

What do you need to know about your characters in order to make them believable? Sometimes, writers' need a bit of help focusing or fleshing out a character. A worksheet or list of questions can help with this. Think of it as a biographer's interview. Anything you can think to ask your character could give you more insight about him and why he acts or speaks the way he does. Some of the answers will be useful for making each character individual during dialog or action. For example, one character might have to push his straight hair out of his eyes during an action scene. Another character might always be scrounging food. In many cases, you can invent these details on the spot while you write furiously through your scene. In other cases, you will need to know a great deal about the character before you write the scene, in order to make that background presence or few speaking lines significant.

You do not need the life history of everyone in your story (I call that "Doing a Clancy"). However, you should know each character well enough to understand his motivations and then be able to predict his reactions.

Sometimes, the best scenes are the ones that feature the secondary characters, not the main ones at all.

Here are some questions to ask your character in order to get to know him.

- Name and nicknames (if any):
- Age:
- Physical description--tall, short, or medium height? Straight hair, curly, wavy, bristle-head? Slender fingers or knobby joints? Thick wrists? Tiny feet? Chin too weak or too strong for the rest of the face?
- What do you do for a living?
- Are you any good at it? Why or why not?
- Ever served in the military? When, for how long, and in what capacity? How discharged?
- Irritating habits--bites fingernails, leaves shoes in the middle of the floor, turns the car engine off with the radio on the highest volume, clears throat all the time...
- Eating habits--granola cruncher, junk-food junkie? adores waffles? vegetarian except for steak once a month?
- Sleeping habits? --Early to bed, early to rise? Sleep all day, party all night? Poor sleeper? Snores? Grouchy before 8 am?
- Hobbies? Activities? Crafts? Sports? Collect anything?
- Worst disappointment while growing up? Major disappointment overall in life?
- Best things that happened while growing up? Best events overall in life?

- Proudest moment and most shameful moments?
- What are your goals in life? In your job?
- Ever had a serious injury? Broken bone or bones? Emergency operation?
Motorcycle crash? Internal injuries? Concussion?
- Ever had a serious illness? Staph infection in a hip bone? Pneumonia? Malaria?
South American amoebas (yes, I know people who have had all these things.)
- Did you change much after high school? After college? Why or why not?
- Who were you closest to in your family while growing up? Who are you closest to in your family now?
- Are you single? Married? Divorced? Widowed?
- Children? Grandchildren? Aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces , etc? Pets?
- Ever hated anyone? --who? and why?
- Who have you loved? Who did you love best, and why? Ever felt guilt about love?
- Have you ever betrayed anyone? What did you do?
- Ever witnessed or experienced violence? What was your reaction to seeing or experiencing that violence?
- Ever committed a violent act? What was it, and why did you do it?
- Ever risked something important or made a sacrifice for someone else? Would you do it again?
- Oddest thing that ever happened to you -- Caught in tsunami? Received a shipment of 114 pairs of shoes by mistake? Fell off a cliff into a banana tree and survived?
(And yes, I know people that these things have happened to also.)
- Anything idiosyncratic or otherwise interesting? (E.g., plays the concertina and sings sea shanties in dives.)

This list of questions is obviously not complete. You don't need to know the answers to every one of these questions. Also, depending on your story, you will have other questions to ask. Make up your own list and see where it takes you. You might find yourself fleshing out subtle areas in your story that you had not really considered before. You might also find that knowing your characters better gives the story new life.