

SHORE SCRIPTS

5 QUICK CHARACTER HACKS

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes you've got a great idea for a screenplay with a compelling scenario, unusual setting, or exciting plot, but you're possibly not entirely sure who your main character should be or how to fill up your cast with relatable, realistic, and memorable characters. Use this quick hack to generate some fast potential protagonists that could create additional conflict, give your idea even more originality, or even propel your plot into a completely new and exciting direction.

You don't necessarily have to go through this workbook in order, so skip ahead to the topics that interest you the most or that apply to however fleshed out your idea already is, but each of them will throw up different aspects of character design that are all worth looking at.

IF YOU KNOW THE GENRE...

Keeping the genre in mind, run through these quick questions to brainstorm potential attributes, personalities, flaws & limitations that would make your movie idea stronger.

1. Describe a typical protagonist you'd expect to feature in a movie of your chosen genre or list 5-10 well-known main characters that you can instantly recall when thinking of movies that share some similarities to your idea. What commonalities do they share in terms of gender, age, personality, temperament etc.
2. Take that list or description and jot down which attributes your audience will be expecting your MC to have too. Does your rogue cop need to have an addiction? Does your romantic lead need to be ultra-picky? Or does your superhero need to have some sort of kryptonite etc? Knowing what the viewers will want to see in your MC will help you tailor your own character to suit their needs.
3. Now flip it. What qualities *won't* they be expecting? List all of the opposing traits and consider whether they'd maybe add something new to the genre or would prove to be too big of a clash. Opposites don't always work here. A scatter-brained detective

could work if you're writing a comedy, but not so much if you're writing a hard-boiled detective drama – so keep the genre in mind.

4. Flip it again! Rather than focusing on personality traits, look at physicality's. Swap genders, play around with age groups, does changing the race or culture of a typical protagonist help add another layer of conflict as well as increasing the originality. Don't be afraid of diversifying. Could your protagonist have a physical or mental ailment? Could their height, weight, eyesight strength, hearing etc give them an advantage or disadvantage that adds something fresh?

IF YOU KNOW THE SETTING...

Location, time period, culture, and environment can all have an impact on how your characters act and reacts to different scenarios. Creating conflict is key, so that should be your focus when answering questions in this section.

1. Consider whether your MC should be someone who is local to the location or be an outsider aka the fish out of water character. It's worth plotting out both here in order to discover who creates the most conflict and who is more compelling.
2. For the 'local hero', quickly jot down some attributes that the setting has given them, i.e. someone living in a remote cold climate is likely to be hardy, resourceful, and practical. Someone whose grown up on harsh city streets may be untrustful, hardened, or quick-thinking etc.
3. Flip that list to create possible attributes for a 'fish out water' character. Would a city-dweller now in a remote cold climate be vulnerable, careless, or over-reliant perhaps? Would someone from an isolated small community who now finds themselves in a gritty city be seen as naïve, innocent, or unprepared?
4. Flip them both! Are there any attributes from the 'local hero' that you could give to the 'fish out of water' character and vice versa in order to mix things up and surprise the audience? You need to ensure that the traits are plausible of course, but does giving your characters unexpected negative and positive attributes make them more unique and does it create any potential conflicts?

IF YOU KNOW THE ENDING...

Not everyone knows the ending to their movie before they start, but doing so does allow you to know where your characters need to get to, which allows you to work backwards to find out where they need to start.

1. What attributes does your protagonist need to win during the final climax of your movie (if the piece is a tragedy, write down what lesson was learned instead). Do they need to have a specific skillset? What sort of mental fortitude do they have? Is the climax more of a mental battle or a physical battle?
2. Now reverse-engineer that moment. If your hero needed to physically beat the antagonist (or antagonistic force), was it using skills they've had throughout the story or ones they learned along the way? Thinking about their mental fortitude, if they showed bravery, restraint, compassion, etc, again, are these traits that they already had, or do they need to learn them during the journey?
3. Figure out if your MC is conquering a fear or overcoming a limitation or weakness during the climax. What elements of the movie's end battle are the most difficult for your MC? If you can answer this, brainstorm some ideas on why that moment was particularly hard for them, thus giving you a better idea of what your character might be like at the beginning of the story.
4. If you've been able to envisage your hero at the end of the movie and have flipped those attributes so that you can see what sort of person they were to begin with, you can start plotting out exactly what pivotal moment in your story instigated change in them too. Brainstorm ideas for scenes that could potentially force your character to become the hero they are at the end.

IF YOU KNOW WHO THE ANTAGONIST IS...

Knowing who or what your protagonist is up against can help you figure out what type of character they need to be in order to defeat them or survive. If you have a better idea of who the hero is but are still unsure of who your villain needs to be, just flip the questions and answer them as though they were being asked about the antagonist instead.

Remember, an antagonist doesn't always come in the shape of a human character. It can be nature, a monster, a difficult scenario, or even the protagonist can be their own worst enemy, but having a human character also take on the role can help add even more conflict to your plot.

1. Who is the most unlikely person to win against your villain? Which character won't the audience ever consider having a chance up against the antagonist of your story? What characteristics makes them an improbable candidate? Is this person possibly a main character in the making, if not, are there any attributes they they have that your MC could share or could this be a potential 'stakes' character instead?
2. What goal does your antagonist have? When the hero and the villain are after the same thing, almost making them competitors, brainstorm what personality traits they'll both need to succeed. Add to this list by giving your antagonist a clear advantage or your MC a clear disadvantage or devise a secret strength and a secret weakness that can both be exploited.
3. It's often said that the hero and villain are two sides of the same coin, meaning that they very likely share similar traits. The main difference is that the villain represents the person that the hero will become if they don't change the course of their journey. Brainstorm what moment happened to turn your antagonist into the bad guy. Were they betrayed, did a relationship fail, were they overlooked etc? Does your MC need a similar moment to test their own resolve and does your antagonist also need a follow up moment where they could potentially redeem themselves or pass the point of no return?
4. Would your antagonist make a more compelling character to watch than the protagonist? Look at your story from the villain's point of view and list the reasons why they're determined to succeed. What's motivating them and why? Can the audience empathise with their struggle? What injustices occurred that led to your antagonist being the way they are?

IF YOU KNOW WHAT'S AT STAKE...

What your MC stands to lose should they fail to achieve their goal can help you figure out the driving motivating force behind every single action and line of dialogue they say.

1. Brainstorm just why what's at stake for your MC is so important to them. The more they care, the stronger their drive will be, and the more compelling the story will be in return too. Jot down exactly why they care. What losing will mean for them (both physically and mentally). Are they afraid to lose and why? Is it personal?
2. What is your MC willing to do to succeed? Are they willing to go against their core beliefs? Can they make morally ambiguous decisions? Can their faith be tested? Make a list of beliefs or codes of character that your MC might live by in order to discover which ones you can challenge during their journey. This is a great way to find unexpected ways to inject more conflict into your story.
3. Your MC's external 'goal' versus their inner 'need'. Instead of focusing on what's at stake physically, should the MC fail, let's look at what's at stake mentally. Your MC may need to save their wife's life from terrorists taking over the building, but what's also at stake is a failing marriage and the chance to be a better husband. Brainstorm what's been holding back your MC from succeeding before your movie started. What wrong way of thinking do they need to realise needs to change? What's really the emotional stake of your story?
4. Once you know your MC's external goal and their inner need, double check that it's connected to the central theme. If your overall theme is "with great power comes great responsibility" list as many characteristics as you can that might conflict with that notion, such as carefree, recklessness, violent, overwhelming etc. Then flip it. How does a character like that need to change in order to embody that theme? Become accountable, show remorse, take charge etc. Determine which thematic characteristics your MC needs to have at the beginning and end of your story.

CONCLUSION

Not every story starts off with a great idea for a character first, so these are just a few ways to start you brainstorming which types of characters might make a good fit for your idea, which won't, and which ones could surprise the audience, making your story more memorable and unique.

Changing characters to better suit the plot isn't cheating, it's making a tighter, more rewarding, and more succinct story, so don't be afraid to change certain aspects of a beloved character you've already created. The main thing is to make sure that if you do this in the middle of the story, that it's completely plausible, otherwise, it's probably better to alter the plot instead. But until that spec script is sold, nothing's set in stone, so explore your characters, play with them, test them, and give em' hell!