

# *Writing Characters*

## **Naming**

When you name the characters in your story give serious thought to the names you give them.

Names follow fashions. What are the names of your classmates? What are the names of your parents and their friends? What about grandparents? How many of your friends have names that were just as popular fifty years ago? There will be some overlap but not much.

Is there a person in your class who was born overseas or whose parents came to Australia from another country? What different names can they add to your list?

It might be fun to conduct a survey of families in your class. Make a table of the names of each period of time to provide you with a good starting place. Copy out this table on a larger sheet leaving enough spaces for many more names.

Born (year)	Born (country)	Male names	Female names

When you come to create your characters you need to consider these matters. How old is each person? What sort of name was popular at the time when this person would have been born? What culture did this person come from?

If you choose to give the character a very unusual name you will need to provide a reason for this. Don't be afraid to change the character's name if it doesn't quite work. Just remember to change it all through the story.

## Background

In reality everyone has a past, so your character should too. If you want your character to be just an ordinary person then their history will largely be pretty straightforward. If your character is more of an adventurer, it will be useful to imagine how he or she might have grown up to make him or her behave this way now. Ask yourself these questions. You may come up with some others.

- Where might your character have grown up?
- What would the conditions have been like for this person to grow up?
- What sort of friendships and relationships had this person had?
- What sort of education has this person had?
- What personal discoveries might they have made in their lives that help them make decisions now?

You don't have to write about this character's history, but you do need to know it. This knowledge will help you as you continue to write about them and the character will become more realistic to your reader.

Write a short profile of a character you make up based on these questions. Or apply them to an existing character in a novel or film you know of.

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## Appearance.

It is important as a writer to be able to visualize your characters. Just as it is not always necessary to write about all the history of a character, it is not always important to describe all the physical features of your character. Sometimes all you need is an indication of general appearance and allow your reader to fill in the gaps themselves.

*"While Jason was obviously both physically strong as well as taller than most men, it was the clear, direct look in his eyes that instinctively inspired confidence in him from his team. His voice when he gave his orders was not a snarling bark but a clear request that no-one thought to question".*

This is really a very short physical description, but most readers will have happily filled in the rest. Later, if it seems to be relevant you might add a few extra physical features to build on the image for the reader.

*"Jason, drying his close-cut black hair roughly with a piece of cloth, answered, "We wait!"*

It is usually not a good idea to describe a person all in one paragraph. It can become dull. When you come to add features later your personal image of the character will help you stay consistent.

The actions, mannerisms and language of the character will actually do more to help your reader form an image of them than lengthy physical descriptions.

## Language

How does your character speak? How does his voice sound? (Rough, mellow, seductive, squeaky, nasal) Is there an accent or an unusual speech habit? How broad is this character's vocabulary?

Based just on the words these two characters have used, what can you say about them? You will notice in this example that there are no author statements such as "he said". The voices are left to carry to the whole image.

*"Good afternoon."*

*"Yeah, g'day. How're goin'? Been good weather ay."*

*"Very pleasant indeed. I can scarcely remember such mild weather in December. It is usually considerably hotter."*

*"I'd reckon. Forecast says it's gunna get a lot hotter by Thursday though. Time to get out the sunscreen and floppy hat. See ya at the cricket?"*

*"Absolutely. I'm really looking forward to it. Till Wednesday then".*