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It's Alive! Creating Real Characters

Creating characters that live and breathe, that jump right off the page (and follow you around like a puppy) is one of the most critical jobs of fiction writers. If you can't design a fictional person that seems real, you can't hold your readers interest.

So where do you begin to come up with these pretend people that everyone swears live right down the street?

By watching people. Do try not to stare, though. Even when your neighbor's doing odd things out in the back yard.

Watching the World Go By

A great [fictional character](#) will live in the readers' minds long after they put the book down. (Or if you're like me, live in the writer's mind until she can't shut him up.) Many of those "great" characters in fiction writing come from right next door; from your own life.

No, that's not dull. To someone who lives elsewhere, your neighborhood may be fascinating. So start in your own backyard with what you see and hear. Use that irritating neighbor three doors down as the basis of your [antagonist](#) (or just a minor irritating dweeb, if you wish). Just be sure on paper, that grouchy old man doesn't resemble your neighbor *too* much. Or you'll end up in court.

Another great way to find fodder for your cast is by watching strangers. I know, I know! Your mom always told you not to stare, and not to eavesdrop. But this is an exception, as long as you can do it politely. You have to get fast at glimpsing people that intrigue you, at jotting bits of conversation down. Otherwise, you're liable to provoke the natives.

You can sit (or stand) anywhere public to watch people and their antics. The library. The grocery store. The football game. Anyplace with people is fair game.

Keep a notebook handy, so you can write down ideas, from a snatch of [dialogue](#) to a hairstyle that strikes you or an attitude that's perfect for a "person" you already have in mind.

Usually, if you try to write directly from what you see, it'll end up flat. So up the ante by exaggerating your observations until they fit the story perfectly.

One More Time, With Feeling

Any [character](#) has feelings. At least if you're making them "real" they do. How do you convey those feelings? How do you show their motives for acting as crazy as they do?

Through [characterization](#). You can use description of body language, conversation, actions. Anything that lets us see and hear that person, that makes her come to life, will help us know her well enough to say, "Yeah, that's exactly what she would have done."

Again, observing people in real life will give you scores of ideas for characterizing your fictional people. The swagger of the local teen heart-throb, the screech of the mom with triplet sons who're driving her to the edge of her sanity, the eclectic mix of oddball used clothing your cousin's kids wear with pride. Just keep your eyes open, your ears tuned (and your notebook in your pocket - with a pen!) and you'll find plenty of ideas for all the people in your novel.

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Through the Eyes Of...

One more thing to think about when you populate your novel is who is telling their story? You have to choose the [point of view](#) that will best portray the story you are telling.

Should it be the [protagonist](#) through his eyes only? Or maybe you need the protagonist's best friend's viewpoint, too. Maybe you need an even more distant viewpoint, and omniscient [POV](#) (that's shorthand for point of view) is the only way to really tell your story.

A little experimenting goes a long way toward helping you choose the right viewpoint. So don't be afraid. This experiment can't blow up in your face.

By the way, it may help to keep a file with a [fiction writing character outline](#) for each person. I recommend it if you have more than six people you're trying to keep track of. Otherwise, they'll all end up sounding alike, dressing alike, acting alike... (Yikes! The *Stepford Wives* are back!)

Now, you're ready to create your cast. All you need is eyes and ears and your notebook in hand, and you're on your way to living, breathing fictional folk.

Just be sure none of them look exactly like me.

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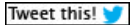


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