tournament, a Miss Utah pageant, or a chili cook-off.

13. Lose weight.

This may be the most ubiquitous goal there is.

14. Become strong and muscular.

This sometimes goes along with #13.

15. Run a 5K, a half marathon, or a marathon.

This is a popular fitness goal.

16. Recover from a disease, injury, or illness.

Your character may be undergoing treatment for cancer, or she may be battling a mental illness.

17. Reconcile with someone.

Your protagonist may want to patch things up with a spouse, girlfriend, or former best friend.

18. Repair something.

Fixing up an old house is a worthy long-term goal for your character, and fixing up a boat or car is a great goal for a short story.

19. Help someone else thrive.

A character might want to find the right school for her child with special needs, or find a compatible kidney donor for his spouse. Alternately, she may be trying to fix someone who isn't really trying to fix himself. (Spoiler: it doesn't work.)

20. Have sex—or have better sex.

Some people are actively seeking to lose their v-card. Others have problems they want to fix in the bedroom.

21. Attend an exciting event.

Examples include seeing his favorite rock band in concert, going to the Super Bowl, and celebrating New Year's Eve in New York's Times Square. It could also be something personal, such as the birth of his child, if he has challenges in getting there.

22. Ensure an exciting event that she is organizing goes well.

This could be Christmas with the whole family, a wedding, a family reunion, or a town festival or professional conference she's pulling together.

23. Avoid arrest.

If your character has broken the law, this may be his primary aspiration.

24. Get out of debt.

For someone burdened with a lot of student loans or gambling debts, this may be goal #1.

25. Raise money for a cause.

He may have come up with any number of ways to help a cause he believes in or a person he knows who has fallen on hard times.

26. Change the law.

She may be protesting an unfair rule at her high school or a legal loophole that allows industries to pollute the environment.

27. Convert people.

He may be trying to persuade people to become Christians, vegans, or political conservatives.

28. Move to a better place.

Your character may believe that there's a state, city, or country where she would be much happier.

29. Become popular, or just make some friends.

This might involve attempts to overcome shyness, joining a group or two... or making changes to how he presents himself, which may or may not be wise.

30. Be a better parent.

She may want to spend more quality time with her kids, or stop getting

so upset with them.

31. Be her true self.

She may be a transgender person who wants to come out and start living as a woman, or she may want to embrace some other aspect of herself that she's denied.

32. Get a promotion.

He may want his boss's job, or for that matter, he may want to run the whole operation.

33. Learn a foreign language.

This frequently appears on people's lists of things they hope to do someday.

34. Learn how to play a musical instrument.

The piano and the guitar are probably the most popular ones.

35. Learn another new skill or craft.

It could be sword fighting or website development.

36. Read more books.

Here's another "never stop learning" type goal. Some people set a goal of reading a certain number of books per year.

37. Have a weekly "date night" with his spouse.

This is a popular resolution for couples, particularly those with children.

38. Climb a mountain.

Because it's there! As a variation, your character might want to hike somewhere famous, such as the Appalachian Trail, or sail to Australia.

39. See her child get married and have children.

Many parents of adult children desire this, and some of them try hard to make it happen.

40. Create something significant.

Your character might want to make a homemade quilt or a short film.

41. Become famous.

Different people have different ideas about how they might want to make this happen.

42. Be an extra on a television show or a movie.

This is for people who would be happy to be a *little* famous, and who just think that this sounds like fun.

43. Retire.

Although he may want to do it, financial considerations or nervousness about what he'll do all day may be preventing him from making the decision.

44. Own her dream car.

45. Sleep under the stars.

Some people want to do this during a meteor shower. The next one is a similar goal.

46. See the Northern Lights.

47. Get a fantastic tattoo.

A short-term goal, to be sure, but one shared by many.

48. Get organized and get rid of all the clutter.

This usually pertains to a person's own space, but it can also involve the home of an aging or deceased loved one.

49. Sell something.

It could be a house, a car, a screenplay, or a piece of jewelry.

50. Attain spiritual enlightenment.

This may involve your character practicing his faith more fully, or it may mean a quest for answers or for the right path. It may involve travel.

25 MOTIVES FOR MURDER

For your thriller or mystery to ring true, your killer needs to have a reason for doing what he does. A motive will also enable the good guys to catch him. There are lots of reasons why people kill. Some killers may have more than one motive, and some of these motives work for serial killers.

This list may seem morbid, but hey, we writers sometimes need these things! There's a reason why we hope nobody looks at our browser histories, right?

1. A physical fight turns deadly. Either the killer loses control, or she accidentally inflicts more damage than she intended.
2. The murderer kills the victim in order to steal from her.
3. The victim of a robbery or rape puts up a fight, and the struggle ends in his death.
4. The victim was the witness to a crime.
5. A spouse or child murders the victim to claim the insurance money or to inherit the estate.
6. The victim is murdered by a spouse or family member who is sick of his verbal or physical abuse.
7. A spouse wants out of a marriage, but he doesn't want to pay alimony, or have others think he was a bad person. He commits the murder as a means of "instant divorce."
8. The murderer kills his mistress or girlfriend because she is pregnant. Maybe he is married to another woman and doesn't want

his wife to find out about the affair, or maybe he doesn't want to be burdened with a child.

9. The killer wants to eliminate his rival in romance, politics, or some other competition.

10. The killer believes the victim personally wronged her—by ridiculing her, firing her, ending their friendship, or “stealing” her man. Note that this grudge might go way back. Also, the supposed injustice may be all in the killer’s imagination.

11. The victim personally wronged someone the killer loved. He might have raped the killer’s sister, for instance, or financially ruined the killer’s father. The killer might be exacting justice after the legal system failed to do so.

12. A boyfriend or husband murders the victim after flying into a jealous rage over a real or suspected infidelity.

13. The victim reminds the murderer of someone who rejected him.

14. The killer gets sexually aroused by murdering women or men to whom he is attracted.

15. In the murderer’s mind, she is doing the victim a favor by killing him—because he is suffering on earth, or because he’s bound for eternal bliss.

16. The murderer hates the victim’s politics, religion, sexual orientation, or ethnicity. He may see himself as a crusader.

17. The killer believes the victim is possessed by a demon. Note that if you are writing a horror or paranormal story, the killer may be correct.

18. The murder is a result of a drug deal gone bad.
19. The guilty party murders his wife or child so that people will feel sorry for his loss.
20. The killer feels inferior, and the murder makes him feel powerful and important.
21. The killer commits a murder in order to frame someone close to the victim and destroy that person's life.
22. The victim's life seems perfect—and the murderer is obsessed with the unfairness of this.
23. A spouse, parent, or child murders a family member because he requires an extraordinary amount of caretaking.
24. The murderer actually mistakes the victim for his real intended target.
25. The killer is an amoral monster who wants to know what it feels like to kill somebody.

25 REASONS TO MOVE TO A NEW TOWN

Leo Tolstoy once said, “All great literature is one of two stories; a man goes on a journey or a stranger comes to town.” I don’t know if this is true, but there are many wonderful books and movies about these two things. That’s why I created a list of reasons to move to a new town, and you could also write about the journey there.

1. She’s going to college in this new town, or she might be a foreign exchange student.
2. He just landed a new job there, or his company transferred him to this office. Maybe he thinks it will be a nice place to live. On the other hand, maybe he thinks the town is a dump, but he has no other prospects.
3. Her fiancé or husband got a job there. Maybe they arrive together, or maybe they have been doing the long-distance thing for a while.
4. He’s looking for a new job. If you want to work in his field, this is the place to be.
5. She thinks this town is the perfect place to start her bed and breakfast, coffee shop, or other dream business.
6. Even though she’s from a small town, she’s always dreamed of life in the big city.
7. Even though he was born and raised in a bustling metropolis, he’s always fantasized about an idyllic life in the country.

8. His aging parents live there, and he's moving close by so he can look after them.

9. Her siblings or parents live there, and she's a single parent who could use their help with the kids.

10. Her sister's or daughter's family lives there, and she wants to be a part of the kids' lives.

11. He wants to get as far away from his family as possible, because they are unbearable.

12. Her parents died, and she is moving back to her hometown to get the house ready for sale—or maybe live in it.

13. He moved after a terrible scandal or a crime. Maybe he even changed his name.

14. She moved after a painful breakup. There's no avoiding her ex in that little town!

15. Something awful happened to him and he wants to put all those terrible memories behind him.

16. She thinks this is a better place to raise her kids.

17. She's sick of living in a cramped apartment and wants to move to a place with a lower cost of living where she can afford a house.

18. He feels as though he will never meet the woman of his dreams in that tiny hometown—or in that snobbish suburb.

19. She's had it with winter. She was made for this sunny climate.

20. He won't be there forever, but has a work assignment —an environmental study, a consulting gig, or a political campaign to run.

21. She won't be there forever, but she's on a long vacation. Maybe her friend is letting her stay at the beach cottage or city loft for the summer.
22. She or her kid is sick, and needs to be closer to a particular hospital or treatment center.
23. He just needs a shorter commute. He's tired of driving in from the neighboring town.
24. Her last house was flattened by a hurricane or tornado. That's not likely to happen in this part of the country.
25. He used to live there, as a kid, a student, or a young man, and he always regretted moving away.

25 REASONS FOR INITIAL ATTRACTION (BESIDES GOOD LOOKS)

If your character becomes interested in somebody, it's nice if there is a reason besides or in addition to physical attractiveness. Sure, there's nothing wrong with big brown eyes or an athletic physique. Most people like those things! But that's exactly the point: there's nothing special there. It doesn't tell the reader, *Oh my gosh, these two were made for each other.*

So here are 25 reasons why your character might sit up straight and take notice of someone. Some of these might work for the beginning of a great friendship as well.

1. In a roomful of vulgar guys, he seems polite and dignified.
2. In a roomful of uptight snobs, she seems like a loveable goofball.
3. He loves the same obscure author, game, or rock band.
4. She makes hilarious jokes.
5. He's the only one who seems to get her jokes.
6. She's shy...and he thinks that's cute.
7. He's gregarious and puts everyone at ease...and that impresses her.
8. They have an experience in common: they both grew up on farms, or they both went to Burning Man.

9. He's impressed by how important her faith is to her.
10. She's impressed by how dedicated to his work he seems to be.
11. His casual comment makes her think about something in a new way.
12. Her voice is sexy.
13. She is pretty clearly a brainiac.
14. He has an amazing sense of personal style.
15. He has an amazing accent.
16. When she smiles, her joy lights up the whole room.
17. He's nice to her pet or her kid.
18. She's animated when she speaks and uses her hands a lot. It's cute.
19. He has an impressive random talent.
20. She stands up for herself.
21. He stands up for a cause she believes in.
22. She seems intense and mysterious.
23. He's in uniform.
24. She smells fantastic.
25. He has the same hopes and dreams as she does...whatever they may be.

4. ACTION

Most of us believe that “actions speak louder than words.” No matter what we think or say, what we do says the most about us. The same holds true for the characters in our stories.

Screenwriters, in particular, need to tell their stories through actions as much as words. While some people enjoy introspective, talky films, most audiences want to see things happen.

This section deals with scenes that involve much more action than talk. It also covers ways that people reveal their feelings without stating them directly. Some of these do involve dialogue, but most of them don’t. Finally, it lays out different ways that people respond to extreme situations.

500 GREAT WORDS FOR ACTION SCENES

Fistfights and battles, chases and escapes, shootouts and swordplay, flying leaps and crashing cars... Action scenes challenge writers to create compelling choreography, arresting visuals, and visceral character reactions. Here is a thesaurus for writing scenes that will get your readers' hearts pumping. You might even find good inspiration here for the title of your next adrenaline-fueled project. Let's do this!

VERBS

advance

aim

ambush

assault

attack

bail

balance

bang

barrel

bash

batter

battle

beat

bellow

bite

blast

bleed

blind

block

bludgeon

bombard

bounce

brace

breach

break

bullet

burn

burst

bust

butt

careen

catch

challenge

charge

chase

choke

chop

clamp

claw

cleave

climb

cling

clutch

cock
collapse
collide
combust
command
commandeer
corner
cover
cower
crack
crash
crawl
crouch
crumble
crumple
crunch
crush
cuff
cut
dangle
dart
decimate
defeat

aerend

defy

deliver

demand

demolish

destroy

dig

dispatch

distract

ditch

dive

divert

dodge

dominate

drag

drift

drip

drive

duck

duel

elbow

electrocute

emerge

enraged

evalue

exchange

explode

face

fall

falter

fight

fire

flank

flare

flee

fling

flip

fly

follow

force

freeze

gasp

ghost

glare

glide

gouge

grab

orannple

SURFING

grasp

graze

grimace

grin

grind

grip

growl

grunt

guard

hack

hammer

hang

haul

hijack

hit

hoist

hook

hover

hunt

hurl

hurt

hurtle

ignite

impale

improvise

incinerate

jab

jam

jockey

jump

kick

knee

knock

lacerate

land

lasso

laugh

launch

leap

lift

light up

lob

loom

lurch

maim

maneuver

mangle

mash

mount

obliterate

overcome

overpower

overturn

pant

paralyze

parry

pierce

pivot

plant

plow

plummet

plunge

poke

pounce

pound

propel

protect

pry

pull

pulverize

pummel

pump

punch

puncture

push

race

rage

ram

rear-end

recoil

reel

regain

retrieve

revive

ricochet

rise

roar

roll

ruin

run

rush

sail

save
scoop
scowl
scramble
scrape
scratch
scream
screech
scuttle
sever
shake
shatter
shear
shield
shift
shoot
shout
shove
shred
shudder
sing
skid
skim

slam

slap

slash

slice

slide

sling

slip

smack

smash

smear

snap

snarl

sneak

sneer

somersault

spin

spit

splay

sprawl

sprint

square off

squash

squeal

squeeze

squish

stab

stagger

stalk

stall

stand

startle

steal

stick

sting

stomp

storm

straddle

strain

strangle

stride

strike

struggle

stumble

stun

surround

swagger

sway

sweep

swing

swipe

swoop

take apart

tangle

taunt

tear

tense

thrash

throb

throttle

throw

thrust

thwart

topple

toss

totter

trace

track

trade

trail

~~~~~

**transform**

trap

tremble

trickle

trip

tumble

twist

unleash

upend

vanquish

vault

veer

whip

whirl

wield

wrap

wrest

wrestle

yank

zigzag

zoom

## NOUNS

accuracy

adrenaline

agility

assailant

assassin

barricade

bastard

blade

blaze

bone

bottle

bravura

brawl

brick

bridge

bruise

bus

chaos

clash

cockpit

concrete

control

damage

danger

daredevil

darkness

destruction

determination

devastation

dust

effort

elevator

enemy

escape

fist

flame

flesh

focus

fracture

fray

fuel

fugitive

fury

gang

getaway

gore

granite

grenade

gut

hazard

headlock

heart

hell

henchman

ice

impact

inferno

instant

invasion

jaw

knuckles

ledge

lightning

madness

marauder

mayhem

-----

menace

mud

oblivion

obstacle

opponent

pain

pavement

pipe

posse

precision

purpose

pursuit

rain

rescue

retreat

ribs

ringleader

roof

scuffle

shadow

shards

shock

sidewalk

signs

siege

skill

skin

skirmish

skull

smoke

socket

soldier

sparks

speed

stance

steam

steel

sternum

stone

strength

survivor

sweat

takedown

target

team

threat

throat

thug

~~miss~~

train

tunnel

warrior

water

weight

window

wire

wound

wreckage

wrench

## ADJECTIVES

airborne

audacious

badass

breakneck

breathtaking

brilliant

brutal

catastrophic

decisive

defiant

deranged

desperate

dislocated

disoriented

dizzy

effective

excruciating

exhausted

extreme

fatal

ferocious

fierce

graceful

hard

heedless

insane

lethal

malicious

massive

maximum

messy

mighty

mindless

monstrous

nauseated

nimble

perilous

pitiless

precarious

quick

reckless

relentless

resourceful

..

ruthless

savage

slick

solid

spectacular

stark

suicidal

surgical

swift

ugly

unconscious

vicious

## 500 GREAT WORDS FOR SEX SCENES

A good love scene isn't a sex recess in a story. It furthers the plot in some way, usually by developing the relationship. It also reveals more facets of the characters.

A lot of people feel nervous the first time they write a sex scene. If you focus on the emotions, thoughts, and sensations of the characters, you should be fine. Remember, if you think something is hot, chances are pretty good that other people out there will find it hot, too. Relax, pour a glass of wine if that's right for you, and let the words flow.

## VERBS

abandon

ache

arch

arouse

assault

awaken

beg

bite

brace

breathe

brush

buck

burn

bury

capture

caress

choke

circle

claim

clasp

clench

cling

clutch

coax

coil

command

consume

consummate

convulse

course

cover

cradle

crash

crave

crush

cry

cuddle

cup

curl

dart

delve

demand

desire

.

devour

dip

dive

drag

drink

drive

drown

ease

electrify

enchant

enclose

encourage

enfold

entwine

escalate

explode

explore

exult

fascinate

feast

feed

fill

flare

~~tex~~

fling

flood

flush

flutter

force

fuck

fulfill

fuse

galvanize

gasp

gaze

grab

grasp

graze

grip

groan

growl

haul

heave

hiss

hold

immerse

~~impale~~

**impris**

imprison

incite

inflame

inhale

intoxicate

invade

invite

jerk

kiss

kneel

lap

lave

lick

lift

lower

lunge

massage

melt

moan

move

murmur

need

**nihbhlø**

**MOTOR**

nip

nuzzle

offer

open

overwhelm

pant

part

penetrate

pet

pinch

play

plunder

plunge

pound

press

provoke

pull

pulse

push

quiver

rack

rage

ram

ravish

redden

relax

relish

restrain

reveal

revel

rise

roam

roar

rock

roll

rub

sate

savor

scoop

scrape

scratch

scream

seek

seep

shake

shatter

shiver  
shove  
shudder  
sigh  
sink  
skim  
skyrocket  
slam  
slide  
slip  
snuggle  
sob  
soothe  
spark  
spread  
squeeze  
squirm  
stagger  
stare  
steal  
stimulate  
stir  
strain

stretch

strip

stroke

struggle

stun

succumb

suck

surge

surrender

swallow

sweep

swell

swirl

taste

tease

tempt

thrash

thrill

throb

thrust

tickle

tighten

tilt

tingle

torment

torture

toy

trace

trail

transfix

transport

travel

tremble

trust

tug

tumble

twist

twitch

urge

want

warm

whimper

whisper

wiggle

wind

work

worship

wrap

wriggle

writhe

yank

yearn

## NOUNS

abdomen

act

ankles

ardor

back

beauty

belly

bliss

blood

bond

chest

climax

curves

devastation

ear

ecstasy

edge

elation

embrace

encounter

euphoria

eyes

feet

fever

fingers

flavor

flesh

fragrance

freedom

frenzy

friction

frisson

gentleman

goddess

goosebumps

grace

gratification

greed

hair

hands

heart

hips

hug

hunger

inamorata

instinct

jaw

jolt

joy

legs

lips

lobe

longing

lover

madness

mess

mouth

nails

nape

navel

neck

nerves

obsession

passion

peak

persuasion

plea

pleasure

power

pupils

rake

rapture

rhythm

rumble

rush

satin

satisfaction

scent

scoundrel

seduction

sensation

service

shock

shoulder

siren

skill

skin

soul

soul mate

spice

spice

steel

strength

stubble

sweat

tang

teeth

texture

toes

tongue

torso

touch

treasure

veins

velvet

vision

welcome

wonder

wrists

## ADJECTIVES

addictive

alive

alluring

amazed

anguished

bare

blinding

blunt

bold

breathhtaking

brilliant

broken

bronzed

brutal

careful

carnal

clever

creamy

dangerous

daring

deep  
deft  
delicate  
delicious  
delirious  
desperate  
determined  
devout  
drugged  
eager  
erect  
erotic  
exposed  
exquisite  
fast  
feral  
fervent  
fierce  
fiery  
filthy  
firm  
forbidden  
frantic

full-bodied

furious

generous

gentle

glorious

gorgeous

guttural

hard

heady

heartbreaking

heated

heavy

hesitant

hoarse

hot

hungry

impossible

incandescent

insane

insistent

intense

intimate

irrepressible

irresistible

irrevocable

juicy

languorous

lax

lean

lithe

lovely

luscious

lush

luxurious

magnificent

male

meaningful

merciless

molten

naked

nude

patient

persistent

pliant

plump

potent

primal

**p**rimai

pure

radiant

rapid

ravenous

raw

responsive

reverent

rich

rigid

ripe

rosy

rough

savage

scorching

searing

sensual

sexy

shameless

shapely

shy

silken

sincere

**s**inful

.....

single-minded

slack

slick

slow

smoky

smoldering

smooth

soft

solid

spent

starved

stiff

stormy

strong

sublime

succulent

suggestive

sultry

sumptuous

supple

sweet

swift

tangled

-- o --

tart  
taut  
tempestuous  
tentative  
thick  
tousled  
unbidden  
undone  
unguarded  
unrelenting  
untamed  
violent  
volatile  
voluptuous  
vulnerable  
wasted  
weak  
wet  
wicked  
wild  
willing  
yielding

## SYNONYMS FOR INTIMATE PARTS OF THE BODY

Some people still believe all romance novels contain hilarious euphemisms for genitalia. Most romance writers don't get too fanciful. Still, sometimes we need synonyms, so I've collected some here. This is really an addendum to the previous list. I thought it would be more helpful to have those separated out.

I personally wouldn't use some of the things on the list, but every writer has her own preferences. Some words may be more appropriate to one point of view than to another, and some might make more sense when your character is just looking at the other person or thinking about sex as opposed to actually having it.

If you are writing a historical story, do the research to make sure you're choosing terms that are appropriate for the period...but remember that many slang terms go way back.

### PENIS

This can sometimes be referred to indirectly—"arousal," etc.

cock (probably used the most often in romance)

shaft

dick

length

arousal

hard-on

hardness

erection

phallus

manhood

male part

prick

member

*if he's hard but still has his pants on:*

ridge/hard ridge

bulge

## SEMEN

seed

come

vitality

## VAGINA

Some of these might benefit from an appropriate adjective in front. Again, this includes ways to refer to the genitalia indirectly.

pussy (a few people hate this one)

core

~~core~~

sheath

cleft

slit

quim (historical)

cunny (historical)

cunt (many people hate this one)

sex

well

between her legs

between her thighs

heat

wetness

into her/into her body

*in certain contexts*

entrance

walls

## LABIA

folds

petals

female flesh

private flesh

secret flesh

lips/nether lips

## CLITORIS

clit

bud

bundle of nerves

knot / knot of pleasure

center of pleasure

berry

pearl

jewel

button

most sensitive place

## VAGINAL SECRETIONS

juices

cream

honey

dew

nectar

elixir

arousal

Note that almost everybody hates the word moisture. I wouldn't use "secretions," either.

## BREASTS

mounds

globes

tit

## NIPPLES

peaks

tips

buds

points

beads

nubs

You might want adjectives in front of these: dark tip, tight bud, etc.

## BUTTOCKS

ass

butt

backside

derriere

rear

arse (British)

bum (British)

cheeks

globes

## 50 ACTIONS THAT SHOW ATTRACTION

Let's say the two main characters in a romance, or any story with a romantic subplot, are just starting to get interested in one another. It's way too early for declarations or kisses. How will one of them suspect that the other is into her?

Here are fifty ways, some of them quite subtle, that your characters might demonstrate their feelings—whether they mean to or not.

This list includes indirect cues and obvious signs, and some indicate deeper levels of interest than others. A few of them can also demonstrate feelings of platonic friendship. Remember that for this list, as always, you can substitute genders as you like.

1. He can't stop looking at her.
2. She has trouble meeting his eyes without blushing.
3. He listens intently and leans forward whenever she talks.
4. He inquires about her living situation, or what she likes to do on the weekends... because he's trying to figure out whether she's romantically available.
5. She asks him for a favor—possibly one that involves him coming over to her place, or her coming over to his.
6. She does him an unexpected favor.
7. He asks for his opinion or advice.
8. She reads a book or sees a movie after the woman she likes says it's good.

9. She remembers how he likes his steak, or she gets his coffee shop order right.
10. In a meeting or a classroom, he chooses the seat next to her, even though there are plenty of other empty chairs.
11. She unexpectedly defends him, or his opinion or idea, in a conversation, meeting, or class.
12. He compliments her on something that she cares quite a bit about, but that nobody else ever seems to notice.
13. She wears something frequently or starts wearing her hair a certain way after he says he likes it.
14. He apologizes more than he needs to for a small or nonexistent slight.
15. She gives him a lot of sympathy over small things, like if he has a cold or his weekend plans got ruined.
16. He shows off in front of her or brags about an accomplishment.
17. She stumbles over her words around him, although she is usually articulate.
18. He forgets basic things when he's around her, such as the appointment he needs to get to, or what exactly he came to her store to buy.
19. She fidgets when she's around him or plays nervously with her phone or whatever is close at hand.
20. He notices even slight changes in her expression and body language and asks her what's wrong even when nobody else notices anything is wrong.

21. She talks to him about something that she never discusses with anyone. Her own openness may surprise her.

22. He asks the man he likes an overly personal question...or maybe a few of them.

23. She asks her a lot of questions, just to keep the conversation going.

24. He buys her a gift for her birthday, or just because she said she wanted a particular item...even though they haven't known each other all that long. He might pass it off as no big deal.

25. She plays with her hair when she talks to him.

26. He adjusts his tie when he talks to her.

27. She finds excuses to touch him in casual ways. She might touch his arm to get his attention or to guide him in the right direction if they're walking somewhere together. She might even give him a playful strike on the shoulder in response to something he says.

28. He loans her his jacket because it's cold out.

29. She warns him about bad weather, bad traffic, or a bad-tempered supervisor.

30. He sits or stands up straight when the guy he likes walks into the room.

31. She tilts her head when he's talking and she's listening.

32. He makes a joke for her ears only about the party or the lecture.

33. He laughs more loudly at her joke than she expected.

34. She smiles a whole lot more whenever he's around.
35. His friend makes an excuse to leave them alone together.
36. Her friend says knowingly that she's heard a lot about him.
37. She shows up for a meeting with him several minutes early...even if she makes a habit of being fashionably late.
38. He frantically cleans his apartment before she stops by.
39. She tries to make friends with his daughter, his mom, or his cat.
40. He just happens to turn up at a place where she hangs out or visits regularly.
41. She encourages him to take a bite of her food or a sip of her drink.
42. He offers to drive her or walk her home, even if it's a safe neighborhood and she's only walking a few blocks.
43. She connects with him on social media, and likes his pictures and posts.
44. If her friends talk admiringly about other men—acquaintances, or hot actors—she doesn't join in if he's around.
45. If his friends are joking about gross bodily functions, he doesn't join in if she's around.
46. She makes more racy jokes or sexual innuendoes when she's with him, even if they aren't directed specifically at him.
47. He teases her, but in a flattering way.
48. Her voice becomes ever so slightly softer, gentler, or higher-

pitched when she speaks to him.

49. He invites her to a group event, such as a party or a dinner with friends.

50. She gets visibly irritated at someone else flirting with him.

## 50 ACTIONS THAT SHOW ANIMOSITY

Just as you might want to show a budding friendship or attraction between your characters, you might also need to depict hostility. Your main character might or might not understand what he did to earn this person's dislike or disrespect, but here are fifty ways to demonstrate it. These might also be the actions of people who actually like or love one another, but are fighting and behaving badly.

For these to really show animosity, they have to contrast with how a character treats everyone else. Some of these can be additions to a later list in this book, "25 Ways to Show a Character Is a Jerk," if he acts that way with just about everyone.

Note that some of these actions could be accidental, which might prove useful if you want to sow seeds of misunderstanding between two characters. Some of these are much more hostile than others, although they all fall short of physical violence. You'll want to think about what's appropriate for the level of a conflict, which may increase throughout your story.

In all of these examples, I've used "he" versus "she," just for the sake of clarity. I'm not suggesting that most conflicts are between a man and a woman.

1. He avoids looking her in the eye.
2. She turns her body away from him. It may be a slight or subtle movement.
3. He crosses his arms.
4. She clicks her tongue at something he said.
5. He snorts with disgust at something she said.

6. She rolls her eyes at him.
7. He interrupts her.
8. She exchanges disbelieving looks with others when he talks.
9. He bumps into her or jostles her coffee.
10. She looks at her phone or her watch while he talks.
11. He shakes his head slightly as she talks.
12. She plays the devil's advocate when he expresses an opinion.
13. He thwarts her suggestions even on trivial issues.
14. He speaks to her in a flat tone of voice.
15. He raises his voice when speaking to her.
16. She speaks to him in a tone dripping with sarcasm.
17. He ignores her question or comment.
18. She pretends she doesn't notice that he's walked into the room.
19. He demands to know what she's reading, what she's looking at online, or where she's going, if he thinks it might embarrass her.
20. She insults him, but passes it off as a harmless joke.
21. When she gets good news, he suggests possible down sides.
22. She abruptly stops talking to friends or co-workers when he approaches.
23. He leaves her off of a group invitation to a meeting or a party. He may claim it was an accident.

24. She forgets an appointment with him, or so she says later. Alternately, she cancels it at the last minute for what sounds like a trivial reason.

25. He laughs at something she said when she was being serious.

26. She gives advice and suggestions that imply he's done absolutely everything wrong.

27. He befriends her competitor or rival.

28. She pretends not to notice when he tries to shake hands.

29. He shakes hands using an uncomfortably tight grip.

30. She spreads a false or unflattering story about him.

31. He learns a secret about her that she would rather no one knew—and brings it up.

32. She brings up some small mistake he made months ago.

33. He draws attention to a stain on her blouse, a pimple on her face, or some other flaw.

34. He berates her about an accident or an innocent mistake.

35. He leaves her a mean note.

36. He walks fast, even if she clearly struggles to keep up.

37. When she has trouble carrying something or picking up things she dropped, he doesn't help.

38. She calls him by a nickname he hates.

39. If she's in a position of power, she gives him more than his share of the work, or assigns the worst job to him.

40. He encourages others to join him in making fun of her.
41. She predicts that his job interview, date, or vacation won't go well.
42. He makes fun of something that he knows she likes.
43. She switches off the music he was listening to, or the TV program he was watching.
44. She unfriends or blocks him on social media.
45. He threatens or bullies her via an anonymous account on social media.
46. She damages his property, maybe when no one can see her, or maybe when she can claim it was accidental. She keys his car, spills water on his phone, or runs over his flowerbed.
47. He slams the door, punches a wall, or smashes a plate on the floor.
48. She makes an abrupt retreat: she storms out of the house, abandons camp, or gets off the plane right before departure.
49. She calls him terrible names.
50. He tells her he hopes she dies, or that she should kill herself.

## 25 RESPONSES TO A CRISIS

When things get really bad, different people react differently. In some cases, their behavior is exactly what one would expect, and in other instances, they reveal new facets of their identities. A person who seems tough may fold like a cheap chair, while a previously unassuming individual may step up to the occasion.

Some of the reactions on this list are reasonable responses to some crises, and inappropriate and counterproductive to others. Some are specific to situations where your characters face a sentient antagonist rather than, say, an illness or a natural disaster.

Your characters' authentic responses to dire events will make your story all the more gripping for a reader. Here are twenty-five possibilities!

1. Physical violence.

2. Freezing up.

He is completely unable to take action. He may not even be able to move or speak.

3. Bargaining.

She opens up negotiations with an aggressor, offering something in exchange for a resolution.

4. Persuasion.

He attempts to appeal to the aggressor's logic or humanity in order to convince her to change course.

5. Seeking comfort.

She asks someone else for reassuring words, a hand to hold, or a hug.

6. Sarcasm and humor.

This is his usual strategy for getting through life, and he sticks to it when big problems arise.

7. Crying.

This may be her main reaction, or something she does before or after taking more productive measures.

8. Blaming.

Even when it's nobody's fault, he insists that it is.

9. Lashing out.

While she doesn't actually blame the people around her for what's happening, she does yell at them.

10. Praying.

She asks God or the deity of her choice to make the crisis go away or keep her company as she goes through it.

11. Fiddling while Rome burns.

Since everything is terrible, she decides that they may as well have sex or a party.

12. Hiding.

He cowers in a closet or avoids his friends and acquaintances.

13. Documenting.

She shoots a video of what's happening or writes about it in her journal in order to make sense of it or serve as a record for others.

14. Analyzing.

He studies and researches the problem, looking for possible solutions,

even when it seems like there aren't any, or there isn't enough time to find them.

15. Nurturing.

She worries about the impact of the situation on the people around her, and tries to take care of them.

16. Escaping.

He runs away. Depending on the situation, this may prove difficult.

17. Choosing oblivion.

In a different kind of escape, she turns to drugs, alcohol, or even suicide.

18. Taking inventory.

He organizes everything that might prove useful, whether it's canned food, ammo, or a list of friends' phone numbers.

19. Looking for help.

She sets out to find a specialist, a neighbor, or a nearby gunfighter to lend a hand in dealing with the problem.

20. Begging.

He pleads with an aggressor to relent and spare him.

21. Switching sides.

She joins forces with an aggressor in order to survive.

22. Verbal attacks.

He yells at or insults the aggressor.

23. Organizing.

She gets a group to confront the problem together, through a strike, a fundraising push, or an uprising.

24. Deceit.

He attempts to get out of the situation through trickery and distraction.

25. Sacrifice.

She tries to save others in a way that puts herself in danger.

## 5. DIALOGUE

Dialogue moves the story forward and reveals a lot about the characters. It's also one of the ways that funny stories are funny. Even in a less humorous novel or script, witty or entertaining conversation can make a sweet story less reverent, or provide some much-needed relief to grim or tense proceedings. That's why I began this section with ideas for writing funny dialogue.

All characters have their own way of speaking. Some wouldn't use bad language if they were on fire, while a few may seem almost unable to speak a sentence without a curse word thrown in. The expressions characters use, how much they talk, and when, will probably depend to some extent on their ages and backgrounds, and may also be affected by their gender.

In real life, all of us have expressions and phrases we use frequently. In your story, a character might use the same expression more than once. If someone in your story is meant to be annoying, you could give him an irritating favorite phrase and let him use it frequently.

In some of these lists, I've broken down common parts of conversations. Some of the less usual options might be used ironically by a contemporary character. Although I've included profane expressions, you don't need to make any of your characters talk that way if that's not your style.

I have also included two lists of words and expressions for stories set in medieval England and Victorian England. While nothing can take the place of reading original sources and getting the rhythms of historical speech in your head, they are a good place to start.

## 25 WAYS TO WRITE FUNNY DIALOGUE

Of course, witty dialogue is all about the execution, but here are some methods that can get you there. One common way to write funny dialogue is by having characters make fun of one another, but this can get old fast. The readers may even get sick of your characters, or think they are a little mean.

When someone in your story says something funny, avoid having other characters overreact to it. If people in the story are slapping their thighs or laughing until they can't breathe at something mildly amusing, the reader may get annoyed. Just remember, a lot of humor grows out of the unique perceptions and points of view of each character.

1. A character is over-dramatic about a situation—or at least, it seems that way to other characters. For instance, he is furious that another player did something shady in his role-playing game, or she is despondent that the jade green dress she ordered is actually emerald green.
2. Someone uses an outlandish or incorrect metaphor, comparing a person, object, or situation to something unexpected.
3. A character is inappropriately candid. (This isn't funny if the character ridicules a vulnerable person.)
4. To a long-winded, convoluted question, someone gives a monosyllabic answer.
5. A character asks someone else a question or a series of questions. The other person doesn't answer, and the character

answers her own question(s).

6. Someone misunderstands a question and gives an unrelated answer.

7. A character begins to deliver a clichéd line, but puts an unexpected spin on it.

8. Someone calls another person by a clever nickname.

9. A character pretends to agree with someone, and then adds a sarcastic comment to show she doesn't agree at all.

10. Someone begins to take offense at something another character says about him—and then admits that it's actually true.

11. A character feigns innocence for comic effect. For instance, she acts shocked about the existence of wrongdoing, or pretends to be dismayed that there's no Santa.

12. Someone proclaims his or his friend's superiority in an exaggerated or exceptionally creative fashion.

13. A character anticipates what someone else wants, or is about to say—but she is way off. “I understand. You want me to kill him.” “What? No!”

14. Someone tells a lie or makes a claim that nobody would ever believe.

15. A character responds to a surprising proclamation or turn of events in a mild and understated way.

16. Someone makes a casual reference to a bizarre event in her past that nobody knows anything about.

17. A character does an imitation of another character. It's either

amusingly bad or hilariously spot on.

18. Someone uses a word or an idiom wrong, or maybe several of them.

19. A character makes a pun or terrible joke, and is very pleased with himself. His being a dork about it is what makes it funny.

20. Someone makes a joke at an inappropriate time, and other characters are unamused.

21. A character says something that, much to her embarrassment, comes out in a suggestive or a self-incriminating way.

22. Someone takes a figure of speech literally, or takes a sarcastic comment in earnest.

23. A character asks someone else a question, but is too distracted to pay attention to or even stick around for the answer.

24. Someone responds to an extremely negative comment or enraged rant in a positive way.

25. A character claims she's said her last word on the subject, and then has to say some more.

## WAYS PEOPLE SAY HELLO

Some of these can be combined into one greeting.

“Good morning.”

“Morning.”

“Hi.”

“Hi there!”

“Hiya.”

“Hey.”

“Hey, dude.”

“Hey, man.”

“Hey, girl.”

“Hey, you.”

“Howdy.”

“Nice to see you.”

“It’s been a while.”

“Long time no see.”

“You’re a sight for sore eyes.”

“Look what the cat dragged in.”

“How are you?”

“How are things?”

**How are things:**

“How’s it going?”

“How you doing?”

“What’s new?”

“What’s shaking?”

“Yo, what’s up?”

“Sup?”

“Well, if it isn’t (name of person here.)”

“Greetings.”

“Good evening.”

Additionally, your character could just say the other person’s name, with enthusiasm, like this: “David!” “Shoshanna!”

## WAYS PEOPLE SAY GOOD-BYE

Again, some of these can be combined.

“Bye.”

“Bye now.”

“Bye-bye.”

“So long.”

“See you later.”

“Catch you later.”

“Catch you on the flip side.”

“Later.”

“Later, skater.”

“I gotta get going.”

“I better head out.”

“I should be on my way.”

“I’m out of here.”

“Peace.”

“Take it easy.”

“Take care.”

“It was nice seeing you.”

“~~No talking to you~~”

true talking to you.

“Good to see you.”

“See you around.”

“See ya.”

“Ta ta.”

“Toodles.”

“Ciao.”

“Adios.”

“Call me!”

“Have a nice day.”

“Have a nice night.”

“Good night.”

## WAYS PEOPLE SAY YES

These include answers to factual questions, responses to suggestions, and expressions of agreement.

“Uh-huh.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Yup.”

“Yeppers.”

“Of course.”

“Naturally.”

“Heck, yes.”

“Hell, yeah.”

“Affirmative.”

“Absolutely.”

“Exactly.”

“Indeed.”

“Correct.”

“Precisely.”

“Bingo.”

“You bet.”

“All right.”

“Allrighty.”

“As far as I know.”

“Okay.”

“Okey dokey.”

“Sounds good.”

“I’m down for that.”

“I’m game.”

“I guess it couldn’t hurt.”

“Sure thing.”

“Sure, why not?”

“I believe so.”

“That’s right.”

“I know, right?”

“That makes sense.”

“Damn straight.”

“You can say that again.”

“Amen to that.”

“Preach.”

## WAYS PEOPLE SAY NO

“I’m not saying no, but...”

“Excuse me?”

“Hold up.”

“Nope.”

“Nah.”

“Naw.”

“Uh-uh.”

“Nuh-uh.”

“Yeah, no.”

“How about no.”

“Oh God, no.”

“Aw, *hell*, no.”

“Yeah, right.”

“You wish.”

“Get lost.”

“Get out of here.”

“Give me a break.”

“Please.”

“Forget it.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Not hardly.”

“Not even close.”

“Not a chance.”

“Not going to happen.”

“No can do.”

“No way.”

“No way in hell.”

“No fucking way.”

“Not on your life.”

“Not in a million years.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Are you out of your mind?”

“Seriously?”

“I wish I could.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Let me think about it.”

“We’ll see.”

## WAYS PEOPLE VERBALIZE POSITIVE FEELINGS

“Yesssss.”

“Oh yeah!”

“Oh, my goodness!”

“Nice!”

“Ahhh!”

“Yay!”

“Hooray!”

“Wow!”

“Woot!”

“Wooo!”

“Woo hoo!”

“Yahoo!”

“Yee haw!”

“Yippee!”

“All right!”

“I love it!”

“Great!”

“Cool!”

“How cool is that?”

“Fantastic!”

“Fabulous!”

“Wonderful!”

“Awesome!”

“Amazing!”

“Brilliant!”

“Excellent!”

“Sweet!”

“Hallelujah!”

“That’s what I’m talking about!”

“Magnificent!”

## WAYS PEOPLE VERBALIZE NEGATIVE FEELINGS

There are so many colorful ways for people to do this, but here are some of the more standard ones. Some of the “Ways People Say No” work here, too.

“Ugh.”

“Hmmph.”

“Yikes.”

“Wow.”

“Ouch.”

“Grrr.”

“Aww, man.”

“Bummer.”

“Drag.”

“Sheesh.”

“Jeez.”

“Booo.”

“Nooo!”

“Oh, fudge.”

“Oh, shoot.”

“Aw, nuts.”

“Oh, poo.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake.”

“Oh, for God’s sake.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

“For Chrissakes.”

“Gah!”

“Rats.”

“Dang it!”

“Crap.”

“This is ridiculous!”

“This is bullshit.”

“Unbelieveable.”

“That sucks!”

“Shoot me now.”

“Damn it!”

“God damn it.”

“Damn it all to hell.”

“What the hell?”

“What the fuck?”

“Shit.”

“Son of a bitch.”

“Fuck this.”

“Alas.”

## WAYS PEOPLE PREFACE STATEMENTS AND QUESTIONS

Most of the time, you probably want to keep your lines of dialogue somewhat more streamlined than real-life speech. However, extra phrases like this can sometimes reveal the personality or mood of the character. For instance, a more hesitant character might begin more sentences with phrases like, “I could be wrong, but...” or “This could just be me, but...” A phrase before a statement can also add emphasis or irony: “Oh, and by the way, you’re fired.”

“So get this....”

“Guess what?”

“You know what?”

“You know something?”

“You know...”

“You’ll never believe...”

“Listen.”

“Look.”

“I feel like...”

“I could be wrong, but...”

“Is it just me, or...”

“I’d just like to say...”

“I’ll say this much...”

“The way I see it...”

“As far as I’m concerned...”

“From what I understand...”

“If you ask me...”

“Personally, I think...”

“For what it’s worth...”

“Just so you know...”

“Just as a heads up...”

“FYI...”

“Not to brag, but...”

“Not for nothing, but...”

“Let me make myself clear.”

“Here’s the thing.”

“The thing is...”

“Obviously...”

“I’ve got to tell you...”

“I gotta be honest here...”

“Frankly...”

“Actually...”

“Not gonna lie...”

“Trust me...”

“Believe me...”

“Believe you me...”

“Believe it or not...”

“I swear...”

“With all due respect...”

“No offense, but...”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but...”

“Just to play devil’s advocate...”

“I’m sorry, but...”

“Forgive me, but...”

“Okay, but...”

“What I want to know is...”

“At the end of the day...”

“I mean...”

“Well...”

“By the way...”

“Before I forget.”

“One more thing.”

## WORDS AND EXPRESSIONS FROM MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

Almost all of these are straight out of *The Canterbury Tales*, written in the late 1300s, but some are from various versions of King Arthur stories. Some are still in use today, but aren't used nearly as often. I've indicated the meaning or usage wherever I felt that it might not be clear.

Dialogue in a contemporary story set in medieval times is rarely accurate, because it needs to be comprehensible to modern readers. By using a number of archaic words and expressions consistently and avoiding language with too modern a sound, you can achieve a convincing historical feel.

a right good steed

all matter of mirths (“all kinds of fun”)

anon (“soon” or “in a little while”)

aye

Be he...? (“Is he...?”)

be ware (“beware”)

begone

betwixt

bid (“ask,” “entreat.” Past tense: bade.)

bold of his speech

breast (a man's or woman's chest)

• • •

bright as any star  
by my fay (“by my faith”)  
by my troth (“I swear”)  
by your leave  
certes (“assuredly”)  
*chérie* (endearment, to a woman: “dear,” “darling”)  
choleric (“bad-tempered”)  
churlish  
come hither  
cursed be that day  
dally  
dalliance (brief sexual relationship)  
deem (“consider,” “judge”)  
demoiselle (“damsel” is an abbreviated version of this. It means “lady,” and may be used in direct address)  
dumb as a tree (“silent”)  
ere/ere long (“before”/“before long”)  
fain (“pleased,” “willing”)  
fair (“attractive,” of a woman; also used in place of “nearly”)  
fellow (also “good fellow”; used to address a common man)  
fie on thee (used the same way as, “screw you,” “the hell with you”)  
fierce as any lion  
for Christ’s love (used the same way as, “for God’s sake”)  
for the nonce (“for the time being”)

fresh as a rose  
full (used to mean “very,” as in “full wise”)  
God defend you/God save you (other ways of saying “God bless you”)  
God’s teeth (a curse)  
God you speed  
gone to ground like a fox (“went into hiding”)  
grammercy (“thank you”)  
grievous (often used to describe news, or a wound)  
haply (“perhaps”)  
hark (“listen”)  
have some drop of pity  
he acquitted himself well (“he did well”)  
Ho!/Ho there! (“Hey!”/“Hey you!”)  
hold you still (“hold still”)  
hold your peace (“be quiet”)  
I cannot say (“I don’t know”)  
I cry you mercy (“I beg your pardon”)  
I marvel that... (“I’m surprised that...”)  
I pray you of your courtesy (the same as, “if you would be so kind”)  
I say not so (“that’s not what I’m saying”)  
imprimis (“first of all”)  
in no wise (“in no way”)  
in sooth (“to tell the truth”)

in this wise (“in this way”)

*Jesú/Jesú Christus* (“Jesus”/”Jesus Christ”)

jolly as a pie (meaning “jolly as a magpie”)

knave (a boy or servant; may also mean a scoundrel)

leech (“doctor”)

leman (female lover or sweetheart)

list (“want,” “like”)

low company (“bad company”)

lusty (“healthy,” “robust”)

mark me well (“listen to me”)

may the Virgin keep thee safe

*merde* (a vulgar curse)

meseems (“it seems to me”)

messires

milady

milord

mine (often used instead of “my” before a noun)

mischance

most like (“most likely”)

must needs (“need(s) to”)

naked as a needle

natheless (“nonetheless”)

naught

nay

never was there such another (storm, knight, etc.)

nigh (“near”; “nearly”)

no more will I (“neither will I”)

of a surety (“definitely”)

on the morrow

overlong (“too long”)

passing (“very”)

perilous

prate (a disparaging way to say “talk”)

pray (“please”)

prithee (an abbreviation of “pray thee;” also means “please”)

privily (“secretly” or “confidentially”)

queint (“vagina”)

red as any fox

sanguine (“cheerful”; can also refer to a ruddy complexion)

sennight (“week”)

simpleton

sirrah (used to address a man or boy of lower rank; an insult)

slay

slut (a woman who doesn’t keep herself clean)

stalwart

succor (“aid”)

swain (a young male lover)

tarry

thee (“you,” as an object of a verb or preposition)

thou (“you,” as the subject of a verb)

thy (“your”)

treacherous

trow (“think,” “believe”)

trull (“prostitute”)

varlet (a servant, particularly a knight’s page; by mid-1500s, it meant a dishonest man)

touching him (“concerning him”)

wax (“grow,” “become,” as in “it waxes late”)

What cheer?/What cheer do you have? (“How are you?”)

What ho? (“What’s this?”)

What wilt thou say?

whether he will or no (“whether he wants to or not,” “whether he wants it or not”)

whilst

whosoever

will he or nill he (same as “whether he will or no”)

with full glad heart

witless (“foolish”)

woe

yea

yellow as wax

yeoman (a landowner of a class beneath the gentry; may be used in direct address)

yonder

your wont (“your desire,” or “your tendency”)

## WORDS AND EXPRESSIONS FROM VICTORIAN ENGLAND

Most of these words and phrases are used today, but far less frequently. To create this list, I worked from the dialogue in the novels of Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, as well as *Passing English of the Victorian Era*, published in 1909. I haven't included much street slang or any Cockney rhyming slang, delightful as it is, because their application is so specific and because so many excellent resources for them exist online.

Characters in British Victorian novels use more adverbs than in contemporary ones, particularly in negative contexts: "a beastly country," "cruelly unjust," "dreadfully poor," and so on. Even if you are accustomed to eschewing adverbs in your writing, you may want to make some use of them in historical conversations.

Reading a few Victorian novels will give you an ear for the dialogue. Sentence constructions, in particular, are different and more elaborate in Victorian conversations than in present-day speech.

a good deal/a great deal ("a lot")

a small matter/no matter ("no big deal")

abominable

agreeable (may describe not only a person but also a situation)

amiable

at your peril ("at your own risk")

away (lower class usage; a euphemism for "in prison")

~~university teacher class usage. a supplement to "in prison",~~

Bah! (an expression of disgust)

bang up to the elephant (“perfect” – this later got shortened to “bang up,” as in “doing a bang-up job”)

barmy (“crazy,” “mad”)

beast (used as an insult)

before you can say Jack Robinson (“in no time”)

between the Devil and the deep blue sea (similar to “between a rock and a hard place”)

blackguard

bless my soul

bootlicker (“sycophant”)

butter upon bacon (“more than enough”)

by George

by Jove

by-the-bye (“by the way”)

capital (“excellent,” as in “a capital idea”)

chafed (annoyed: “you are a little chafed”)

charming

clever

Cock of the Walk (a leader, or a confident, domineering man)

coming a cropper (failing, or having a stroke of very bad luck)

confound it/confound you (“damn it”/“damn you”)

contrivance (may mean an invention or a scheme)

cordial

costermonger (someone who sells fruits and vegetables, usually from a cart on the street)

countenance

creature (used of people: “dear creature,” “poor creature,” “be a reasonable creature”)

cross (as in “grumpy”)

cruel (frequently used in the same way contemporary North Americans use “mean”)

dash it all (a more polite version of “damn it all”)

dear me

delightful

detestable

devilish (used to modify an adjective, such as “devilish good-natured”)

disgraceful

distressing

diverting

double-dealing (“backstabbing,” “treacherous”)

doubtless

dreadful

drunk as a lord (a middle and lower class expression)

dull as ditchwater (this is the original expression, possibly coined by Dickens, which later changed to “dull as dishwater”)

everything is nice in your garden (a mildly reproachful response to a boast)

extraordinary

Commonly

falsehood

feeling low (a common way to say “sad”; also, “low in spirits”)

fellows (frequently, the way a man refers to other men)

a fine fellow

in fine fettle (in good shape, or well organized)

fond

folly

fool/foolish

foolish fancy (a silly idea or notion)

for shame (used as a reproach)

frightful/frightfully

ghastly

glad to hear of it (“I am glad to hear of it;” “I hope he will be glad to hear of it”)

gloomy

good God

good gracious/good gracious me

good-humored

grand (“Isn’t that a grand idea?”)

grieved (not only used in reference to death: bad news or bad luck may leave someone “grieved”)

grouse (“grumble”)

hang it all (used in the same way as “damn it,” to express frustration)

hard (used in the same way as “mean,” as in, “you say such hard things”)

hard as nails

haste (“make haste” means “hurry,” and “hasty” means “quick”)

he worships the golden calf (“he only cares about profit”)

heaven and earth (used in the same way as, “for heaven’s sake”)

hindrance

hoodwinked

horrid

hungry as a hunter

I assure you (“most assuredly,” “most assuredly not,” and “most assuredly so” are also commonly used)

I can’t give over (“I can’t let it go”)

I dare say

I entreat you

I give you my sacred honour that (“I promise you that”)

I say... (a common beginning of a sentence)

I wonder that... (“I’m surprised that...”)

idleness

if I may inquire

if you please

I’ll be bound (“I bet”)

I’m sure (sometimes used at the end of sentences: “I don’t know, I’m sure.” “I’m certain” is used in the same way.)

ill-bred

impertinence  
in a twinkling (“in a moment”)  
insolence  
Indeed? (“Really?”)  
it is just the thing (“it is popular”; “it is commonly done”)  
jolly  
let me bear you company (“let me keep you company”)  
loathsome  
Love bless you/Lord love you  
lucky dog (a lucky man)  
madness (like “lunacy,” often used to describe plans and situations)  
mamma (used by many children and adult women to address and refer to their mothers)  
mean (used as a synonym of “stingy”)  
minx (mischievous girl or young woman)  
monstrous  
my blood is up (“I’m upset”)  
my dear boy/fellow/girl/sir/lady/child  
my good sir/my worthy sir  
naughty  
no use flogging a willing horse  
nor did I (“neither did I”)  
not a matter of much consequence  
~~not to be endured~~

**NOT TO BE CONFUSED**

oh, dear/oh, dear me

oh, my stars

odious

on the square (“honest”)

palaver (idle or pointless discussion)

paltry

papa (used by many children and adult women to address and refer to their fathers)

peevish

perfect lady (used satirically on the streets, to describe someone who’s anything but)

pitiful

pleasant (“a pleasant journey,” “a pleasant evening”)

Pooh! Pooh! (a dismissive expression)

portionless (without a regular allowance)

provoking (“irritating”)

Pshaw! (an expression of disparagement)

quarrelsome

queer (“strange”)

quite right (“absolutely”; “quite correct” is also used often)

scarcely

sick at heart (“very upset”)

speak plainly

spruce (neat or stylish)

stupified

that won't answer ("that won't work")

throw him over ("abandon him")

scoundrel

scuttler (a tough young person of the streets)

silent as the tomb

splendid

suitable

sulky

that is nothing to the purpose ("that doesn't matter")

thrashed ("beaten")

to be sure

trifle

Tut, tut! (an expression of admonishment)

uncivil

uncommonly

unfeeling

ungenerous

unjust

unmanly

unwell

up to the scratch ("sufficient," "good enough")

upon my life

upon my word

vainglorious

vexed

victuals (food; provisions)

vulgar (often used the same way as “tacky” or “trashy,” to describe both things and people)

was desirous of (“wanted”)

well-bred

What can you mean?/Whatever can you mean? (“What do you mean?”)

What next? (a common response to an unbelievable statement)

What the deuce...? (“What the heck...?”)

What the devil...? (“What the devil do you mean?” “What the devil’s the use?”)

woeful

wickedness

with all my heart

Would you be good enough to...? (used when asking a favour; also, “Could you have the goodness to...?”)

wretched

you are very good/you are very kind

you do me honour

your obedient servant (a popular closing for a letter; also, “your humble servant”)

## 6. CHARACTER NAMES

Some of us take forever to figure out what to call the people in our stories—and with good reason. Often, one of the first things our reader learns about a character is his or her name. For a novel, the names of the main characters are right there in the blurb or on the back cover.

If the names sound too fake, that can turn people off, although there is a lot of leeway in speculative genres such as science fiction, fantasy, and paranormal romance. When the character names of a historical story are too modern, readers will roll their eyes. Bad character names can even keep people from buying a book in the first place.

Getting the right names for characters is a passion of mine, and I'm going to share a few suggestions to make your choices reader-friendly. It's only my opinion, so see what works for you.

1. Whenever possible, choose names that most readers will be able to pronounce in their heads, at least for your main characters. Granted, this may be a challenge for some time periods and places.
2. If you pick an unusual first name, you might want to go with a normal surname ("Indiana Jones" is a great example.) Conversely, if you have a common first name, you might want a more evocative last name to give your character some flair ("Mary Poppins," for instance.) Then again, you might want the character to sound like a very average person...even if it turns out she's anything but.
3. Avoid writing a conversation where the character explains why she is named what she is ("Actually, my full name is Andromeda. My mother is an astronomer, you see...") It's overdone. If the name is so weird that it absolutely

requires explaining, pick a more believable one.

4. If you are writing a fantasy or science fiction story, the characters from the same culture should have a similar logic to their names. For instance, don't name one elf Silverleaf and another elf Bob.
5. Make sure all of your characters don't have names that start with the same letter, or else your reader will have a terrible time keeping them straight. Giving siblings names that start with the same letter is fine, because it reminds the reader that they are related.
6. Avoid having the same number of syllables in everyone's first and last names. Mix it up a little.
7. Use nicknames to convey relationships. For instance, the first time one of your character shortens the name of another one—calling her “Ro” instead of “Rosemary,” for instance—it can be an exciting signal to the reader that they've become closer. Family members and old friends may have childhood nicknames for your character that nobody else uses in her adult life. In some communities, everyone may go by nicknames.

Okay, enough advice. On to the lists!

## NAMES FROM VIKING-ERA SCANDINAVIA

I found most of the names on this list in Norse sagas that describe the Viking age in the 900s and early 1000s. I also looked at historical documents dating from around that time.

This list includes Anglicized names, and I have excluded many names that I felt would befuddle most English-speaking readers. Some of these names may still be difficult, or sound odd—in fact, one of the men’s names is literally Odd—but they will give your Viking historical novel or romance an authentic feel.

I’ve also listed last names that people earned, such as Sweyn Forkbeard and Erik the Red. You could have a lot of fun making up surnames like this for your characters. Some of the ones here seem kind of mean, but if you’ve ever read any of the sagas, this will not surprise you.

# WOMEN

Agata

Ádisa

Alfifa

Arnfasta

Arnóra

Ása

Asgerd

Aslaug

Asny

Astrid

Astrior

Asvor

Atla

Aud

Bera

Berghóra

Bersa

Birna

Borga

Brynhild

Dagmar

Dalla

Droplaug

Edda

Elfdisa

Eyfura

Folka

Freydis

Frigg

Geirrid

Gerd

Grima

Grimhild

Gróa

Gudrid

Gudrun

Gudny

Gunnhildr

Hadda

Haldora

Halla

Hallbera

Hallgerda

— — —

Hallkatla

Helga

Herbord

Herdís

Hilda

Holmkel

Hungerd

Ingibiorg

Idun

Jódís

Jofrid

Jórunn

Katla

Kol

Kolfrosta

Kolga

Kistrún

Luta

Nál

Nauma

Olof

Osk

Randalin

Καγούνια

Rannveig

Ríkví

Sága

Saldís

Sif

Signy

Sigrid

Skaga

Svala

Svanhild

Steingerd

Swala

Thora

Thorbera

Thorbjörg

Thordis

Thorgerd

Thurid

Ulfrún

Unna

Valka

Vigdis

## MEN

Alfarin

Asmund

Asolf

Atli

Audolf

Bard

Bearne

Bergfinn

Björn

Bodvar

Bolli

Bork

Bran

Brand

Dofri

Egil

Einar

Eldearn

Erik

Eyjolf

Eywind

Finnbogi

Gestr

Gisli

Glum

Grettir

Grimr

Grímur

Gunnar

Gunnbjorn

Gunnlaug

Hafgrim

Haldor

Hagbard

Harald

Heimir

Helgi

Hermund

Illugi

Ingimundur

Ivar

Jofrid

Jokul

- - -

Jorund

Ketil

Leif

Odd

Ofeig

Olaf

Olvir

Ogmund

Önundur

Ondott

Orund

Ossur

Raknar

Randwer

Raven

Rerir

Rolf

Sigi

Sigurd

Skuli

Snorri

Solvi

Soti

## Steinor

Stymir

Sweyn

Thrand

Thoralf

Thorarin

Thorfinn

Thorgrim

Thorgunna

Thorir

Thorkel

Thorsteinn

Thorvald

Thrond

Ufeig

Uspak

Vali

Vestein

Vestmar

Viglund

Wolf

## SURNAMES – WOMEN

Ásbrandsdóttir

Bárðsdóttir

Baugsdóttir

Bjarnardóttir

Bolladóttir

Brynjólfssdóttir

Egilsdóttir

Einarsdóttir

Flosadóttir

Gamlisdóttir

Gilsdóttir

Grímsdóttir

Hallkelsdóttir

Hermundardóttir

Höskuldursdóttir

Hrútssdóttir

Ingjaldsdóttir

Jónsdóttir

Kollsdóttir

Konalsdóttir

,

Ofeigsdóttir

Oddsdóttir

Olofsdótter

Onundardóttir

Ósvífrsdóttir

Sigurðsdóttir

Skaftadóttir

Snorradóttir

Steinsdóttir

Sturludóttir

Tindsdóttir

Valbrandsdóttir

Vestarsdóttir

Yngvarsdóttir

Sunbeam

Witchface

the Fair

the Deep-Minded

the Haughty

the High-C counseled

the Low

the Slender

## SURNAMES – MEN

Asbrandson

Ásvaldsson

Bollason

Bolverkson

Egilson

Eriksson

Estridsson

Geitirsson

Gormsson

Gnupasson

Gudlaugsson

Hafgrimson

Hámundarson

Haraldsson

Harðbeinsson

Herjolfsson

Hoskuldsson

Hrólfsson

Ingjaldsson

Ketilsson

Kollsson

Leifsson

Magnusson

Marson

Ólafsson

Önundarson

Skallagrímsson

Súrsson

Tryggvason

Bloodaxe

Clubfoot

Combhood

Dry-Frost

Flatnose

Gatebeard

Halt-Foot

Greycloak

Most-Beard

Ironpate

Longchin

Rough-Foot

Treefoot

Wall-Eye

- - - - -

Wooden-Leg  
the Black  
the Bounteous  
the Broad  
the Burner  
the Crow  
the Fox  
the Greyhaired  
the Learned  
the Masterful  
the Peacock  
the Sage  
the Smiter  
the Strong  
the Unwashed  
the Victorious  
the Proud  
the Thick  
the Wealthy  
the Wise  
the Worm-Tongue

## NAMES FROM MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

This list might also be helpful if you're writing a high fantasy with swords and sorcery. Naming trends didn't change nearly so quickly in past centuries as they do now, so it's a good resource for your English Renaissance or Tudor-era story as well.

My sources include battle histories, subsidy rolls, and [A Dictionary of English Surnames](#). I also included just a few names from the King Arthur legends.

## MEN

Adam

Adelard

Aglovale

Alan

Aland

Albert

Aldred

Alexander

Alfred

Alisander

Alphonse

Amis

Anselm

Arnold

Arthur

Balin

Bardolph

Barnabas

Bartholomew

Basil

Baudwin

Bennet

Berenger

Bernard

Bertram

Blaise

Bliant

Brom

Bryce

Castor

Cederic

Cerdic

Charles

Cyr

Daniel

David

Denis

Diggory

Dinadan

Drogo

Edgar

Edward

Edwin

— .

Egbert

Elias

Eliot

Eluard

Emory

Eustace

Everard

Faramond

Frederick

Fulke

Gabriel

Galleron

Gamel

Gareth

Geoffrey

George

Gerald

Gerard

Gervase

Gilbert

Giles

Godwin

Gregory

Grimm

Gunter

Guy

Hamon

Hamond

Hardwin

Hector

Henry

Herbert

Herman

Hildebrand

Hubert

Hugh

Humphrey

Ingram

Isaac

Isembard

Ives

James

Jasper

Jeremy

Jocelyn

Jordan

Joseph

*josephus*

Lambert

Laurence

Leland

Leofwin

Lionel

Lucan

Lucius

Mabon

Manfred

Mark

Martin

Matthew

Maynard

Merek

Michael

Miles

Milo

Nicholas

Nigel

Noah

Ogier

Osric

*paul*

Percival

Peter

Philip

Piers

Randel

Ranulf

Reginald

Richard

Robert

Roger

Roland

Rolf

Rowan

Sampson

Sayer

Silas

Solomon

Theobald

Thomas

Thurstan

Timm

Tobias

Tristram

Turstin

Ulric

Urian

Walter

Warin

Warner

William

Wolfstan

Wymond

## WOMEN

Acelina

Adelina

Aelina

Agnes

Aldith

Alice

Alma

Althea

Alyson

Amelina

Amicia

Anais

Anne

Artemisia

Athelina

Audry

Augusta

Avina

Barbetta

Beatrice

Berta

Blanche

Brangwine

Bridget

Caesaria

Cassandra

Catelin

Caterina

Cecily

Celestria

Christina

Clare

Constance

Dameta

Delia

Dionisia

Douglas

Edeva

Edith

Eglenti

Elaine

Eleanor

Elizabeth

—..

Elle  
Elysande  
Emeline  
Emma  
Etheldreda  
Eva  
Evaine  
Evelune  
Felicia  
Florence  
Floria  
Genevieve  
Gisela  
Giselle  
Gracia  
Gratia  
Guinevere  
Gundred  
Gwendolen  
Helewisa  
Ida  
Ingerith  
Isabeau

-----

ise may

Isolda

Ivette

Joan

Johanna

Joya

Joyce

Juliana

Justina

Laudine

Lavina

Legarda

Lena

Letia

Leticia

Lia

Lillian

Linota

Lovota

Lucia

Lunete

Magdalen

Margaret

Margareta

**Names**

Marie

Marion

Martha

Mary

Mathilde

Maud

Milisant

Mirielda

Molly

Muriel

Nesta

Nicola

Odelina

Oliva

Orella

Oswalda

Paulina

Petronilla

Regina

Richolda

Roana

Rosa

Rosamund

**Names**

Roxanne

Sabina

Sapphira

Sarah

Sela

Sigga

Sophronia

Susanna

Swanhild

Sybil

Tephania

Theda

Thora

Venetia

Viviane

Ysmeine

## SURNAMES

This list includes patronyms, occupational names, and place names. You will need to research whichever last name you choose to make sure that it makes sense for your character.

Achard

Alder

Arundel

Ashdown

Atwood

Auber

Bainard

Baker

Ballard

Barnes

Basset

Bauldry

Baxter

Beaumont

Becker

Bellecote

Beringar

Bortman

**Bertram**

Bigge

Bolam

Bosc

Bouchard

Brewer

Brickenden

Brooker

Brooker

Browne

Burrel

Burroughs

Butler

Cambray

Campion

Campion

Canouville

Capron

Capron

Cardon

Cardonell

Carpenter

Carter

Cecil

~~.....~~

Challener

Challenge

Chauncy

Chauncy

Cherbourg

Clarke

Clay

Colleville

Comyn

Cooke

Cooper

Corbet

Corbin

Courcy

Court

Cross

Crump

Cumin

Custer

d'Albert

d'Ambray

Dale

Danneville

Darcy  
Dean  
de Balon  
de Beauvais  
de Bethencourt  
de Bethencourt  
de Blays  
de Challon  
de Civille  
de Coucy  
de Erley  
de Ferrers  
de Grandmesnil  
de Grey  
de Ireby  
de Lacy  
de la Haye  
de la Pole  
de la Porte  
de la Reue  
de la Roche  
de Logris  
de Lorris

de Maris

de Montfort

Deschamps

de Servian

des Roches

Destain

Dodd

Drake

Draper

Dumont

Durandal

Durville

Duval

Duval

Dyer

Emory

Evelyn

Faintree

Faucon

FitzAlan

FitzOsbern

Fitzroy

Fletcher

Ford

Foreman

Forester

Fox

Fuller

Gael

Gary

Gaveston

Giffard

Gillian

Gilpin

Glanville

Godart

Godefroy

Graves

Griffen

Grosseteste

Guideville

Gurney

Hachet

Harcourt

Hauville

Hawthorn

Hayward

Hendry

Holland

Holmes

Hood

Hope

Hughes

Ide

la Mare

Lamb

Langdon

Latham

Lea

le Blanc

le Blanc

le Conte

le Grant

le Grant

le Orphelin

le Roux

le Savage

Lister

Lucy

Lynom

Malet

Mallory

Mallory

Manners

Marchmain

Marshal

Martel

Mason

Mathan

Mathan

May

Medley

Mercer

Mortimer

Mortmain

Mowbray

Napier

Nash

Nesdin

Neuville

Noyers

of Benwick

of Cleremont

of Warwick

of Wichelsea

Osmont

Papon

Parmenter

Parry

Parry

Paschal

Patris

Payne

Perci

Perroy

Peveril

Picard

Port

Prestcote

Rainecourt

Raleigh

Rames

Renold

Reviers

Roger

Rolfe  
Rowntree  
Saint-Clair  
Saint-Germain  
Saint-Leger  
Sawyer  
Seller  
Shepherd  
Slater  
Taylor  
Teller  
Thibault  
Thorne  
Tilly  
Tull  
Vaughan  
Vaux  
Verdun  
Vernon  
Ward  
Watteau  
Weaver  
Webber

**w**ebs

Wilde

Willoughby

Wood

Wright

Writingham

## NAMES FROM REGENCY ENGLAND

The Regency period is exceptionally popular in historical romance. This list is a good reference for any project set in England from the Georgian through the Victorian era.

The Regency period lasted from 1811 to 1820. To create this list, I used various parish records from that period. I also looked at portions of UK Census Returns of 1801 and 1821, and parts of Burke's Peerage 1826. Although these latter sources were not dated exactly to the Regency period, they were close enough to contribute to an accurate list.

Many of these names would have had nicknames, such as "Nora" for "Honora" and "Molly" for "Mary." I've only listed diminutives if they were given names in their own right. Some of the first names here are unusual for the time. Although I haven't done a quantified study, an asterisk indicates a name that showed up often in the records I consulted.

I didn't do a surname list here because it overlapped so much with the surnames in the medieval list, as well as the list of the most popular U.S. surnames at the end of this section.

## WOMEN

Abigail

Agnes

Albina

Alice\*

Alicia

Amelia

Amy

Angel

Ann\*

Anne\*

Arabella

Augusta

Awella

Barbara

Beatrice

Betsey

Betty\*

Bridget

Caroline

Catherine\*

Cecilia  
Charity  
Charlotte\*  
Christianna  
Deborah  
Diana  
Dinah  
Dorothea  
Dorothy  
Edith  
Eleanor\*  
Eliza\*  
Elizabeth\*  
Ellen\*  
Emily  
Emma  
Emmeline  
Esther\*  
Fanny\*  
Florentia  
Frances\*  
Frederica  
Georgiana

— .

Georgina

Grace\*

Hannah\*

Harriet\*

Helen

Helena

Henrietta

Hester

Honora

Horatia

Isabel\*

Isabella

Jane\*

Jean

Jemima

Jenny

Jessie

Joan

Joanna

Joyce

Judith

Julia

Juliana

Juniet

Katherine

Kitty

Laura

Lavinia

Leah

Letitia

Lilias

Louisa

Lucy\*

Lucy-Anne

Lydia

Madalene

Margaret

Maria\*

Marianne

Marina

Margaret\*

Marjorie

Martha\*

Mary\*

Mary Ann\*

Matilda

Melissa

**IV. FEMALE**

Modesty

Nancy\*

Patience

Peace

Peggy

Phillis

Phyllis

Phoebe

Priscilla

Prudence

Rachel\*

Rebecca\*

Rose

Ruth

Sally\*

Sarah\*

Selina

Sophia\*

Susan\*

Susannah

Tabitha

Teresa

Theodosia

~~SECRET//NOFORN~~

Unity

## MEN

Aaron

Abraham\*

Adam

Adolphus

Albinus

Albion

Alexander\*

Algernon

Allan

Ambrose

Americus

Andrew

Anthony

Archibald

Arthur

Augustus

Aylmer

Baldwin

Barnard

Benedict

Benjamin\*

Brook

Carew

Cecil

Charles\*

Christmas

Christopher\*

Coape

Colin

Cornelius

Daniel\*

David\*

Donald

Dudley

Duncan

Edmund\*

Edward\*

Edwin

Eli

Elias

Emanuel

Ephraim

Erasmus

—

Ernest

Evan

Ewan

Ezra

Felton

Francis\*

Frederick

George\*

Gerard

Gibbs

Giles

Gilbert

Graham

Guy

Harcourt

Harry

Henry\*

Herbert

Honor

Horace

Hudson

Hugh\*

Isaac\*

JACOD

Jahleel

James\*

Jasper

Jeffrey

Jeremy

Jerome

John\*

Jonathan\*

Joseph\*

Joshua

Josiah

Josias

Kenneth

Laurence

Leonard

Levi

Lewis

Lodge

Loftus

Ludlow

Luke

Mark

Martin

**Names**

Matthew\*

Meshach

Michael

Miles

Morgan

Moses

Nash

Nathaniel

Neil

Nicholas

Noah

Norman

Obadiah

Oliver

Owen

Patrick

Percy

Percival

Peregrine

Peter\*

Philip\*

Phineas

Ralph

~~Names~~

Reginald

Reuben

Richard\*

Robert\*

Roger

Rollo

Sampson

Samuel\*

Seth

Shadrack

Sherborne

Silas

Simon

Solomon

Stephen

Theophile

Thomas\*

Timothy

Walter

William\*

## 200 NAMES FROM THE WILD WEST

The list of Regency names will actually give you plenty of good ideas for naming characters in an American Western, and you'll be able to tell which ones are too high-faluting to import into your Wild West town (although even those might be good for one of your city slicker characters.) Here are some first names of real people in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Western United States. They are outlaws, lawmen, buffalo soldiers, rodeo performers, soldiers who fought at the Alamo, railroad laborers, gold prospectors, prostitutes, business owners, entertainers, and more.

Several names on the list are unusual, and some sound like nicknames. They may still be given names, or in some cases, a person's nickname may have become so common that his Christian name was forgotten, even for official documents.

Many of these names are English or German in origin, and some of them seem to be American inventions. Names with an asterisk belonged to Mexicans or Mexican Americans. Two asterisks indicate a Chinese name, spelled as it was on the census records. There were far fewer Chinese women than Chinese men in the Wild West, and I was unable to find any on census records, so I don't have any listed here.

This list does not include names of Native Americans, as far as I know, because I don't want to contribute to any errors. You'll need to look into a Native American character's particular background and history and consider factors of cultural assimilation in order to find an appropriate name.

## WOMEN

Adaline

Aleda

Almira

Alpha

America

Antonia\*

Artemicia

Aurora

Banica

Barbary

Belle

Beulah

Birdie

Blanche

Caldonia

Calsey

Candelaria\*

Chastelle

Clementine

Comfort

Cordelia

Cory

Della

Dina

Dixie

Dolly

Donita

Drusilla

Edgarda

Effie

Elisa

Ernestine

Elnora

Etta

Eugenia

Eunice

Faustina

Faye

Freda

Fredricka

Guadelupe\*

Gussie

Helentha

— . .

Helvina

Hepsibah

Iola

Isadora

Iva

Kittie

Jewell

Jovenita\*

Lena

Lissie

Lola

Lotta

Lovina

Luella

Lulu

Malena

Malinda

Marietta

Mattie

Medina

Minerva

Missouri

Myra

Ivannie

Narcissa

Nellie

Nesta

Nettie

Nicolasa\*

Parthenia

Patsie

Pearl

Philena

Pleasant

Reta

Reva

Rosalia

Rosetta

Sadie

Salina

Sallie Jane

Sirena

Solana

Sura

Temperance

Thresia

Trinidad\*

~~Una~~

Una

Ursula

Versie Mae

Victoriana\*

Vina

Wilhelmina

Zerelda

Zola

## MEN

Adison

Alladin

Alvis

Antone

Axel

Bass

Bing

Boone

Bose

Bruno

Burrell

Buster

Camillus

Chambers

Chancy

Clinton

Cornelius

Dallas

Delton

Dewitt

Elfego\*

Ellwood

Emil

Emmett

Ervine

Eulogio\*

Fidelous

Fine

Fletcher

Floyd

Gregorio\*

Grover

Gustavus

Ham

Hamilton

Hampton

Herman

Hilliard

Hiram

Holden

Hugo

Isham

Jin\*\*

- - -

Judd

Lacon

Lafayette

Lamoyne

Larken

Launcelot

Leander

Leonidas

Lester

Levi

Lewellyn

Lin\*\*

Lot

Loyal

Lucius

Lyman

Mack

Major

Marlin

Marquess

Maximino\*

Melchior

Merritt

~~Millard~~

Milo

Monroe

Montford

Mose

Newton

Orlindo

Paden

Pious

Pliney

Preston

Prince

Prudencio\*

Pryor

Quan\*\*

Quincy

Ransom

Roscoe

Shelby

Simeon

Socorro\*

Squire

Stillman

~~Temple~~

~~Temple~~

Tiburcio\*

Tuck

Uriah

Ventura\*

Volney

Warner

Washington

Wiley

Worth

Wright

## NAMES FROM WORLD WAR II-ERA U.S. AND GREAT BRITIAN

If you need names for soldiers, pilots, nurses, Rosie the Riveters and Land Girls, look no further. This list can also be useful for any project set in the U.S. or the U.K. from the 1930s through the 1950s. You might even find the perfect name for an older character in your contemporary novel. Many of the names on this list are still popular today.

For the most part, names were pretty similar on both sides of the pond. The names marked with an asterisk, however, seem to be more typical in the U.K. than in the U.S. in this period.

## WOMEN

Agnes

Alice

Alma

Anna

Annie

Barbara

Beatrice

Bernice

Bertha

Betty

Catherine

Clara

Dolores

Doris

Dorothy

Edith

Edna

Elaine

Eleanor

Elizabeth

Ella  
Elsie  
Emma  
Esther  
Ethel  
Evelyn  
Florence  
Frances  
Geraldine  
Gertrude  
Gladys  
Gloria  
Hazel  
Helen  
Irene  
Jane  
Jean  
Josephine  
Juanita  
June  
Leona  
Lillian  
Lois

- .

Lorraine

Louise

Lucille

Mabel

Marie

Marion

Marjorie

Margaret

Martha

Mary

Maud\*

Mildred

Minnie

Myrtle

Nancy

Norma

Opal

Patricia

Pearl

Phyllis

Rita

Rose

Ruby

Kutn

Sarah

Shirley

Thelma

Vera

Virginia

Wanda

Wilma

Yvonne\*

## MEN

Albert

Alvin

Anthony

Archibald\*

Arthur

Benjamin

Bernard

Carl

Charles

Chester

Clarence

Clyde

Cyril\*

Dale

Daniel

David

Donald

Douglas

Edgar

Edward

Edwin

Ernest

Eugene

Everett

Francis

Frank

Fred

Frederick

Geoffrey\*

George

Gilbert

Glenn

Harold

Harry

Harvey

Henry

Herbert

Howard

Hugh\*

Ian\*

Jack

James

John

- - -

Joseph

Kenneth

Lawrence

Leo

Leonard

Louis

Marvin

Maurice

Milton

Nigel\*

Oscar

Paul

Percy\*

Peter

Ralph

Raymond

Richard

Robert

Roy

Russell

Samuel

Sidney\*

Stanley

Thomas

Vernon

Victor

Virgil

Walter

Warren

Wayne

Willard

William

# 200 NAMES FOR CONTEMPORARY HEROINES

When you're naming characters for a novel or script set in the present day, you can turn to a baby name book or website. However, that means wading through thousands of choices, many of them difficult to pronounce or hard to imagine using for an adult in a contemporary setting. This is my attempt to make it a little bit easier.

Many names on this list are popular for women in their 20s, 30s, and 40s in the United States. I have avoided some choices with negative connotations or baggage (although any one of them might carry baggage for you). I've curated some rarer names as well. I hope you can find the right moniker here for your quirky, brave, gorgeous, brainy, compassionate, and/or hilarious heroine!

1. Abigail
2. Aisha
3. Alexandra/Alexandria
4. Alice *Alicia is one variation.*
5. Allison *Also spelled Allyson. Alyssa is another option. Most people think of Allison as blonde and friendly.*
6. Amanda *She might go by Mandy.*
7. Amaya *A pretty Japanese name with a pretty meaning—“night rain.”*
8. Amelia

9. Amy
10. Andrea
11. Angelina
12. Annika *Both a Russian and a Swedish name, and actually, I knew an Annika from Finland.*
13. Antonia
14. April *Abrial is the Spanish version.*
15. Aria
16. Athena *The goddess of wisdom and war. Suitable for a brave, smart heroine.*
17. Audrey *I've always loved this name, which has an elegant association with Audrey Hepburn. Audra is a variation.*
18. Autumn
19. Bethany
20. Brandy
21. Bree *Irish in origin, this name is derived from the name Brigid.*
22. Bronwyn *This is a classic Welsh name.*
23. Brooke
24. Caitlin
25. Callista *This Greek name can also be spelled with a “k.”*
26. Camille

27. Caprice *This seems like the name of someone who might get you into trouble, and it might be worth it.*
28. Carina *Also spelled Karina. Corinne is a similar name.*
29. Carissa
30. Caroline *Carrie is the most common nickname, and Carolina is a Spanish version. The Carolina I know has Colombian parents, and everyone calls her Caro.*
31. Catalina
32. Cecilia *Celia is a variation.*
33. Celeste
34. Chandra
35. Chantal “*Chantel*” and “*Shantell*” are alternate spellings.
36. Charlotte “*Lottie*” is one possible nickname.
37. Chaya *This is a Hebrew name meaning “life.”*
38. Cherie
39. Chloe
40. Clara
41. Clio *This is the name of the muse of history—one of the nine muses in Greek mythology. Cleo is an alternate spelling.*
42. Colleen
43. Courtney
44. Daisy

45. Dalia *May also be spelled Dahlia, like the flower.*
46. Dana *Danae is a variation.*
47. Daphne
48. Dawn *This is kind of an optimistic hippie name.*
49. Delphine
50. Diamond
51. Diana
52. Devi *A Hindu name that means “divine” or “goddess.”*
53. Dominique *A glamorous name of French origin. Monique has a similar feel.*
54. Eden
55. Elena *This is an Italian, Spanish, and eastern European version of Helen.*
56. Elise *Elyse is an alternate spelling.*
57. Elizabeth *All kinds of nicknames possible.*
58. Emily
59. Erin
60. Estelle *Stella is a variation.*
61. Eva *Could also be short for Evangeline.*
62. Faith

63. Felicia *Felicity is a variation.*
64. Fern
65. Florence *Flora or Flory are nice nicknames.*
66. Francesca
67. Gabriela *This is a Spanish name, and Gabriella and Gabrielle are English versions.*
68. Genevieve *Geneva is a similar choice.*
69. Georgia
70. Giselle
71. Grace
72. Haley *Can also be spelled Hayley.*
73. Hannah
74. Heidi
75. Holly
76. Hope
77. Imogene *This is an unusual but very classic name. It can also be spelled Imogen, but the “e” on the end helps with pronunciation.*
78. Ingrid *This Scandinavian name first got popular in the United States thanks to the actress Ingrid Bergman.*
79. Iris *A pretty flower and the name of a famous writer, Iris Murdoch.*

80. Ivy
81. Jacqueline\* *Bound to have associations with elegance, thanks to Jackie Kennedy.*
82. Jade *People imagine that Jade has a carefree personality. Jada is a variation.*
83. Jamie.
84. Jamila *An Arabic name that means “beautiful.” Can also be spelled Jamilla or Jamillah.*
85. Jane *I think of this as a good name for a reserved person, probably because of Pride and Prejudice. Janelle, Janine, and Janae are variants.*
86. Jasmine
87. Jennifer *Jenna is a variation.*
88. Jessamine *Jess or Jessie for short.*
89. Jia *A Chinese name that means “good” or “outstanding.”*
90. Jillian *This could also be spelled Gillian.*
91. Joelle *This French name means “Jehovah is God.”*
92. Jolene
93. Josephine *She could go by Jo, Joey, or Josie.*
94. Joy
95. Julia
96. June

97. Justine

98. Karen

99. Katherine *Also spelled Catherine, of course. There are a few different choices for nicknames here.*

100. Kelly

101. Kelsey *Can also be spelled Kelsie.*

102. Kendra

103. Kimberly *Also spelled Kimberley.*

104. Kristina

105. Lacey *Also spelled Lacy and Lacie.*

106. Lakeisha *Can also be spelled Lakesha.*

107. Laura *Lara is a popular variation.*

108. Lauren *Laurel is a similar choice.*

109. Leah

110. Leila *Layla is a possible alternate spelling.*

111. Lilly *Can also be spelled Lily if it's not short for Lillian.*

112. Lindsey *Can also be spelled Lindsay.*

113. Linnea

114. Lisa

115. London

116. Lucia

117. Lucy *Could be short for Lucille or Lucinda...or it might just be Lucy.*

118. Macy *Can also be spelled Macie or Macey.*

119. Maggie

120. Mara

121. Maria *As classic as it gets, and many people think of it as a Hispanic name.*

122. Marissa *Marisol is a similar option.*

123. Maureen

124. May

125. Maya

126. Megan

127. Melissa

128. Melody

129. Mercy

130. Millicent *I put this on here mostly because Millie is such a cute nickname.*

131. Mina *This name appears in a few different cultures, and in Bram Stroker's Dracula.*

132. Miranda

133. Molly *People think of Molly as really cute and maybe kind of*

*innocent.*

134. Nadia

135. Naomi

136. Natalia *Or Natalie.*

137. Nicole

138. Nina

139. Noel *Also spelled Noelle.*

140. Octavia

141. Olivia

142. Oralie *This is a French name meaning “golden.” Aurelia is a variation.*

143. Paige

144. Pamela

145. Pauline

146. Penelope *Although Penelope in The Odyssey stayed home and waited for twenty years, people imagine Penelope as an adventurous type. Lots of nickname options here: Pen, Penny, Nell, and Nellie.*

147. Phoebe

148. Piper

149. Poppy

150. Rae

151. Rachel *Also spelled Rachael.*

152. Rebecca *Frequently spelled “Rebekah.”*

153. Renée

154. Rhiannon *This is the name of the Celtic goddess of horses, inspiration, and the moon. It’s also a really old rock song.*

155. River *There are two terrific Rivers in science fiction: River Song in Dr. Who and River Tam in Firefly.*

156. Robin *An alternate spelling, Robyn, might seem more modern, but Robin Hood was often spelled “Robyn Hode.”*

157. Rose

158. Rosemary

159. Rowan *“Rowena” is a variation.*

160. Roxanne *Roxy/Roxie is a pretty fun nickname.*

161. Ruby

162. Ruth

163. Samantha

164. Samara

165. Sarah *Frequently spelled without the final “h.”*

166. Savannah *Sometimes spelled without the final “h.”*

167. Selena *This is a version of Selene, the moon goddess of Greek mythology. Of course, the two big associations here are the late singer who went only by her first name, and Selena Gomez.*

168. Sasha

169. Serenity

170. Shasta

171. Shayla

172. Shea *Occasionally spelled Shay.*

173. Sidney *Might also be spelled Sydney.*

174. Simone

175. Skye

176. Sonia *Also spelled Sonya.*

177. Sophia *Sophronia is a similar but less common name. Sophie is short for either.*

178. Sylvia *Silvia is the Spanish and Italian version.*

179. Talia

180. Tameka *Aramaic in origin. Can also be spelled Tamika or Tamikah.*

181. Tara *People think of Tara as someone who likes to have fun.*

182. Tasha *Latasha is a variation.*

183. Tegan *Also spelled Teagan.*

184. Tessa *Or Tess. Either of these may be short for Theresa.*

185. Tia

186. Trinity

187. Valencia

188. Vanessa

189. Victoria

190. Vida

191. Viola

192. Violet

193. Virginia

194. Wendy

195. Winifred *She could go by Win, Winnie, Fred, or Freddie.*

196. Winter

197. Wren

198. Zara *This can also be spelled Zahra.*

199. Zephyr

200. Zoe

## 200 NAMES FOR CONTEMPORARY HEROES

I originally developed a shorter version of this list with the romance fiction genre in mind, but this expanded version can be used for all kinds of leading men in any genre. Again, I have emphasized names that are popular in the United States for men in their 20s, 30s, and 40s, but I've included unusual names as well. I hope you find one that's just perfect for your guy!

1. Aaron
2. Adam *Quintessential solid good-guy name.*
3. Aidan *Can also be spelled Aiden.*
4. Alaric *Also spelled Alarik.*
5. Alden
6. Alexander *He can go by Alex or Xander.*
7. Amir *This is both of Arabic and of Hebrew origin.*
8. Andrew *Andreas is a popular version in Germany.*
9. Arturo *Arthur is the English version.*
10. Asher *Ashton is a similar name. Either one could go by Ash.*
11. August
12. Aziel *I was sure this would be the name of a Biblical angel or demon, but no.*

13. Blake
14. Benedict *A variation, Benedick, appears in Shakespeare's As You Like It.*
15. Benjamin
16. Bowie
17. Bradford
18. Brady
19. Brandon
20. Brian *Brion and Bryan are alternate spellings.*
21. Brody
22. Bruce *The actor Bruce Willis and the comic book character Bruce Wayne are two strong associations here.*
23. Bryce
24. Burne *May also be spelled Byrne.*
25. Byron *Maybe for a hero who is, like the famous poet, “mad, bad, and dangerous to know.”*
26. Caleb
27. Cameron
28. Campbell
29. Carrick
30. Carter

31. Chance

32. Charles *Several nicknames are possible. You might prefer the Spanish version, Carlos.*

33. Chase

34. Christopher

35. Clayton *Or just Clay.*

36. Cole

37. Colt *He's tough! Like a gun! But vulnerable! Like a baby horse! His full name might be Colton.*

38. Clark *Famous Clarks include Clark Kent and Clark Gable.*

39. Clive

40. Conall *This Irish name means “strong in battle.”*

41. Connor

42. Craig

43. Daire

44. Dalton

45. Dane

46. Daniel

47. Dante *Because of The Inferno, people will likely see this hero as brooding or dangerous.*

48. Darius

49. David

50. Dax *It's an unusual name, but it pops up in the U.S. now and again.*

51. Dean

52. Denver

53. Derek

54. Desmond

55. Dimitri *This name is Greek in origin, and also popular in Russia. Demetrius is a variation.*

56. Dominic *Also spelled Dominick or Domenic.*

57. Donovan

58. Dorran *This is a Celtic name that means "stranger."*

59. Dougal *Also spelled Dougall.*

60. Dylan

61. Edward *Eduardo is the Spanish version.*

62. Elijah *Elijahs frequently go by Eli.*

63. Elliot *Can also be spelled Elliott. Ellison is a similar name.*

64. Ephraim

65. Eric *The spelling Erik is more Scandinavian, and somehow looks more daring.*

66. Ethan

67. Eugene
68. Evan
69. Ezra *This Hebrew name means “helper.”*
70. Finn
71. Ford
72. Frederick
73. Gabriel
74. Gage
75. Gareth *This is the name of one of the Knights of the Round Table.*
76. Garrett
77. Gerard
78. Gideon *This Biblical name has a pretty serious sound to it.*
79. Glen
80. Grady
81. Grant
82. Gregory
83. Griffin *He’s named after a mythological beast, so that automatically makes him awesome.*
84. Henry *Nicknames for Henry, weirdly enough, include Hal and Hank.*

85. Harry

86. Harris

87. Hudson

88. Hunter

89. Ian *One of the most famous Ians is Ian Fleming, the writer who created James Bond.*

90. Irving

91. Isaiah

92. Issac

93. Ivan

94. Jack *Sometimes a nickname for John or Jonathan. Of course, it's also short for Jackson, and you might want to use that full name.*

95. Jake *Probably short for Jacob.*

96. Jamal

97. James

98. Jared *I've also seen it spelled Jarrod and Jerrod.*

99. Jason

100. Javier *This is a great Spanish name.*

101. Jay *Famous Jays include Jay Gatsby and Jay-Z.*

102. Jeremy

103. Jericho

104. Jesse

105. John *The quintessential everyman name. Jonathan is an alternative.*

106. Joel

107. Joshua

108. Julian *Some people feel that this name sounds a little feminine or unisex. I don't agree, and I don't think that's a bad thing, anyway.*

109. Justin

110. Kane

111. Kendrick

112. Kento *This is a pretty cool name for your Japanese or Japanese-American hero.*

113. Kevin

114. Kingsley

115. Kirk

116. Kyle

117. Lance *Or you could just go ahead and name him Lancelot.*

118. Landon

119. Leo *Sometimes this is short for Leonardo, and sometimes it's not.*

120. Li *This super-popular Chinese name means “strength.”*

121. Liam

122. Lincoln

123. Lionel

124. Locke

125. Logan

126. Lorenzo *This is an Italian and Spanish version of Lawrence that most people find really sexy.*

127. Louis *Famous Louises include all those French kings, and Louis Armstrong.*

128. Lucas

129. Luke

130. Luther *This German name means “famous warrior,” but people imagine Luther as being more of a quiet type.*

131. Maddox

132. Malachi

133. Malik *This is an Arabic name meaning “lord,” “ruler,” or “chief.”*

134. Marcus *Or simply Marc.*

135. Marshall

136. Matthew\* *Chances are good that most people call him Matt. Mathias is an alternative, and Mateo is the Spanish version.*

137. Mason

138. Max *Could be short for Maxim, Maxwell, or Maximilian.*

139. Micah

140. Michael\* *Mikhail is a Russian variation.*

141. Miles

142. Monty *This is generally short for Montgomery.*

143. Morgan

144. Nathan\* *This could be short for Nathaniel. Either Nathan or Nathaniel could go by Nate.*

145. Neal

146. Nicholas\*

147. Noah

148. Oliver

149. Orion *This is the name of a constellation, which in turn takes its name from a legendary hunter in Greek mythology.*

150. Orlando

151. Owen

152. Patrick\*

153. Paul

154. Pavel *This is a fairly popular Russian name.*

155. Peter\*

156. Pierce *Piers* is an alternative.

157. Quinn

158. Ramon

159. Raphael *This is the name of an archangel in Hebrew tradition, and also the name of one of the most famous painters of the Italian Renaissance. Rafael is the Spanish version.*

160. Raine

161. Reed *Can also be spelled Reid.*

162. Roan

163. Roark *Can also be spelled Roarke.*

164. Robert

165. Roderick

166. Roger *Also spelled Rodger.*

167. Roland *This is a very cool old German name that shows up in Shakespeare. It seems like no one ever uses it. Rollo is the typical nickname.*

168. Richard

169. Ryan

170. Ryder *He's going to come off as something of a cowboy, whether he is one or not.*

171. Samuel\* *Almost all Samuels go by Sam.*

172. Sean\* *Can also be spelled Shawn or Shaun.*

173. Seth

174. Simon

175. Spencer

176. Stephen *Stefan is a popular variation of German origin.*

177. Tariq *A name of Arabic origin, also spelled Tarek or Tarik.*

178. Tavis *Tavish is a variation.*

179. Terrence

180. Theodore *He might go by Ted, Teddy, or Theo.*

181. Thomas\* *The nickname Tom is more no-nonsense, while Thomas is fancier.*

182. Timothy\* *Most Timothys go by Tim.*

183. Travis\*

184. Tremaine

185. Trenton *Or just Trent. Almost everyone seems to have positive associations with this name.*

186. Trevor

187. Trey *This Latin name means “three” or “third.”*

188. Tristan

189. Vance

190. Vaughn

191. Victor *I love how this name is a synonym for “winner.”*

192. Vincent

193. Wade

194. Ward

195. Weston *This is a good name for a rich jerk, who might turn out to be not a jerk at all. For a more down-to-earth variation, just go with West.*

196. William\* *The nicknames Bill, Billy, and William each have a very different feel.*

197. Wyatt *Another cowboy-type name.*

198. Xavier

199. Zach\* *Short for Zachary or Zachariah. If you want something not so American, you could go with Zak, short for Zakhar, which is a Russian name.*

200. Zane *Zain is an alternate spelling.*

# 100 VERY COMMON LAST NAMES IN THE U.S. TODAY

Need a popular last name for an American character? Pick one from here! Many of these are very common in Canada, the U.K., and Australia as well. The names marked with an asterisk are the ten most common names in the U.S., according to the 2010 census.

Adams

Allen

Anderson

Bailey

Baker

Barnes

Bell

Bennett

Brooks

Brown\*

Butler

Campbell

Carter

Clark

Coleman

Collins

Cook

Cooper

Cox

Cruz

Davis\*

Diaz

Edwards

Evans

Foster

Garcia\*

Gomez

Gonzalez

Gray

Green

Gutierrez

Fisher

Flores

Hall

Harris

Henderson

Hernandez

Hill  
Howard  
Hughes  
Jackson  
James  
Jenkins  
Johnson\*  
Jones\*  
Kelly  
King  
Lee  
Lewis  
Long  
Lopez  
Martin  
Martinez  
Miller\*  
Mitchell  
Moore  
Morales  
Morgan  
Morris  
Murphy

- - -

Myers

Nguyen

Ortiz

Parker

Perry

Peterson

Phillips

Perez

Powell

Price

Reed

Reyes

Richardson

Rivera

Roberts

Robinson

Rodriguez\*

Rogers

Ross

Russell

Sanchez

Sanders

Scott

Smith\*

Stewart

Sullivan

Taylor

Thomas

Thompson

Torres

Turner

Walker

Ward

Watson

White

Williams\*

Wilson\*

Wood

Wright

Young

## **7. CHARACTER TRAITS**

Sometimes we get the idea for a story before we have a clue about the characters in it. Even when characters spring into our imaginations, we don't usually know everything about them at first. What do they do for a living? What's their history? What are they into? Basically, what makes them tick?

I heard a writer say once that most stories are about blood and money—people's families, and how they make a living. While some stories don't involve these elements, they are good things to figure out for your characters.

Even if your character is basically good, he or she will need flaws in order to be believable. Likewise, a good villain may have some admirable traits.

In addition to the lists in this section, two previous lists may help in thinking about the people in your story: the "Master List of Physical Descriptions," and "50 Goals and Aspirations." With careful thought, you can create a character who is as real in your readers' minds as anyone else they know in real life... a character they will never forget.

# 100 POSITIVE CHARACTER TRAITS

What are some of the strengths that your character relies on when the going gets tough? What's her everyday superpower? Here are lots of possibilities! In some cases, I've given an example or two of how they might play out, but of course that will depend on your story.

## 1. Accountable.

He takes responsibility for his actions.

## 2. Active.

She loves biking, hiking, gardening, or volunteering. She's not so into sitting around and watching TV.

## 3. Adventurous.

Dodgy vacation destinations and big changes in her life don't scare her. She's always up for something new.

## 4. Affectionate.

You can always count on him for a hug, a kind word, or good-natured teasing.

## 5. Agreeable.

You want to go to a hockey game? She says, Sure, that sounds fine. No, wait, you want to go to a cooking class instead? Okay, she says, sounds good.

## 6. Ambitious.

He has goals and dreams, and he's positive he can achieve them.

**7. Appreciative.**

She shows gratitude for small favors and doesn't take any of her blessings for granted.

**8. Articulate.**

She's rarely at a loss for words. Her comments and speeches are on point.

**9. Artistic.**

He has a flair for painting, sculpting, photography, or design.

**10. Balanced.**

Her life is evenly divided between work and play.

**11. Brave.**

He might be scared, or he might not be. It doesn't matter. If there's a good reason to do the scary thing, he does it.

**12. Capable.**

He's competent and can handle situations and tasks successfully.

**13. Charismatic.**

It may be hard to say why, but she just has a glow that attracts people to her.

**14. Chivalrous.**

He treats women with old-fashioned politeness and gallantry.

**15. Cheerful.**

On a regular day, he whistles while he works and never stops smiling. Even in tough times, he finds some reason to be happy.

**16. Compassionate.**

His heart goes out to those in distress, and he does what he can to help.

17. Confident.

She believes in her value and the quality of her work.

18. Considerate.

He remembers your kids' names, and even your dog's name. When you miss class, he grabs an extra handout for you.

19. Cooperative.

Group project? No problem. She excels at working with others.

20. Cultured.

He can tell you about theater, the history of jazz, and every little gallery in town.

21. Curious.

She wants to learn about everyone and everything.

22. Cute.

It's not just the way she looks, but the whimsical and guileless way she dresses and acts that makes her adorable.

23. Decisive.

He doesn't waste a bunch of time trying to figure out a course of action. He chooses to do something, and he does it. Bam. End of story. (Or possibly, the beginning of the story.)

24. Dependable.

She never shirks her responsibilities.

25. Dignified.

His self-respect shines through his words, gestures, and the way he presents himself.

26. Disciplined.

He exerts self-control to meet his goals.

27. Discreet.

She can keep a secret, or a hundred of them.

28. Easygoing.

She's relaxed, slow to get upset, and rarely takes offense.

29. Efficient.

He gets things done quickly, in the simplest way possible.

30. Empathetic.

He understands how people feel and why they do what they do.

31. Empowering.

She makes others feel like they can do just about anything.

32. Energetic.

As long as he gets his required five hours of sleep a night, he keeps going and going.

33. Enthusiastic.

She gets excited about plans, events, and occasions.

34. Entrepreneurial.

She has great ideas for new businesses, and the drive to see them through.

35. Fair.

He tries to make sure that no one gets shortchanged.

36. Faithful.

She's committed to her spouse, and doesn't even flirt with anyone else.

37. Family-oriented.

His spouse and kids come before everything else.

38. Flamboyant.

He lives out loud and does everything in a big way. This may be more of a neutral than a positive trait.

39. Flexible.

She can change her routine or her usual way of working to suit the situation.

40. Friendly.

She goes out of her way to connect with others.

41. Frugal.

She saves 15% of every paycheck, re-uses plastic sandwich bags, and never has to toss vegetables that are past their prime.

42. Funny.

He always has something hilarious to say.

43. Generous.

If you need twenty bucks or you want half of his cookie, he'll say yes.

44. Gentle.

She has a soft, caring manner, and would never hurt anyone.

45. Good Listener.

He doesn't just think about the next thing he will say. He actually pays attention.

46. Good Teacher.

She knows how to explain things and encourage people as they learn.

47. Graceful.

He carries himself in an elegant way.

48. Handy.

She knows how to fix things around the house.

49. Health-conscious.

She works out, eats right, and gets enough sleep.

50. Honest.

He never takes what isn't his, and he's always truthful.

51. Honorable.

He doesn't take advantage of others, and he's always good for his word.

52. Idealistic.

She has hopes for a healthier planet or a better society.

53. Imaginative.

She can see possibilities where others cannot, and can invent elaborate stories or worlds.

54. Independent.

He doesn't mind eating alone in a restaurant. If no one else shares his opinion on something, he's fine with that.

55. Industrious.

She's not afraid of a little hard work. In fact, she's not afraid of a lot of hard work.

56. Innocent.

Although this trait can get people into trouble, it's often charming.

57. Intelligent.

She learns things and solves problems quickly.

58. Intuitive.

His hunches often prove correct, and he knows when something's off. It could be a slightly supernatural talent, or he might just synthesize a lot of disparate data on a subconscious level.

59. Knowledgeable.

He's an expert in his field, or in many fields.

60. Lighthearted.

She's quick to laugh at a joke, and finds many things pleasant or amusing.

61. Logical.

Instead of letting emotions or fears take over, she looks at the facts.

62. Loyal.

He's true to his family, his friends, and his company.

63. Meticulous.

She makes sure all the small details are correct.

64. Modest.

He doesn't draw attention to himself or his achievements, and doesn't especially want others too, either.

65. Mysterious.

Her enigmatic appearance, words, or behavior intrigue or confuse people. This can be a neutral rather than a positive trait.

66. Natural Leader.

Others look to her for direction, because she's skilled at giving it.

67. Nature-loving.

He has a strong connection with animals, trees, and the great outdoors.

68. Neat.

He's well groomed, and he keeps his apartment and even his car tidy.

69. Nurturing.

She instinctively takes care of others and makes them feel loved.

70. Observant.

He notices and recalls small details that most people miss.

71. Organized.

She has a system for everything.

72. Optimistic.

She always expects the best-case scenario.

73. Passionate.

He feels things deeply, and expresses them emphatically.

74. Patient.

She doesn't get frustrated when something or someone takes a long time.

75. Peace-making.

Not only does he avoid fighting himself, but he also tries to keep others from doing it.

76. Persuasive.

She could sell bikinis in Antarctica.

77. Polite.

Even in strained or unusual situations, her manners serve her well.

78. Punctual.

He never apologizes for being late, because he never needs to.

79. Quiet.

This is actually neither a positive nor a negative trait, but it had to go somewhere.

80. Resourceful.

He can cook a delicious meal out of the most random remains in the kitchen cupboard, or build a comfortable living shelter out of trash he found in an alley.

81. Restrained.

Even if she's jealous, hurt, or angry, she doesn't throw a fit.

82. Romantic.

Thoughtful gifts, sweet nothings, and grand gestures of love are his "thing."

83. Scholarly.

She feels most at home in the classroom or the library.

84. Serene.

He may be facing certain death, or even his toddler's meltdown, but he keeps his cool.

85. Sexy.

Not just his looks, but his words and gestures are enticing.

86. Shrewd.

His good judgment helps him strike favorable bargains and deals.

87. Spiritual.

She has a deep connection with God, nature, or something else larger

than herself.

88. Spontaneous.

She can drop everything she's doing if an interesting plan presents itself.

89. Stylish.

Her clothing choices and maybe the interior of her home show real flair.

90. Suave.

He has a polished charm that serves him well in social situations.

91. Tactful.

He avoids awkward questions and preserves other people's privacy and dignity.

92. Tech-savvy.

When people have computer questions, he's the one they call.

93. Tenacious.

Her first plan didn't work? Plan B didn't either? That's fine. She doesn't just have a Plan C—she has the whole alphabet and then some. She's not giving up.

94. Tolerant.

She won't complain about the empty wine bottles you left around the kitchen or make fun of your conviction that you were abducted by aliens. "Live and let live" is stamped into her very soul.

95. Tough.

Despite pain or adversity, he doesn't complain and he doesn't quit.

96. Unpretentious.

She doesn't share perfectly filtered photos on social media, or try to

impress everybody at the party. She's honest about herself and her life, and it's refreshing.

97. Vivacious.

His warm, talkative manner makes people feel good.

98. Wise.

People naturally look to her for advice, and she steers them in the right direction.

99. Youthful.

He does things that you would never expect someone his age to do.

100. Zany.

She's a nut. There's never a dull moment around her. This is another one that could be negative, but I think it's most often a good thing.

# 100 NEGATIVE CHARACTER TRAITS

Even the nicest character has his weaknesses. If he doesn't, nobody's going to like him that much – paradoxical, maybe, but true. Your nastier characters may have a whole suite of bad qualities, or they may have one that people find unforgivable.

Some of these qualities may not be things your characters can really help or change. These may make things difficult for your characters, but they are not moral failures.

## 1. Absent-minded.

She has no idea where she left her papers, and she forgot about her meeting. She just can't seem to get it together.

## 2. Aggressive.

Whether she's on the interstate or in a conversation, she's confrontational for no very good reason.

## 3. Aloof.

He's so chilly, you need a sweater to go near him.

## 4. Antisocial.

He rarely wants to take part in a conversation, let alone a friendly meal or a party.

## 5. Anxious.

Certain situations make her nervous—or maybe it's life in general.

## 6. Apathetic.

She doesn't take an interest in others' lives, and her own life bores her even more.

7. Argumentative.

The devil never had a better advocate than this guy. Sometimes he argues just to be contrary.

8. Authoritarian.

She bosses people around and tries to dictate their words and actions. Nobody had better make a move without her approval.

9. Awkward.

Although he means well, he has a knack for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time.

10. Bitter.

He feels he was treated unfairly, and he will never, ever get over it.

11. Brusque.

He seems to think talking to others is a waste of time.

12. Callous.

When she sees those sad commercials about abused cats and dogs, she doesn't even sniffle. The plight of others leaves her unmoved.

13. Careless.

If she hasn't been in a car accident lately, she's probably caused one.

14. Childish.

She expects immediate gratification and has a meltdown when she doesn't get it. She's a 3-year-old trapped in an adult body.

15. Clumsy.

He's always dropping things or running into things.

16. Conceited.

It's a wonder her ego can get through doorways.

17. Condescending.

How kind of her to deign to explain things to you.

18. Commitment-phobic.

He can't promise to show up at a barbecue, let alone promise to be faithful.

19. Conformist.

If all of his friends jumped off a cliff, he would do it, too, while telling everyone he's always been into cliff diving.

20. Cowardly.

She runs from even the hint of danger or risk.

21. Cruel.

Another person's pain amuses him...so much so, in fact, that he'll often cause it. This is a flaw that readers find very hard to forgive.

22. Cynical.

She greets even positive situations with a jaded attitude.

23. Delusional.

He has grandiose ideas about himself and expectations for his life. This is only a negative thing when it starts to harm how he relates to others or how he pursues opportunities.

24. Demanding.

As a boss, a parent, or a lover, she has a long list of things she expects you to do.

25. Dependent.

He's clingy, and he can't stand on his own two feet.

26. Depressed.

It may not be his fault that he's sad all the time, but it does make it difficult on everyone else.

27. Dishonest.

He lies whenever it suits him, and he steals if he can get away with it.

28. Disloyal.

It doesn't matter how much you've been through together or how much she owes you. She'll turn on you if it benefits her.

29. Drama-loving.

He might say, "I don't want any drama," but he thrives on conflict, and his words and actions stir it up.

30. Dull.

She has no particular interests and no strong feelings. She does the same things every day. She's just boring. (Readers will also have a hard time forgiving this in a main character.)

31. Foolish.

She makes terrible decisions on a fairly regular basis.

32. Frivolous.

He wastes time and money on meaningless pursuits.

33. Fussy.

The layout of a document, temperature in a car...everything has to be "just so" for this person.

34. Gossipy.

She always passes on juicy stories, whether they're true or not.

35. Grouchy.

Complaining about the weather is his way of saying “good morning.”

36. Gullible.

You can draw her into almost any scheme or bad situation.

37. Harsh.

His words, lessons, or punishments are needlessly severe.

38. Hedonistic.

He indulges himself and puts his immediate pleasure above pretty much everything else.

39. Hot-tempered.

It's not hard to set her off, and she yells a lot.

40. Hypercritical.

As far as she's concerned, every flaw is worth mentioning, or even discussing in detail.

41. Hypocritical.

For instance, she holds forth on the sanctity of marriage, and she's having an affair.

42. Ignorant.

He doesn't know much about the world. If he is willing to learn, it's forgivable. If he prefers to stay ignorant, it's not.

43. Impatient.

Waiting just about kills him, and he lets everybody know.

44. Indecisive.

It takes her so long to choose a restaurant that by the time she does, they're all closed for the night. For years, she's been trying to decide

whether or not she should leave her husband or go back to school.

45. Inflexible.

He doesn't want to change his plans or routines for any reason.

46. Inhibited.

She can't loosen up and be herself.

47. Insecure.

He requires a lot of reassuring and flattering, and he often has the need to prove that he measures up to others.

48. Interfering.

It may be none of her business, but she'll make it her business.

49. Intolerant.

People who are different from her frankly infuriate her.

50. Irrational.

He makes decisions based on fleeting emotions or ridiculous fancies rather than reasonable considerations.

51. Jealous.

She fumes over the fact that other people have nice boyfriends, lovely homes, or good jobs, when she doesn't. It's just not fair!

52. Judgmental.

Who died and left him God? Apparently he thinks *somebody* did.

53. Lazy.

Her life would be so much better if she could just get motivated.

54. Lecherous.

He hits on people constantly, regardless of whether they seem interested

or not.

55. Loud.

This is not always a negative character trait, but it certainly can be annoying in some situations.

56. Manipulative.

She finds sneaky ways to get other people to do what she wants.

57. Materialistic.

His prime concern is to acquire more and better stuff than anyone else.

58. Messy.

His room, his truck, his hair, or all of the above are a disaster.

59. Moody.

She is fine one minute and moping the next.

60. Narrow-minded.

She won't listen to other points of view.

61. Obsequious.

He could care less about people of lower social standing, but he sucks up to important people.

62. Obsessive.

She just can't let something go.

63. Opposed to change.

New procedures, circumstances, technology and trends threaten him.

64. Overcommitted.

She always takes on more than she can handle.

65. Overtalkative.

It's hard to get a word in edgewise.

66. Passive.

Maybe he doesn't do anything evil, but he doesn't do anything to stop it, either.

67. Pedantic.

She belabors all the details and formalities.

68. Perverted.

He has disturbing inclinations.

69. Pessimistic.

She always expects the worst-case scenario, which is much worse than anything you could have imagined.

70. Petty.

He gets hung up on the slightest of slights.

71. Pompous.

She's self-important and pretentious.

72. Possessive.

He acts like his wife or girlfriend is his private property.

73. Prickly.

You never know what will offend him.

74. Procrastinating.

She puts everything off until the last minute.

75. Proud.

She doesn't ask for or accept help, even when it's the most sensible

thing to do.

76. Pseudo-intellectual.

He takes every opportunity to pretend he is well read or highly philosophical.

77. Rebellious.

This can be a positive trait, but only if there's a good reason for it.

78. Rude.

Where are his manners? Nowhere to be found.

79. Sanctimonious.

Why can't everyone live up to her high moral standards? That's all she wants to know.

80. Self-centered.

She will rarely ask herself how her actions or a situation will affect anyone else but her.

81. Shallow.

He's almost incapable of considering or discussing weighty matters.

82. Shy.

He won't strike up a conversation and will get nervous if you do.

83. Smug.

Her life is perfect, and she will be the first to tell you that this is all because of her good choices.

84. Snobbish.

If you invite her to dinner, she'll turn her nose up at your bargain wine or your grandma's fried chicken recipe.

85. Stingy.

Waitresses hate him.

86. Stubborn.

Trying to get her to change her mind on anything is close to impossible.

87. Suspicious.

He's pretty sure everyone's out to get him...so much so, you kind of hope that somebody does.

88. Tacky.

She's too loud, she dresses inappropriately, and she has no social graces.

89. Unable to Admit Mistakes.

Even when it's clear that he messed up, he'll have some kind of story or excuse.

90. Undisciplined.

She can't stick to a plan or exert much self-control.

91. Ungrateful.

His grandma paid for some of his college. He can't even be bothered to send her a birthday card.

92. Unimaginative.

She can't envision other possibilities.

93. Vain.

He's attractive, sure...especially in that big oil painting of himself hanging over his mantel. However, he isn't nearly as handsome as he thinks he is.

94. Vindictive.

If she thinks she's been wronged, she will try to even the score and then some.

95. Violent.

She handles disagreements by breaking dishes or breaking bones.

96. Vulgar.

He makes inappropriate and gross jokes. He makes his bodily functions everybody's business.

97. Wasteful.

He doesn't just spend money on things he doesn't really need...he spends money on things that nobody on earth needs.

98. Weak.

When the going gets tough, she lies down and gives up.

99. Workaholic.

He can't make time for his partner, his family, his friends, or anything else.

100. Whiny.

Not only does he complain a lot, but he does it in an annoying tone of voice.

## 25 POSITIVE CHARACTER TRAITS THAT CAN ALSO BE NEGATIVE

When you were reading through the lists of positive character traits, did you find yourself thinking, “Well, that one can be annoying at times”? And in the list of negative character traits, did you ever think, “Hey, that’s not always a bad thing?”

One key to creating great characters is to give them strengths that are *also* flaws. Here are 25 examples of personal qualities...and how they can sometimes be too much of a good thing.

**1. The good quality:** He wants to protect everyone he cares about, plus anyone else he perceives as needing protection.

**How it can be bad:** He may boss people around too much—for their own good, in his mind. To repel a threat, he might use more force than necessary, and he might even perceive a threat where there isn’t one.

**2. The good quality:** She’s an optimist. Even in tough circumstances, she looks on the bright side, which makes her a cheerful person.

**How it can be bad:** When people feel angry, sad, or discouraged, she may make things worse by telling them to cheer up. She may pursue grand plans that don’t have a chance of working.

**3. The good quality:** He has a great sense of humor. For any situation, he has a hilarious comment.

**How it can be bad:** He might joke about things that really aren’t that funny, and be unable to discuss something seriously. His wisecracks

may wind up exposing people's vulnerabilities and hurting their feelings.

**4. The good quality:** She has a lot of self-discipline. Sticking to a workout schedule and finishing a difficult project are no problem for her.

**How it can be bad:** Trying to get her to abandon her routine, even for a good reason, may be next to impossible. She may not know how to relax and have fun.

**5. The good quality:** He loves new experiences and adapts easily even to abrupt changes in circumstances.

**How it can be bad:** In stable, predictable environments, he gets bored and restless. He might abandon people or responsibilities entirely.

**6. The good quality:** She's agreeable and goes along with plans, never starting arguments or causing conflicts. This makes her a great team member and a favorite employee.

**How it can be bad:** She carries out orders even if they are immoral or illegal. She'll be the first person to say later that she was just doing her job.

**7. The good quality:** He's sensitive to other people's feelings. He frequently shows and tells his family and friends how much he loves them.

**How it can be bad:** He may take things very personally, even when they weren't intended that way. At times, he may be too clingy.

**8. The good quality:** She has charisma to spare. People are naturally drawn to her company and conversation.

**How it can be bad:** She might always demand to be the center of attention, even when it's somebody else's turn.

**9. The good quality:** He is meticulous. His email inbox is always

cleaned out, his apartment is always immaculate, and he's the only one to read the fine print.

**How it can be bad:** He might think everyone should organize things the same way he does, and he might be so fussy and critical that he drives everybody nuts.

**10. The good quality:** She is ambitious. So far, she's made her own way in the world, and she is just getting started.

**How it can be bad:** She might be ruthless in pursuing her goals. In order to win, she might be willing to cheat, lie, or manipulate others.

**11. The good quality:** He is a creative genius. His paintings, movies, or books enthrall people.

**How it can be bad:** He may struggle with depression, anxiety, or other mental health issues, and he may resist treatment because he's afraid it will alter his work.

**12. The good quality:** She's candid and honest about her opinions and her own mistakes. It's refreshing.

**How it can be bad:** She might not be able to keep her mouth shut, even when that would be the best course of action. Her words may make people feel bad or get her and everybody else into trouble.

**13. The good quality:** He's an idealist. A humanitarian, he works and campaigns to make the world a better place.

**How it can be bad:** There may be no middle ground for him—he won't settle for anything less than his vision. As lofty as his ideals for humanity are, he might not be kind to individual people.

**14. The good quality:** She has a great imagination. She can get lost in books and TV shows, and she's a good storyteller herself.

**How it can be bad:** She might be an escapist who avoids real-life problems and responsibilities. She may not engage enough with the real

people around her.

**15. The good quality:** He has impeccable taste. In clothing, interiors, music, or all of the above, he's knowledgeable and has true style.

**How it can be bad:** His high level of taste may lead him to overspend. He may look down on those with less refined sensibilities.

**16. The good quality:** Her analytical skills are beyond compare. She can look at the facts objectively and propose rational solutions.

**How it can be bad:** She may fail to understand when someone just wants empathy rather than a practical solution. She might not be that great at expressing warm feelings in general.

**17. The good quality:** He's outgoing and gregarious. His social calendar is full, and he has friends everywhere.

**How it can be bad:** He may have no idea how to entertain himself and might not deal well with solitude. He may not be a deep thinker.

**18. The good quality:** She's strong and stoic. Even when things get really tough, she doesn't complain.

**How it can be bad:** She might expect everyone else to be just as tough as she is and fail to show much pity.

**19. The good quality:** He's a very sensual person. He knows how to take great pleasure in good food, sex, and other indulgences.

**How it can be bad:** He may overindulge, leading to addictive behavior. Alternately, he may be selfish, putting his gratification above other people's feelings.

**20. The good quality:** She's confident. In every situation, she believes in herself and her abilities, and that assurance often leads other people to trust her as well.

**How it can be bad:** She may not ask for advice, even when she doesn't know what she is doing and could really use it.

21. **The good quality:** He takes care of his health. He works out, eats right, and reads articles about nutrition.

**How it can be bad:** He may lecture other people about their choices, and he may treat unhealthiness as a moral failing.

22. **The good quality:** She is a strong critical thinker. She can see through propaganda and recognize when an argument doesn't hold up.

**How it can be bad:** She might be too critical and negative, and she might over-analyze everything.

23. **The good quality:** He's conscientious, and he obeys rules to the letter of the law.

**How it can be bad:** He may want to punish others for harmless infractions, or enforce rules that make no sense.

24. **The good quality:** She's prudent. Before taking action, she researches the matter and weighs the possible consequences.

**How it can be bad:** If she's overwhelmed with data, she might be unable to make a decision. Even in dire circumstances, she may be unable to take quick action.

25. **The good quality:** He's humble and modest. You'll never hear him bragging about anything.

**How it can be bad:** He may not ever live up to his potential, and he may deprive the world of his unique gifts.

## 50 PAST TRAUMAS

One of my favorite poets, Robert Hass, began his poem “Meditation at Lagunitas” with these lines: “All the new thinking is about loss./In this it resembles all the old thinking.”

Nobody gets through life without tragedies. Sometimes we forget how ubiquitous they are, because people don’t always discuss them. The most successful, attractive, popular, and competent people still have heartbreak in their pasts.

The difficulties your character faced in the past may or may not play a large role in your story. Either way, they will affect her personality and the way she deals with immediate challenges.

Although I made this list with backstories in mind, you may find inspiration here for a main plot.

The items on this list range from upsetting to seriously damaging—and of course, different characters would respond differently to any of them. They are in no particular order. I have not elaborated on some of the worst things because I want to avoid triggering strong negative emotional responses in people who have experienced them in the past.

A character’s past trauma may affect her in many different ways. She may be unwilling to try or take risks in some area of her life. She may lack confidence or self-esteem. It may have resulted in a low-level depression, marked by listlessness, aches and pains, insomnia, or chronic fatigue.

If she has post-traumatic stress disorder, she may experience bad dreams or flashbacks about the event. When something reminds her of it, her heartbeat and her breathing may accelerate with panic.

You may shy away from giving the people in your story real problems, but unfortunately, making life perfect for your characters rarely results in an interesting story. No matter how awful your character’s past is, you can write her

into healing and a much brighter future. Her story may provide just the inspiration a reader needed.

1. She was fired from a job.

Maybe she didn't see it coming, or maybe she did and was unable to stop it. Either way, this can be a body blow.

2. His partner cheated on him.

This could raise feelings of inadequacy, anger, and profound distrust in future relationships.

3. Her best friend betrayed her.

This can hurt almost as much as the betrayal of a lover, and people around her might not understand that.

4. He was molested as a child.

5. She was sexually assaulted or raped as an adult.

6. His parent abandoned the family when he was young.

7. She was bullied as a child.

She might have been singled out for ridicule because of her appearance, her learning style, or her behavior.

8. One or both of his parents or a sibling died when he was young.

9. One of her parents or a sibling died recently.

10. His spouse died recently.

11. Her dog or cat died recently.

Not everyone recognizes how much grief this can actually cause, which may make things all the more difficult.

12. He made an accidental but catastrophic mistake.

For instance, he might have run over someone's dog.

13. She was scammed out of a bunch of money.

14. He was mugged or robbed.

15. She was injured in sports or in a bad accident.

16. He was rejected from the college he always dreamed of attending.

17. She didn't get the chance to go to college at all.

Maybe she really wanted to, but it wasn't possible because of her grades, finances, or a family situation.

18. He failed out of college, or was unable to finish.

Mental health issues, a family crisis, or financial circumstances may have been to blame.

19. She got pregnant as a teen.

Whether she terminated the pregnancy, had the baby and gave it up for adoption, or chose to become a mother, she may have been shamed about her pregnancy and her decision.

20. She suffered a miscarriage.

Others may make it worse by saying it was God's plan or that she can get pregnant again.

21. He was demoted at work.

22. His new venture failed.

It's not only disappointing, but also embarrassing.

23. She was physically abused as a child.

24. He was emotionally abused as a child.

25. As an adult, she was physically or emotionally abused by a partner.

26. His father physically abused his mother.

27. She was arrested.

28. He went to prison.

29. Her parent went to prison.

30. His spouse divorced him, or his boyfriend moved out with little warning.

31. Her fiancé called off the wedding.

Alternately, he simply didn't show up for the ceremony.

32. He was evicted from his apartment.

33. She suffered a public embarrassment.

She might have fallen on her butt in front of a huge crowd, or she might have been in an embarrassing video that went viral.

34. He lost access to his children.

Maybe he was deported, or maybe his ex disappeared with them.

35. She witnessed a horrific accident or violent crime.

36. He fought in a war.

37. She or someone close to her was the victim of police brutality.

38. As a child, he was indoctrinated into a cult or religious sect with damaging beliefs.

39. As a child, she lived in poverty.

She might have often lacked adequate food, decent clothes, or other necessities.

40. He survived a hurricane, plane crash, or other disaster.

41. She was very ill as a child or teen.

Extensive treatment or surgeries early in life may have had a lasting impact.

42. He survived a serious illness as an adult.

43. The person he loved married somebody else.

44. She learned some shocking news about herself or her family.

45. At a school or workplace, she was harassed for her race or sexual orientation.

46. When she came out as a lesbian, family members or friends rejected her.

47. He lost his license or accreditation.

He might be a lawyer who was disbarred, a doctor who lost his medical license, or a priest who was defrocked.

48. She lived in an unsafe place.

It may have been in a high-crime area or in a war zone.

49. He lost something important.

He may have misplaced a winning lottery ticket or the heirloom diamond ring he was going to use when he proposed to his girlfriend.

50. She lost the respect of the person whose opinion she valued the most.

## 50 WAYS TO SHOW A CHARACTER IS A GOOD PERSON

This is related to the list “100 Positive Character Traits.” It shows some of the *best* traits on that list, like compassion, consideration, and tolerance, *in action*.

Sometimes, you want to let your readers know right away that a character is really a nice person, even if she or he has flaws. You might also have a moment in your story when a character realizes he misjudged a basically decent person. Here are a lot of ways to show a character has a good heart, rather than simply telling your reader that he does.

1. She says good morning to someone and asks how his weekend was.
2. He smiles at a stranger.
3. She listens to someone else’s story—even if it’s boring.
4. He sympathizes with someone’s gripes—even petty ones.
5. She notices when someone’s down and asks if everything’s okay.
6. He treats an unpopular or weird person with respect.
7. She compliments someone’s handiwork or a photo of his children.
8. He tells somebody that she’s being too hard on herself.

9. She gives money to a panhandler when everyone else walks on by.
10. He knows the name of the elderly neighbor down the hallway from him, or the security guard at his company.
11. She gives directions to someone who is lost. Maybe she notices he looks confused and asks him if he needs help.
12. He calls his mom.
13. She visits her sick friend or her aging relative.
14. He takes care of a friend's baby or kid for the afternoon.
15. On her morning commute, she lets somebody merge in front of her.
16. When someone bumps into him, he says it's okay instead of getting annoyed.
17. When she has a legitimate customer complaint, she addresses it kindly rather than rudely.
18. He stands up for a sales associate or cashier being abused by a customer.
19. She donates blood.
20. He volunteers, formally or informally. He teaches a kid to read, or dishes out food at a community kitchen.
21. She holds the elevator door for someone—and tells him, “Take your time.”
22. He gives his seat to somebody else on the bus.
23. She's nice to her dog or cat.

24. He helps catch someone else's dog or cat who got loose on the street.
25. She puts her shopping cart back where it's supposed to go.
26. He apologizes when he's made a mistake.
27. She shovels snow off her neighbor's sidewalk.
28. He leaves a great tip.
29. She writes a nice comment on someone's post or picture on social media.
30. He lets someone with just one or two items go ahead of him in line at the grocery store.
31. When someone in front of her in line at the grocery store is short a dollar, she chips in the difference.
32. He brings donuts to the office.
33. She buys lemonade from the neighbor kids' lemonade stand.
34. He declines to participate in gossip.
35. She gives credit to a co-worker.
36. He reacts to his whining child with patience and restraint.
37. When she shops for clothes, she picks up a dress that slips off the hanger and returns it to the rack.
38. When he accidentally breaks something in a store, he finds a sales associate so he can pay for it instead of walking away.
39. She defuses a conversation that's growing tense with a joke.

40. He goes to church.

41. She prays.

42. He helps someone jump start her car or helps when it's stuck in the snow.

43. When she and someone else start speaking at the same time, she says, "Go ahead."

44. He finds a recycling bin for his empty can or bottle.

45. She picks up a piece of trash on the sidewalk or in a hallway and throws it away.

46. He strikes up conversation with someone who's alone and looks lost at a social event.

47. She compliments a child on his art project or his outfit.

48. When he's running late in the morning, he turns back because he forgot to kiss his wife goodbye.

49. She calls her husband in the middle of the day, just to say "I love you."

50. He gives someone a hug.

## 25 WAYS TO SHOW A CHARACTER IS A JERK

This is related to the list “100 Negative Character Traits.” It shows some of the *worst* traits on that list in action.

Once in a while, I’ll read a book where the protagonist and all her friends keep talking about how awful a particular character is—but the character doesn’t seem all that bad to me. If I’m supposed to like and root for the protagonist, then this is a real problem in a story. It makes me, as a reader, wonder if the protagonist judges people too harshly.

If a character is eventually going to do something terrible, most of the time, you don’t want him doing it out of nowhere. Moreover, if you’re writing a mystery or thriller, you may want to make one character seem suspicious, even if it turns out he’s just an ordinary unpleasant person and not the bad guy.

Some of the things on this list are really mean, but some could also be done by a decent character on a bad day. Just don’t let her off the hook for it.

1. She gives backhanded compliments.

“That’s a great picture of you. Your face looks slimmer.”

2. He says something sexist or bigoted.

It may be subtle—the kind of thing where no one corrects him, because they’re asking themselves, “Did he mean what I think he meant?”

3. She shares a nasty rumor without being able to confirm it.

4. She’s condescending to the server or the person doing her nails.

5. He sends back his order, even though it’s fine.

“This bagel is all the way toasted, but I said I wanted it *lightly* toasted.”

6. He demeans his spouse, child, or friend in front of others.

He might do it in the guise of a joke, but it's hurtful.

7. She takes up two spaces when she parks her car.

8. He parks in a spot reserved for the disabled, even though he is able-bodied.

He might make the excuse that he's in a hurry, or he's only going to be a minute.

9. She honks other drivers, or even pedestrians, for minor infractions.

10. When he wins at something, he gloats.

11. She leaves a mess behind.

She tosses her cigarette butt on the sidewalk or doesn't re-rack her weights at the gym.

12. He sexually harasses someone who is in no position to object.

It may take the form of subtle innuendo or compliments that are over the line.

13. She doesn't say "thank you."

14. He says "no" instead of "no thanks."

15. She helps herself to someone else's food.

16. He borrows things without asking.

17. She insists on being addressed as "Doctor" or "Senator," if she is one.

18. He makes himself too comfortable.

He sprawls out and takes up two seats on the subway, or he puts his feet

up on someone else's coffee table.

19. She gives unsolicited and bossy advice.

20. He declines to sponsor a walkathon or order Girl Scout cookies.

21. He complains about crying babies or loud little kids.

22. She makes detailed and/or unreasonable demands.

"I've attached a list of acceptable baby shower gifts. I don't want anything homemade or any stuffed animals."

23. He issues orders when most people would make requests.

24. She makes fun of people who aren't hurting anyone, either behind their backs or to their faces.

25. He never passes up the opportunity to show how smart or successful he is.

## 25 VERY COMMON JOBS

Are you trying to figure out how a character makes a living? Here are twenty-five very common jobs in the United States. Some of them are rarely depicted in novels and movies, and any of them can ground your story in reality. If your character has stress or money worries because of his or her job, many of your readers will be able to empathize.

If you are writing about a job that you've never done before, I recommend taking someone with that occupation out to lunch and interviewing them. A lot of people love to talk about their jobs. Not only will you learn interesting details, but you might even get a great idea for a scene or a subplot that you would have never come up with on your own. YouTube also has many videos of people talking about their day-to-day jobs, so it can be another great resource.

### 1. Retail sales associates.

Anyone who deals a lot with the public has some pretty interesting encounters.

### 2. Cashiers.

### 3. Cooks.

They work not only in restaurants, but also in the cafeterias of schools, hospitals, and some companies.

### 4. Nurses.

This job can naturally provide some drama in your story. Your character could be a registered nurse, a licensed practical nurse, or licensed vocational nurse.

## 5. Servers.

A lot of readers either work as waiters and waitresses or have done so in the past, so they'll be able to relate.

## 6. Warehouse workers.

They may prepare orders, pack boxes, and move freight. They might also take deliveries by truck to their destinations.

## 7. Secretaries and administrative assistants.

## 8. Janitors and cleaners.

The majority of people in these jobs work evening shifts, and because the job is usually outsourced, some may work in more than one building every night. Janitors and cleaners may work in schools, office buildings, banks, hospitals, and even outdoor places such as amusement parks.

## 9. Office clerks.

They might be answering phones, entering data, maintaining spreadsheets, making copies, or keeping records.

## 10. Grade school and high school teachers.

## 11. Truck drivers.

This includes people who drive heavy freight across the country, and people who deliver furniture and other goods across town.

## 12. Nurse's aides and attendants.

People in these jobs may work at assisted living facilities or nursing homes, hospitals, or hospices.

## 13. Sales representatives.

A sales rep may spend a lot of time on the phone. Depending on her company, she may need to travel a lot to meet with clients.

14. Teacher assistants.

15. Retail store managers.

16. Mechanics.

A mechanic may work on cars at an auto dealership or a repair shop. Some specialize in diesel engines and work on buses or trucks.

17. Nursery school teachers and day care providers.

18. Accountants and auditors.

19. Maids and housekeepers.

Unlike janitors, people in these jobs work in private homes.

20. Landscaping and groundskeeping workers.

21. Construction workers.

22. Computer support specialists.

They are otherwise known as information technology specialists, or I/T.

23. Bank tellers.

24. Security guards.

25. Software developers.

A developer is likely to work on a team. He might work on something new, or he might adapt or improve an existing program.

## 25 POTENTIALLY HIGH-PAYING JOBS

It sometimes annoys me when characters in movies, TV shows, and novels have gotten rich doing something that almost no one gets rich doing. While almost anything is possible, this does take me out of the story, at least for a few moments.

The most common reason to be rich is to be born into a rich family. However, here are some jobs for self-made characters. Not everyone with these occupations is wealthy, but it's certainly a possibility.

Doctors make a lot of money in general, but I've highlighted some particularly well-paying fields. This list ranges from the outrageously rich to the simply prosperous, and it's not in order.

1. Tech entrepreneur.

Many tech entrepreneurs fail or enjoy only modest success, but this is still a great choice for a young billionaire.

2. Star professional athlete.

3. A-list actor.

This one is a little obvious, and so is the next one:

4. CEO of a huge corporation.

Keep in mind that a CEO of a giant company is most likely to be in his or her fifties or older, unless he started the company himself (see #1.)

5. CFO of a huge corporation.

The person in charge of managing the financial side of the company is generally doing well financially herself. Again, it usually takes a person

many years to reach this level.

6. Real estate investor.

Many rich people got that way through buying and selling property.

7. Investment banker.

At the managing director or senior VP level, especially, investment bankers can make a lot of money.

8. Orthopedic surgeon.

9. Cardiac surgeon.

10. Petroleum engineer.

This job involves making sure that the drilling process is done correctly. Petroleum geologists, who help oil companies figure out where to drill in the first place, can also make a great salary.

11. Gastroenterologist.

12. Psychiatrist.

Both psychologists and psychiatrists do pretty well. Psychiatrists are the ones with medical degrees who can prescribe medications.

13. M&A attorney.

Lawyer salaries vary wildly, and many aren't rich. Attorneys who work in corporate mergers and acquisitions can make a lot more than most, especially if they are partners at big firms. Note that it usually takes at least ten years to make partner.

14. Plastic Surgeon.

This is an extremely profitable field.

15. CEO of a large nonprofit.

This might not be one that immediately comes to mind, but some CEOs

of big nonprofit organizations make huge salaries.

16. IP attorney.

Intellectual property litigators are often handsomely compensated, particularly if they are partners in big firms.

17. Anesthesiologist.

They make sure you're not awake for surgery, and make sure you can still wake up afterward—two very important things.

18. Dentist.

19. Orthodontist.

20. Neurosurgeon.

21. Marketing or management consultant.

The person the company flies in to tell them everything they are doing wrong is often doing quite well for herself.

22. Senior marketing manager.

At large companies, this can be a very lucrative job.

23. I/T manager.

Ditto.

24. Obstetrician/gynecologist.

25. Creative director in fashion or retail.

## 25 JOBS THAT SOUND LIKE FUN

For this list, I asked a lot of people what jobs had always sounded appealing to them. I told them to set practical considerations aside.

I'm guessing that, like most jobs, these have their joys and their challenges. However, they are the kinds of occupations that a lot of people hear about and think, "That must be so much fun!"

Giving your protagonist one of these jobs may attract some readers right away. If it's something that sounds like fun to you, experiencing it in your imagination might make your whole story more enjoyable to write. These aren't in any particular order!

1. Sports announcer.

2. Owner of a bakery.

Some people imagine specializing in pies, cupcakes, cookies, or cakes, which they might decorate.

3. Singer.

I believe "rock star" falls under this category.

4. Voiceover actor.

5. Owner of a bed and breakfast.

It's amazing how many people have a fantasy of doing this one.

6. Airline or helicopter pilot.

7. Wedding planner.

This is probably a difficult job, but somehow it's inherently adorable.

8. Librarian.

9. Owner of a bookstore or comic book shop.

10. Travel writer.

I also heard “TV host on a travel show.” The idea of globetrotting for a living naturally appeals to people.

11. Photographer.

Specifically, “travel photographer” and “nature photographer.”

12. Interior designer.

13. Fashion designer.

14. Character actor at a big amusement park.

When I started thinking about this list, this was the first thing that came into my head. I wasn’t the only one.

15. Archaeologist.

16. Beach lifeguard.

This makes sense—lots of people love the beach. In addition, if you’re a lifeguard, you’re likely to be in good shape. I also heard “scuba dive instructor,” and I bet “surfing instructor” would rank right up there, too.

17. Backup dancer.

18. Dog day care owner.

For those of us who adore all kinds of pups, this sounds lovely. Veterinarian came up as well.

19. Floral designer or flower shop owner.

20. Zoologist or marine biologist.

21. Brewmaster.
22. Developer of computer or video games.
23. Journalist.
24. FBI profiler.

This may be intense, but people still think it sounds like fun.

25. Personal shopper.

## 50 COMMON HOBBIES AND INTERESTS

Our passions are a crucial part of who we are. What do the people in your story love to do? How do they like to spend their time off? The hobbies and interests listed here are popular, and one of them might be perfect for your character.

### 1. Watching TV.

Obviously, most people do this. Not watching TV is rare enough to be a distinctive trait of a character. However, if the person in your story is a huge fan of a particular show or genre of shows, that can be a big part of who she is. She might even follow the lives of the actors or go to conventions.

### 2. Travel.

Your character may have a passion and the means to explore exotic lands, or he may find adventure on thrifty road trips.

### 3. Cooking.

While many people prepare simple and basic meals, some take it to a whole different level and collect recipes like mad, even when they're not in the kitchen.

### 4. Baking.

Sometimes this goes along with cooking, but someone in your story may be focused mostly on making muffins, cakes, cookies, and pies.

### 5. Playing sports.

Your character doesn't have to possess incredible skills (though she might) to be really into her softball or roller derby team.

## 6. Watching sports.

Lots of people enjoy watching sports on television, in real life, or both. You may have someone in your story who is a superfan of a particular team and never misses a game for years on end.

## 7. Playing videogames.

All kinds of people spend hours at this every week, and some of them make friends or find spouses this way.

## 8. Playing board games.

“Game night” with friends or family may be a weekly fixture in your character’s life.

## 9. Photography.

Thanks to digital cameras, camera phones, and easy sharing, more people enjoy this hobby than ever. Some people take a photo every day to document their lives, share lots of self-portraits, or seek out impressive photo opportunities.

## 10. Shopping.

Everyone has to do it to some extent, unless he has somebody to do it for him. However, you might have a character who delights in finding rare items, great bargains, or unique and stylish accessories.

## 11. Connecting on social networks.

Most people do it a little, but some people have many social media accounts and chat almost nonstop.

## 12. Sewing.

Making clothes, quilts, or smaller projects is a very popular hobby.

## 13. Knitting or crocheting.

Your character might always be working on a scarf and might have a

formidable stash of pretty yarn.

14. Gardening.

He might grow flowers, food, or both. If he's a city dweller, he might be part of a community garden.

15. Home décor or home improvement.

She may spend a lot of her time getting design ideas or buying tools, tiles, and paint.

16. Reading.

Although it's a solitary activity, many people join book clubs to read and discuss.

17. Watching movies.

For some, it's a once-in-a-while thing, but for your character, it might be an obsession. He might have a particular genre he loves, and he might be able to tell people all about production and trivia.

18. Fishing.

19. Hunting.

People who hunt often enjoy fishing as well.

20. Running.

21. Hiking.

22. Going to church.

Besides attending regular services, people attend Bible studies and fellowship groups, teach Sunday school classes, and sing in church choirs.

23. Volunteering.

This also might be through a church, or she might log hours at the local

food bank or animal shelter.

24. Going to the gym.

He might be really into lifting weights or going to spin classes.

25. Doing yoga.

Your character might do this on her own, or she might go to a yoga studio.

26. Golf.

27. Woodworking.

This is more popular with men, but there is no reason your female character couldn't be into it.

28. Making jewelry.

Although more women do this craft, plenty of guys are into it too.

29. Riding a motorcycle.

This might be a solitary pastime, or your character might be in a motorcycle club.

30. Riding a bicycle.

Again, this might be done alone or as a social activity—with a spouse, the whole family, or with friends.

31. Home beer brewing.

32. Camping.

A character who loves the great outdoors is likely to find some adventures.

33. Playing a musical instrument.

She might perform somewhere regularly. She also might be in some

kind of band or orchestra.

34. Clubbing.

She might love meeting attractive new people, or she might just love to dance.

35. Playing poker.

He might do this regularly with friends, and/or he might enter competitive tournaments.

36. Boating.

37. Horseback riding.

If she has a horse, it may be a big part of her identity.

38. Theatre.

Your character might be involved in local productions as an actor or in a behind-the-scenes role.

39. Tennis.

40. Skiing.

41. Writing.

Many people write poetry or stories, or keep up regular blogs.

42. Restoring classic cars.

43. Genealogy.

If he's really into researching his family tree, it may lead him to visiting county archives or distant cemeteries and discovering surprising things about his ancestors.

44. Political activism.

She may support a candidate, a party, or a cause. She might attend

rallies or meetings, or organize letter-writing campaigns.

45. Collecting.

There is almost no end of things that people love to collect, but they include coins, stamps, Christmas ornaments, baseball cards, comic books, toys, and certain types of figurines, including action figures.

46. Geocaching.

People hide things, and other people use GPS to find them.

47. Drawing and painting.

48. Coaching.

She might coach her daughter's softball team, or a kids' soccer team through her local YMCA.

49. Swimming.

50. Entertaining.

Hosting dinner parties, cocktail hours, and big bashes may your character's mission in life. Sounds like fun!

## 100 CHARACTER QUIRKS

Have you ever noticed that when you miss somebody, you miss some of the weirdest little things about her? A person's quirks can really stick in your mind. The same is true with fictional characters. Here is a big collection of habits, rituals, attitudes, and favorite things that will likely remind you of some people you know—and no doubt make you think of other quirks as well.

1. She smiles all the time, even when talking about something awful.
2. He cracks his knuckles frequently.
3. She only eats one thing on her plate at a time. Instead of alternating between the steak and the baked potato, for instance, she finishes off one and then attacks the other.
4. He always knows what the weather is going to be like, not only in his own locale, but in other parts of the continent as well. He just really likes weather.
5. She has her headphones on almost constantly, maybe because she's shy or antisocial.
6. When she sits at a table or desk and she's bored, she spins quarters on their sides. She might do it with her wedding ring.
7. He texts his mom or his boyfriend to say "I love you" before he flies anywhere, because he's scared he'll die in a plane crash.
8. He clears out his search history every time he's done using the

computer, although he never looks at anything scandalous.

9. She can't step out of the house, even to take out the trash, unless she is wearing makeup.

10. He shares quotes from movies, pop songs, or famous thinkers of the past. Or all three.

11. She saves lots of boxes and bubble wrap in case she ever has to mail a gift or suddenly move to a new apartment.

12. He hits the snooze button on his alarm clock at least twice every morning.

13. She has trypophobia. Objects with small holes, close together, freak her out.

14. He puts hot sauce on almost everything.

15. She eats one particular snack food, or drinks one particular beverage, to excess.

16. The sight of a hypodermic needle makes him woozy.

17. She occasionally adopts an accent other than her own—British, Southern—for comic effect.

18. He cannot walk past a dog without talking to it and petting it.

19. She sleeps with a teddy bear.

20. When he's driving, he often doesn't notice when the light has turned green because he's a daydreamer.

21. She cannot parallel park to save her life.

22. His sneezes are so loud that they terrify people.

23. She frequently talks in her sleep.
24. He plans all of his outfits for the week on Sunday night.
25. She has nine shirts that are basically the same shirt.
26. He loves routine. He does the same things at the same time every day.
27. She believes in ghosts, past lives, or other supernatural phenomena.
28. He believes in obscure herbal remedies for health issues.
29. She always smacks her gum.
30. He is uncomfortable with silence, so he keeps up a steady stream of chatter even if he has nothing to say.
31. She is never on time for anything.
32. He is so early for everything it sometimes leads to awkwardness.
33. She has trouble recognizing faces, unless she knows people very well.
34. He has no sense of direction whatsoever.
35. She says “rabbit rabbit” first thing in the morning, on the first day of the month, for good luck.
36. He wears a particular hat or jersey when his team is playing to help them win.
37. She listens to an unusual genre of music for pleasure, such as marching band recordings, or Christmas music all year.

38. When he's driving, he sings along dramatically with his music and dances in his seat.
39. She carries a planner or a journal and jots in it frequently.
40. He smokes a cigar every Friday evening when he comes home from work.
41. Her desk is covered with empty paper coffee cups or empty cans of soda.
42. She doesn't talk about herself. If someone asks about her, she gives a short answer and quickly changes the subject.
43. He changes the topic of conversation frequently because he has a short attention span.
44. She worries a lot about germs.
45. He compliments people profusely.
46. She's always cold. She wraps up in blankets and begs people to turn off the air conditioning.
47. He's a vegan.
48. She has trouble making eye contact.
49. He borrows things and never returns them.
50. She changes her hairstyle and hair color often.
51. Children, dogs, food, and beverages are not allowed in his car.
52. Because she's so sentimental, she gets choked up easily.
53. He is a walking encyclopedia of mostly useless trivia.

54. She takes off her bra while she watches TV at home...and sometimes leaves the bra on the couch.
55. He goes barefoot whenever possible.
56. True crime stories fascinate her.
57. He's easily upset by noise.
58. She gets up every morning before the crack of dawn.
59. He's a night owl, and possibly an insomniac.
60. She's convinced that society is going to hell in a handbasket.
61. He talks to plants or possibly inanimate objects as though they were sentient beings.
62. She hates talking on the phone and avoids it whenever possible.
63. He wears a little too much cologne.
64. She apologizes when she has done nothing wrong.
65. He believes he's always being slighted, overlooked, or ill-used.
66. No matter what the circumstances, she likes her chances for success.
67. He always drinks right out of the milk carton.
68. She will write something that she has already done on her to-do list so she can check it off.
69. He doodles in meetings or during class.
70. She talks so quietly, it's hard to hear what she's saying.

71. He puts so much cream and sugar in his coffee that it's barely coffee.
72. She's obsessed with politics, including the petty shenanigans.
73. He always has to be out doing something and gets cranky if he stays at home a couple of nights in a row.
74. When she texts, she uses lots of emoticons. Even her emails have a lot of smiley faces.
75. He judges people who dress provocatively.
76. She judges people who drive expensive cars or live in fancy houses.
77. He does pushups and sit-ups every morning.
78. She has an elaborate dental hygiene routine.
79. He meditates.
80. She jiggles her leg constantly whenever she's sitting down.
81. He takes lots of pictures of people.
82. She puts bumper stickers all over her car.
83. He makes decisions by drawing up comprehensive lists of pros and cons.
84. She makes decisions by flipping a coin.
85. He imagines fantastic scenarios in his head—heroic, horrible, or hilarious.
86. She flirts with pretty much everyone.

87. He tells very long stories.
88. She loves to make spreadsheets, graphs, and charts.
89. He makes everything into a competition and takes casual games way too seriously.
90. She is horrible with money and frequently has her services cut off because she forgot to pay the bills.
91. He gives odd and sometimes incomprehensible gifts.
92. She always has some new business venture or get-rich-quick scheme.
93. Large crowds make him nervous.
94. She loves finding bargains, and tells people about them.
95. He constantly interacts on social media.
96. She's always making food for people and trying to get them to eat.
97. He frequently misplaces his glasses.
98. She is brilliant at multi-tasking. For instance, she can carry on a phone conversation while emailing someone else.
99. He's nostalgic for his high school or college years.
100. She cyberstalks her exes to see how they're doing.

**ONE MORE VERY IMPORTANT LIST:**

# 10 REASONS WHY YOU SHOULD WRITE THAT STORY

## 1. Because nobody else can write it but you.

Your beliefs, your knowledge, your brain chemistry, plus the sum total of all your experiences, make you absolutely unique in the world. (Some would argue your very soul is unique, but souls are a matter of opinion.) They mean that nobody can write the *exact* story you can. If you don't write it, it will never exist.

## 2. Because you're not alone.

If you're into it, someone else out there will be, too. Even if you believe your story is niche or unusual, other people share some of your interests or experiences. The audience may be small, or it may be huge. Either way, it exists. If your story is different, the people who love that kind of story will be all the more grateful to find it.

## 3. Because your life will go by either way.

Some people worry about how much time it will take them to finish a project. What if it takes a whole year? What if it takes three? Three years from now, you will be three years older, and you can do that with or without a finished story (or two, or ten.) Your choice.

## 4. Because you're not too young.

If you're young, it's the perfect time to learn. You don't need to wait until college or grad school. You may not need to go to college or grad school. If you work hard and seek out opportunities to learn, you can

start becoming proficient at your craft right now.

#### 5. Because you're not too old.

Writing isn't like Olympic figure skating or being in a boy band. As long as your mind is still working, you can write a story. Harriet Doerr published her debut novel, *Stones for Ibarra*, at the age of 74. It won a National Book Award. As you get older, you know more about life and have had more experiences, and that will only make your writing better.

#### 6. Because you have the right.

Some people tell themselves that they aren't smart enough or creative enough to attempt writing—even when they really want to. They wonder if they can tell extraordinary stories when their lives are so ordinary. Others worry that people will judge them for writing (“Who do you think you are?”), or judge them for writing in a certain genre (“Comic books, really?”) You have as much right as anybody else to tell stories, plus the right to ignore anyone who says otherwise.

#### 7. Because it doesn't have to be perfect.

Perfectionism can keep people from daring to write their story—or to finish it. If it's your very first story, it doesn't ever have to be good. Nobody gets into the NBA after playing one basketball game. Nobody paints a museum-worthy masterpiece the first time they pick up a brush. Learning and struggling aren't shameful, but reasons to feel proud.

Some of the greatest stories have flaws that everyone acknowledges. Good writing isn't just about getting rid of flaws, but also about building on your strengths—and entertaining, enlightening, and inspiring.

Besides, no matter how proficient you get, no story ever has to be good in the rough draft stage. It's the final draft that counts.

#### 8. Because you'll never know how good it can be until you try.

It might be brilliant.

9. Because you have complete control over it.

If you're like most people, you don't get to control everything in your life. The behavior of the people around you, the stock market, the weather—for better or worse, you have to just deal with these things.

In your story, you are in charge. Like an all-powerful deity, you can create an entire world, and the people who populate it. With very few exceptions, nobody can take your story away from you.

10. Because if you don't, then later you might wish you had.

You don't ever want to look back with regrets. So write your story, and have fun!

Thanks for reading *Master Lists for Writers*. If you enjoyed this book, please leave a review!

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