

TOOLS TO
DEVELOP CHARACTERS,
CAUSE SCENES, AND
BUILD STORIES

The Dramatic Writer's Companion 2nd Edition

WILL DUNNE

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Use exercises from this guide to address such problems as False Character; Unnecessary Character; No One to Care About; Not Clear What the Character Wants; Not Enough Conflict; Not Enough at Stake; False Starts and Stops; Strategy Gone Stale; Retrospective Elucidation; Punches That Don't Land; Nothing Happening; Something Happening, but It Doesn't Matter; Lack of Focus Early On; Main Character Too Passive or Missing in Action; Offstage More Interesting Than Onstage; Weak Throughline; A Crisis That Isn't; Not Clear What Happened in the Story; A Theme That Isn't; and Way Too Many Words.

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The Dramatic Writer's Companion is a creative and analytical reference tool that has helped thousands of writers develop new plays, screenplays, and other types of stories. It is composed not as a linear sequence of chapters but as a collection of self-contained writing exercises to help you explore and refine your own unique material. These tools can be used at any time in any order and can be repeated as often as you like to make new discoveries.

This second edition of the guide has been updated to include chapter-by-chapter references to related writing exercises in the complementary guide *Character, Scene, and Story: New Tools from the Dramatic Writer's Companion*, which uses a similar structure and approach to help you develop scripts. It is not necessary to have that guide in order to use this one, but having both expands the collection of writing tools at your disposal as you flesh out characters, scenes, and stories. Together, the two guides offer you more than one hundred script development tools.

For best results, please take the time to read this introduction, which explains more about this guide and how to use it.

■ TO THE DRAMATIC WRITER

As a dramatic writer working on a play or screenplay, you are engaged in the process of telling a story. It is a process both old and new—old because its roots stretch back through centuries and offer time-tested principles to guide you, and new because it must be adapted to an utterly unique set of dynamics: you and the story you want to tell.

This guide is designed to help you manage both the old and the new of the storytelling process. Written from a playwright's perspective and making room in its embrace for both playwrights and screenwriters, the guide offers sixty-two in-depth character, scene, and story development exercises. The purpose of these tools is to spark creativity and steer analysis as you develop your script.

TOOLS FOR LEAPING INTO BLANK PAGES

The exercises in this guide build on certain basic assumptions. First, though stage and film are each a distinct medium, the writers of plays and screenplays are more alike than different. Both must create the blueprint for an emotional experience that is meant to be seen and heard. Both must tackle the idea that “less is more” and convey a lot—often a character's entire lifetime—in one audience sitting. Both must use the present to imply the past. Both must figure out how to “show, not tell,” the story so that the audience's

knowledge of it comes not from hearing explanations but from observing and interpreting character behavior. Like storytellers of any kind, dramatic writers also must try to grab the audience from the start, keep them interested to the end, and communicate something meaningful along the way. It is common challenges like these that the exercises in this guide are designed to address.

Second, though there may be no rules for creating art, dramatic stories tend to reflect certain basic storytelling principles. For example, most plays and screenplays focus on the dramatic journey of one main character. This journey usually consists of a series of events that change the world of the story for better or worse. Most of these events are caused by the character's need to accomplish something important and are shaped by the conflicts and risks that stand in the way.

Some dramatic writers adhere faithfully to classic principles like these and produce great works like *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Other writers cherry-pick such principles—using some and ignoring others—to produce great plays like *Waiting for Godot*, where nothing really happens, and great films like *Crash*, which has no main character or central throughline. Whether you wish to use traditional techniques or ignore them, you can benefit from an understanding of storytelling principles that have proven to work. The exercises in this guide are designed to remind you of such principles and give you leeway to adapt them in whatever way best fits your specific needs and story.

**American playwright and director
Moss Hart once said that you never
really learn how to write a play, you
learn only how to write this play.**

CHARACTER: THE HEART AND SOUL OF STORY

While emphasizing different aspects of the dramatic writing process, this guide draws from the theory that character is the root of scene and story. The more you know your characters and the world they inhabit, the better equipped you will be to discover and develop all of the other dramatic elements for your script.

Every exercise in this guide is, to some degree, a character exploration. Even when you are working through the details of a scene or building a story, you are making decisions about your characters: how each is unique and how each is universal. The success of your work will depend on how broadly and deeply you mine the truths of each character and use them to structure the dramatic journey. Such truths are most useful when you understand them emotionally as well as intellectually, especially when you

are in the moment of a scene and need to know what each character will say and do next.

Plot is a critical element of any play or screenplay, but a script dictated by plot points may end up sacrificing truth for spectacle and result not in drama but in melodrama. By letting the plot evolve from the characters instead of forcing the characters into a prefabricated plot, you can keep the focus on truths that enlighten the human condition rather than exaggerated conflicts and emotions that exist only for dramatic effect.

Herein lies the simplest yet most powerful idea underlying this collection of dramatic writing exercises: The character is not something added to the scene or to the story. Rather, the character is the scene. The character is the story.

REAL STORY SOLUTIONS

Each exercise in this guide grew out of real issues that playwrights and screenwriters faced while working on scripts, side by side, in more than fifteen hundred dramatic writing workshops that I conducted over twenty years. Each exercise was then tested with different writer groups and refined as needed. The result is a collection of tools that translate dramatic theory into action steps and cover a range of topics from a variety of angles.

Some exercises focus on development details, such as defining a character's credo or figuring out her scenic objective. Others address the big picture of the story by helping you explore subject, theme, and through-line. Sometimes the approach is instinctual—you work “from the heart” to find new insights—and sometimes intellectual: you work “from the head” to evaluate material, fix problems, and reach writing goals.

Each exercise tackles its topic in depth and provides step-by-step guidance rather than general directives. Though the guide is meant to have both educational and motivational value, no exercise is solely a lesson or creative diversion for its own sake. Rather, each targets information that you can import to your story so that you are always exploring your own material—not someone else's. In effect, the exercises become part of your writing process rather than something you do in addition to it.

OTHER RELATED RESOURCES TO ENRICH YOUR WRITING PROCESS

This guide is complemented by two other guides that use a similar structure and approach to help you develop dramatic scripts. Both let you adapt writing tools to your needs by choosing the topics you want to explore at any given time during the writing or revision process.

- **Character, Scene, and Story: New Tools from the Dramatic Writer's Companion** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017) expands the collection of script development tools in this guide by addressing new topics and by exploring many of the same topics in more depth or from new angles. To facilitate this process, each exercise in each

guide includes references to related tools in the other guide. Many of the tools in *Character, Scene, and Story* are visceral techniques that call for intuitive responses. For example, they help you dig deeper into your script by fleshing out visual images, exploring characters from emotional perspectives, and tapping the power of color and sense memory to trigger story ideas. The new guide concludes with a special troubleshooting section to help you tackle problem scenes.

- ***The Architecture of Story: A Technical Guide for the Dramatic Writer*** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016) helps you develop your own dramatic scripts by exploring storytelling tools and techniques that other writers have used. Three successful contemporary American plays—*Doubt: A Parable* by John Patrick Shanley, *Topdog/Underdog* by Suzan-Lori Parks, and *The Clean House* by Sarah Ruhl—are each dismantled from a technical perspective to illustrate dramatic writing principles that you can adapt in countless ways to the scripts you develop. In addition to detailed analysis of these plays, the guide includes hundreds of questions to help you evaluate your own work.

■ HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

You are welcome to sit down and read this guide from cover to cover, but that is not the intended use. Like any reference tool, the guide invites you to review its contents, select the specific information you need now, and use it to produce results.

NONLINEAR DESIGN: YOU CHOOSE WHICH EXERCISE TO DO NEXT

The exercises in this guide are each self-contained, so you can try them in any order at any time and repeat them at different times with different results. This approach reflects the idea that there is no single way to develop story and lets you adapt the guide to your individual writing process and level of experience.

ORGANIZATION FOR EASE OF USE

To help you manage the guide, the exercises are divided into three areas of content: character, scene, and story. Though character is the foundation of scene and story, the breakdown allows a different focus for each section.

Exercises within each section have been further divided into stages 1, 2, and 3. The purpose of these numbers is not to indicate degree of difficulty but to suggest the general stage of script development in which an exercise might be most appropriate, with stage 1 best suited to early development and stage 3 to later development. Attention to these numbers is optional. They are provided mainly for writers who prefer a more structured approach to choosing exercises.

At the end of this guide you will find a troubleshooting section that highlights twenty common script problems and suggests specific exercises to help you address them. For quick reference, you also will find a glossary of terms to facilitate nonlinear use of this guide and also to highlight the dramatic principles woven throughout the exercises. For example, the term *beat* appears in many of the exercises. While it may refer elsewhere to a pause in dialogue for dramatic effect, *beat* is used in this guide only to mean “the smallest unit of dramatic action.” Just as a dramatic story is made up of scenes, a scene is made up of beats. Each beat centers on one thing, such as one topic, one behavior, or one emotion. Beats bring variety to the dramatic action of a scene and determine its structure and rhythm.

EXERCISE ELEMENTS TO TRIGGER DISCOVERY

As you work with the guide, you will find that each exercise offers certain features to support your character, scene, or story exploration, including a summary, suggestion for when to use the exercise, topic introduction, exercise introduction, detailed action steps, and recap of key messages.

Since the exercises are designed to be self-contained and useful in any order, certain principles and questions are repeated among them. As you develop your script, these recurring elements can often lead to new discoveries. Use any recurring theory you encounter as an opportunity to reevaluate your current writing process, and any recurring question as an opportunity to rethink your material and gain new insights about your characters and story. Some exercises tackle the same subject but with different levels of depth or from different angles. Most exercises can be completed in about thirty minutes.

EXAMPLES TO ILLUSTRATE KEY PRINCIPLES

The guide is sprinkled with hundreds of examples from dramatic works, many of which have been developed as both plays and films. Some examples are quick references. Others include more detailed script analysis. The dramatic works used most often or in most depth include *Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches* by Tony Kushner, *Ballad of the Sad Café* adapted by Edward Albee from a book by Carson McCullers, *The Bear* by Anton Chekhov, *The Beard of Avon* by Amy Freed, *Betrayal* by Harold Pinter, *Blasted* by Sarah Kane, *Crimes of the Heart* by Beth Henley, *Doubt* by John Patrick Shanley, *Edmond* by David Mamet, *The Elephant Man* by Bernard Pomerance, *Frozen* by Bryony Lavery, *Glengarry Glen Ross* by David Mamet, *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, *The History Boys* by Alan Bennett, *Hotel Desperado* by Will Dunne, *How I Became an Interesting Person* by Will Dunne, *In the Blood* by Suzan-Lori Parks, *Long Day's Journey into Night* by Eugene O'Neill, *Loot* by Joe Orton, *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare, *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, *The Pianist* by Wladyslaw Szpilman and Ronald Harwood, *The Piano Lesson* by August Wilson, *The Pillowman* by Martin McDonagh, *Proof*

by David Auburn, *Psycho* by Robert Bloch and Joseph Stefano, *The Real Thing* by Tom Stoppard, *Search and Destroy* by Howard Korder, *Topdog/Underdog* by Suzan-Lori Parks, *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams, *True West* by Sam Shepard, *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* by Edward Albee, and *Wit* by Margaret Edson.

GETTING STARTED

How should you begin to develop a dramatic script? Different writers address this question in different ways. In the end, their answers indicate not what is “correct” in the storytelling universe but rather what works best for them. Here are suggestions for getting started with this guide and doing whatever works best for you.

1. **Select a section.** Think about where you are now in the development of your script. Trust your instinct and pick one of three areas to tackle: character, scene, or story. Then go to the matching section in the table of contents.

- Use “Developing Your Character” to flesh out, explore, and understand the important characters in your story. Exercises range from a basic character builder to in-depth character analysis.
- Use “Causing a Scene” to plan, write, or revise any scene in your story. Exercises range from a basic scene starter to more advanced tools for refining dramatic action and dialogue.
- Use “Building Your Story” to spark global thinking and figure out how to compose and connect dramatic events so that they add up to one story. Exercises range from deciding whose story you’re writing to analyzing and revising the dramatic journey that emerged.

If you don’t know much about your story yet, or if you’re not sure what to try next, go to “Developing Your Character.” The more you know your characters, the more your story will write itself.

2. **(Optional) Select a level.** Choose the level of exercise that best matches your current knowledge of the story.

- *Stage 1* starter tools can help lay the groundwork for a new character, new scene, or new story: you may use them any time in any order during writing or revision but might find them most helpful during early script development, when you have the most to figure out.
- *Stage 2* exploratory tools can help you learn more about a character, scene, or story you’ve started. You may use them any time in any order but might find them most helpful during the middle to later stages of script development, when you want to get deeper into your material.

- *Stage 3* focusing tools can help you simplify, prioritize, and clarify your thoughts about a character, scene, or whole story. You may use them any time in any order but might find them most helpful during the later stages of story development, when you are more familiar with your script and have the most details to track and manage.

Some writers will choose to do stage 1 exercises first, stage 2 next, and stage 3 last. Others will gain more from ignoring these numbers and intuitively creating their own system of use. For example, you may wish to try a stage 1 exercise during later script development. The leap back to basics can help shake up material that has grown stale. Or you may wish to try a stage 3 during early script development even though you may not yet be prepared to complete many of the steps. The leap forward can help you plan the story or formulate questions to guide the work ahead.

3. **Select an exercise.** Scan the exercise summaries in this category at this level, and pick the most appealing one. Don't worry about whether you are making the right choice, because while you are using this guide you cannot make a mistake. You can gain something useful from whichever exercise you choose to do—even if you simply select one at random.

4. **(Optional) Explore the topic further.** By reviewing the table of contents or the streamlined “Exercises at a Glance,” you may find other tools in this guide related to the topic at hand. If you also have *Character, Scene, and Story: New Tools from the Dramatic Writer's Companion*, you can continue exploring the topic or a related one in that guide as well. To keep you aware of what the other guide offers, each chapter in this second edition concludes with suggestions of exercises to consider.

■ ONGOING USE OF THE GUIDE

You can use this guide periodically or every time you sit down to work on your story. Integrate the exercises into your writing process to help you warm up, find and explore new ideas, and analyze and solve script problems. Remember that you can use the same exercise at different times to find new material for your story.

As you become familiar with the guide, you can shortcut exercise selection by using “Exercises at a Glance” on page xxiii.

While you write and rewrite, you may wish to use the troubleshooting section at the end of the guide to tackle specific script problems. Remember that if the meaning of a term is unclear, you can always check the glossary for a working definition.

■ GROUND RULES

Before you start any exercise in this guide, be sure you are familiar with the following guidelines. They provide a foundation for each exercise and are designed to help you get the most out of this guide. For best results, revisit these suggestions now and then, and keep them in mind each time you do an exercise:

1. **Trust your authority.** A basic principle of these exercises is to proceed with confidence and turn off the censor inside you who says your work isn't good enough. While doing each exercise—at least for that thirty minutes or so—you are infallible and simply cannot make a mistake. Enjoy it while it lasts.

2. **Work fast.** Another basic principle is to open up and let ideas flow by working as quickly as possible. Try to avoid thinking too much or getting too complicated. If you get stuck on a question, jot down any answer—even a bad one—and go on from there. Off-the-cuff responses sometimes have surprising payoffs later.

3. **Look for what's new.** Some exercises may focus on material that overlaps with other material you've already discovered through another exercise or on your own. Keep taking creative leaps, and try to avoid repeating or rehashing what you already know. Use the exercises to make discoveries, not relive them.

4. **Go one step at a time.** The exercises tend to work best if you don't know where they are leading. Once you get past the introductory material and into the action steps of the exercise, don't look ahead. Focus on here and now.

5. **Honor exercise limits.** Most of the exercises are designed to be done in one sitting. Some have word limits and other restrictions. These limits are designed to boost your creativity, not stifle it.

6. **Stay flexible.** Some exercises ask you to explore several different possibilities to find one solution. For best results, complete the exercise even if you think you've already found a solution that works. It's only an exercise, and the exploration could lead to valuable material where you least expect it.

7. **Think big.** These exercises are designed ultimately to help you discover and understand what matters most about your story. If you find yourself at a crossroads, unsure of which way to turn, always make the most dramatic choice.

8. **Have fun.** While some writers suffer in garrets and slave over their stories, others enjoy their work. The value of your script will not be measured by how much anguish you experienced in producing it. Dramatic writing is serious stuff—and it will often be challenging—but you can have a good time in the process.

EXERCISES AT A GLANCE

DEVELOPING YOUR CHARACTER

Stage 1: Fleshing Out the Bones

<i>Exercise Title</i>	<i>Exercise Subject</i>	
Basic Character Builder	Traits and experiences	3
What the Character Believes	Character credo	8
Where the Character Lives	Home life	10
Where the Character Works	Work life	13
Getting Emotional	Emotional life	16
Into the Past	Backstory	20
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Stage 2: Getting to Know the Character Better

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Developing Your Character

Character is the heart and soul of story. This section can help you flesh out your characters as you prepare to write, make ongoing discoveries about them as your story unfolds, and focus on what matters most. Use these exercises any time. You can always benefit from knowing more about your characters, especially if you begin to lose interest in them, get stuck in a scene, or feel unsure about the direction in which your story should proceed.

BASIC CHARACTER BUILDER

THE QUICK VERSION

Start to flesh out a character

BEST TIME FOR THIS

During early story development or any time you add a new character

CHARACTER: A MIX OF PHYSICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, AND SOCIAL TRAITS

You won't understand what your story is about until you understand who your characters are. Dramatist Henrik Ibsen felt he could not begin writing a play until he knew the characters inside out—as if he had lived with them for a month. To know a character is to know the complex blend of physical, psychological, and social traits that make him or her unique. The most important of these traits will be revealed to us through the character's actions under the increasing pressure of story events.

Great stories create extreme circumstances where characters are tested—and usually changed—and where they may do things, for better or for worse, that they never thought possible. To write such stories, you need to know your characters well enough to understand where in life they have come from, how they usually behave day-to-day, in what unexpected ways they might act under stress, and in what ways they would never under any circumstances behave.

ABOUT THE EXERCISE

Try this first with your main character. You can repeat it later with other principal characters in less detail. Don't overdevelop minor characters. They may steal the show if, after they come and go, we are waiting for them to return.

You don't need to write volumes as you answer the exercise questions. It's more about making choices and knowing what they are. For best results:

Set up a personal palette. For each character you build, choose one or two people whom you can use—in combination with yourself—as a source of information. Pick people who trigger strong positive or negative feelings. Give the character a name that embodies your choices and has special meaning for you.

Look for what matters most. The importance of each question will depend on the unique character you are developing. Try to find character facts that

may influence story events. Don't waste time on details that will have no impact.

Focus on when the story begins. The character will undergo changes as the dramatic journey unfolds. The exercise is designed to help you flesh out who the character is before those changes begin to occur.

When basing a character on someone from your life, you may find the best material by using his or her real name in the early private stages of writing. Once you establish the character—and before others see your script—switch to a fictitious name.

■ YOUR CHARACTER'S PHYSICAL LIFE

Remember that “now” and “today” refer to when the story begins.

1. When was the character born and what is the character's age now?
2. Think about his or her other vital stats, such as gender, ethnicity, height, and weight. Which of these, if any, might matter in the story?
3. How would most people describe the character's physical appearance?
4. Good or bad, what is the character's most striking physical feature?
5. How would you describe the character's strength, endurance, and coordination when it comes to physical activity and sports?
6. What is the character's favorite sport or physical activity?
7. How is the character's health now, and what has most contributed to this?
8. Is the character on any medication now? If so, what is it, why is the character taking it, and how does it affect his or her behavior?
9. What significant diseases, if any, has the character had in the past and what impact does this medical history have on the character now?
10. Has the character ever sustained a serious physical injury? If so, what happened and how has this affected the character?
11. Does the character have any permanent physical defects, such as nearsightedness, or temporary ones, such as a broken leg? If so, what are they?
12. Of the character's most defining traits, which ones run in the family?
13. Does the character use nicotine, alcohol, or recreational drugs? If so, what is used in what quantities and how important is this in the character's daily life?
14. What is the character's greatest physical asset?
15. What is the character's greatest physical weakness or liability?

■ YOUR CHARACTER'S INNER LIFE

1. What is the character's IQ and how has this affected the character?
2. How would you describe the character's imagination?
3. How does the character rate in terms of common sense and sound judgment?
4. How would you describe the character's outlook on life?
5. Does the character tend to be dominant or submissive with others, and why?
6. How does the character usually approach major problems?
7. What is the character's greatest talent?
8. What is the character's greatest lack of talent?
9. What is the character's biggest success in life so far?
10. What is the character's biggest failure in life so far?
11. Up to now, what has been the character's main ambition?
12. What is the character's biggest delusion?
13. In order of importance, identify the character's three greatest fears.
14. In order of importance, name three things that make the character really angry.
15. What would make the character feel embarrassed, ashamed, or guilty?
16. How would you describe the character's moral standards?
17. What are three things that your character most values?
18. What are three things that your character least values?
19. What is the character's greatest virtue?
20. What is the character's greatest vice?
21. What are the spiritual and religious beliefs of the character?
22. Identify something unusual that the character might do—but only if most people would not know about it.
23. Name three things the character would never, ever do.
24. What is the character's biggest secret and why has this stayed hidden?
25. What turns the character on sexually?
26. What is the character's greatest psychological strength?
27. What is the character's greatest psychological weakness?

■ YOUR CHARACTER'S LIFE WITH OTHERS

1. Where did the character grow up and in what kind of home?
2. What was the character's social class and how did this affect the character?
3. During the character's early years, who was in the family and how did the character fit in with them?
4. What did the character's parents do for a living and how much did they earn?
5. What was the greatest strength and weakness of the character's father?

6. What was the greatest strength and weakness of the character's mother?
7. In a nutshell, how would you describe the character's childhood?
8. Inside or outside the family, positive or negative, who had the greatest impact on the character as a child and how would you describe this influence?
9. What kind of schools did the character attend and how well did he or she do?
10. What were the character's best and worst subjects in school?
11. How popular was the character through childhood and teenage years?
12. How actively did the character participate in social organizations at school?
13. Inside or outside the family, positive or negative, who had the greatest impact on the character as a teenager and how would you describe this influence?
14. Who was the character's first love, how did this relationship get started, and—if the character is no longer in that relationship—what ended it?
15. What was the character's first real job, why did the character get hired, and—if the character is no longer at that job—what caused it to end?
16. What does the character do now for a living, how much does he or she earn, and how well suited is the character to this line of work?
17. What is the character's social class and marital status now?
18. Where does the character live now and with whom (if anyone)?
19. How would you describe the character's home life now?
20. How has the character's sex life been lately?
21. Publicly or secretly, whom does the character find most sexually attractive?
22. Who is the character's best friend today, and why?
23. Who is the character's worst enemy today, and why?
24. Does the character have any hobbies now and, if so, what?
25. Other than hobbies, what does the character usually do for fun?
26. What is the last book that the character read?
27. What is the last film, if any, that the character saw?
28. When is the last time the character went to a party, whose party was it, and what kind of time did the character have there?
29. Whether spouse, lover, best friend, coworker, family member, or mentor, who is the most significant other person in the character's life today, and why?
30. What is the happiest moment the character has shared with that person?
31. What is the unhappiest moment the character has shared with that person?
32. How would you describe the character's politics?

33. How would you describe the character's position or role in society today?
34. If the character could change one thing about the world, what would it be?
35. Positive or negative, what were three of the most significant turning points in the character's life and how has each affected the character whom we first meet?

WRAP-UP

You've begun to create a unique identity by making specific choices about the character's physical life, inner life, and life with others. As you develop your story, continue asking questions like these so that your character can keep growing. Look for answers that are relevant to the dramatic journey and can help you better understand how this character will feel and act as the journey unfolds.

Other exercises in this section can help you flesh out specific aspects of your character—such as belief system, home life, and work life—in more depth. In some cases, you may be asked similar questions about the same character and find yourself wanting to give different answers. Know that your character is dynamic and will continue to evolve in new and often unexpected ways as you write and rewrite your story.

To explore the character further, write a biography that focuses on the key turning points in his or her life. Look for examples that will influence story action and are not just interesting experiences in themselves. Another useful exercise is to track a day in the life of the character just before the story begins. You will learn a lot by discovering what he or she typically does from morning to night.

Related tools in Character, Scene, and Story. To continue fleshing out a character, try any exercise in the “Developing Your Character” section, from “Character Interview” to “What Is the Character Doing Now?”

WHAT THE CHARACTER BELIEVES

THE QUICK VERSION

Learn more about your character by fleshing out his or her personal credo

BEST TIME FOR THIS

Any time you need to know a character better

THE CHARACTER'S CREDO: A DEEP SOURCE OF ACTION

To figure out the events of your story, you need to understand your character's belief system. This includes how your character sees the world, what your character values and doesn't value, what pushes your character's buttons, and why your character is likely to behave a certain way under certain circumstances.

ABOUT THE EXERCISE

Choose a character whom you wish to explore in more depth and imagine him or her around the time the story begins. Then use free associations to answer the following exercise questions from this character's perspective and in this character's voice, as if you were writing dialogue. Tell the truth as best you can. "Truth" here is whatever you, the character, *believe* is true when the story begins.

■ YOUR CHARACTER'S BELIEF SYSTEM

When the story begins, how do you, the character, feel about the following twenty topics? For each one, try to say as much as you can in one minute of fast writing.

Money	Sin	Violence	Beauty
Children	Success	Marriage	Death
Church	Family	Drugs	Friendship
Technology	Politics	Justice	Failure
Freedom	Love	Sex	God

A DEEPER LOOK AT THREE KEY BELIEFS

To you, the character, when the story begins:

1. Review your quick responses to the twenty exercise topics. Choose any three topics to explore in more detail.
2. For each topic you chose, take five more minutes to continue where you left off and express your unique point of view. Remember that there is

no right or wrong way to do this. Just be specific and stay true to what you, the character, believe. Try to include specific examples from your life to support your beliefs.

WRAP-UP

Your character's belief system is a key component of who the character is and what makes the character tick. This system is based on what the character has experienced in life, what the character has been taught by others, and how the character feels and thinks as a result of all this.

Like people, no two characters have identical belief systems. Each therefore will act in a unique way, especially under stress when true values tend to show themselves—whether the character likes it or not.

It's easiest to understand values that you and the character share, but what about values you don't share? Take extra time to explore these key differences and what led the character to embrace them.

Related tools in Character, Scene, and Story. To explore a character's credo in more depth, go to the "Developing Your Character" section and try "Beyond Belief."

WHERE THE CHARACTER LIVES

THE QUICK VERSION

Find important clues to your character's identity by exploring his or her home

BEST TIME FOR THIS

Any time you need to know a character better

YOUR CHARACTER'S HOME:

A GOLD MINE OF PERSONAL INFORMATION

The more you know your characters, the more your story will write itself. This exercise helps you flesh out your principal characters by exploring their most personal domains: their homes. Whether or not these dwellings figure directly into the story action, they are telling places that can reveal a lot about who your characters really are.

ABOUT THE EXERCISE

Choose a character whom you wish to explore in more depth and imagine him or her around the time the story begins. Then answer the exercise questions from this character's perspective and in this character's voice, as if you were writing dialogue. Tell the truth as best you can. "Truth" here is whatever you, the character, *believe* is true when the story begins.

■ YOUR CHARACTER'S HOME LIFE

To you, the character: when the story begins:

1. Where is your home located? If you were to get mail there, what information would be on it: your name and full mailing address.
2. What type of place is it—for example, house, apartment, trailer, hotel room, palace, cave, tent, forest, or space station—and how long have you lived there?
3. Identify the different rooms or distinct areas of your home—for example, living room, kitchenette, bathroom, patio.
4. How would you describe your neighborhood or immediate surroundings?
5. What is your financial relationship to your home—for example, do you own, rent, or stay there for free?
 - If you pay, what's the monthly cost and how easily do you manage this?
 - If it's "free," what are you expected to provide instead of money?
6. Who else, if anyone, lives with you? Write each one's name and

relationship—for example, lover, husband, or cellmate. If you have pets, include them, too.

7. Briefly describe your home relationships:
 - If you live alone, how do you like being by yourself?
 - If you live with others, how well do you get along?
8. Briefly describe how your home usually looks—for example, neat or messy, immaculate or filthy, cluttered or sparse, fixed up or run down.
9. Which is your favorite room or area at home, and why?
10. What room or area of your home do you like least, and why?
11. Name three of your favorite possessions at home. Tell what each one is, where you keep it, and why you like it so much.
12. Name three of the possessions that you most want to get rid of someday. Tell what each one is, where you keep it, and why you dislike it.
13. What was the most memorable intimate encounter you've ever had in your home? Include when this happened and who was involved.
14. Aside from that, what's one of the happiest experiences you've ever had in your home? Include when this happened and who was involved.
15. What was the most memorable violent, criminal, or terrible act in your home? Include when this happened and who was involved.
16. Aside from that, what's one of the most frightening experiences you've ever had in your home? Include when this happened and who was involved.
17. What's one of the saddest experiences you've ever had in your home? Include when this happened and who was involved.
18. Name an object in your home—a physical item—that you keep secret from most people. Include where you have it now and why it's hidden.
19. Name something you do—or have done—in your home that most people don't know about. Tell who else, if anyone, was involved, and why it's a secret.
20. Summing it all up, how do you feel about your home?
 - If you're happy living there, what do you most enjoy about it?
 - If you're unhappy there, what's wrong and where would you rather live?

WRAP-UP

The character's home is an often overlooked source of important character information. By answering these questions—even the simplest ones about address, living unit, and rooms—you've had to make many specific and complex choices about your character's life. By responding as the character, you've also taken this research out of the realm of the academic and into the world of your story. This has given you a chance not only to search for leads to new story ideas, but also to develop more of your character's unique outlook, personality, and voice.

Related tools in *Character, Scene, and Story*. The character's home may include things that are important to the story. To study these items and other physical life in the character's world, go to the "Developing Your Character" section and try "Objects of Interest." To explore the character's early home life, try "Meet the Parents" in the same section.

WHERE THE CHARACTER WORKS

THE QUICK VERSION

Learn more about your character by exploring his or her work life

BEST TIME FOR THIS

Any time you need to know a character better

YOUR CHARACTER'S TRADE AND THE IMPACT IT'S MADE

Even if you never show us your character on the job, you can discover a lot of useful story information by exploring what the character does—or did—for a living. Whether it's frying fries at a fast-food stand or ruling a nation from a throne, work is a profound influence that affects and reflects the character's social class, lifestyle, economics, power base, and opportunities for growth. Work also determines how the character spends a significant amount of time and whom the character meets and doesn't meet on a regular basis. All of this can affect to some degree the character's view of society, value system, and perhaps even vocabulary and dress.

Ideally, your character is unique, and no generalization always applies, but different trades tend to suggest different traits among those who ply them. For example, a temp secretary earning minimum wage might see the world differently from a corporate executive raking in top dollar. An accountant might prize organization more than an artist, who might value breaking rules. A computer programmer might speak and dress differently from a church minister, lawyer, or horse jockey. Know your character's trade and the impact it's made. You'll have a better handle on your character during the story—even when work is the last thing on his or her mind.

ABOUT THE EXERCISE

Choose a character whom you wish to explore in more depth and imagine him or her around the time the story begins. Then answer the exercise questions from this character's perspective and in this character's voice, as if you were writing dialogue. Tell the truth as best you can. "Truth" here is whatever you, the character, *believe* is true when the story begins.

■ YOUR CHARACTER'S WORK LIFE

To you, the character: when the story begins:

1. Think about general work categories. What is your profession? Or, if you are currently unemployed or retired, what type of work have you mostly done?

2. What type of establishment do you work in, what is it called, and where is it located in relationship to your home?
3. How do you get to work, and how long is the commute each way?
4. What are your usual working hours?
5. What is your specific job title and how long have you had this particular job?
6. Name two or three qualifications that you needed to get this job.
7. How much do you usually make each month, and how does this pay fit your current needs and lifestyle?
8. What is one of your greatest strengths on the job?
9. What is one your greatest weaknesses on the job?
10. Overall, how well suited are you for the type of work that you do?
11. Give a specific example of one of your greatest successes on the job.
12. Give a specific example of one of your greatest failures on the job.
13. Give a specific example of how you have fun either on the job or with your coworkers after hours.
14. Think about the people you interact with during work—for example, your boss, coworkers, customers, or suppliers. Whom do you like most, and why?
15. Think again about the people you interact with during work. Whom do you like least, and why?
16. What is one of the greatest secrets that you keep from your coworkers, and why do you keep this hidden?
17. What is one of your greatest fears or concerns related to your job?
18. Think about your answers to the questions so far. What do you like most about the type of work that you do?
19. Overall, what do like least about the type of work that you do?
20. If you could be doing any other type of work, what would it be, and why?

If your character has a job that you have never had, you may gain new story insights by taking the time to research that line of work. Talk to people who do it. What do they most like and dislike about the job? What's unique about it? How does it affect the rest of their lives?

WRAP-UP

If your character has a full-time job, it could account for a third of his or her waking life. You may now have a better knowledge of how that valuable time is spent, what it's like for your character, and what impact it has

made. Remember that characters function with a logic and motivation that reflects a whole life—not just the one we see during story events.

By responding as the character, you've taken your research out of the realm of the academic and into the realm of the dramatic. So, while learning about his or her work life, you have also developed more of your character's outlook, personality, and unique voice.

Related tools in *Character, Scene, and Story*. To learn more about your character, try any exercise in the “Developing Your Character” section. For example, use “Character Interview” to flesh out the character emotionally. Or use “Character Fact Sheet” to develop a more objective portrait of him or her.

GETTING EMOTIONAL

THE QUICK VERSION

Explore causes and effects of a character's emotional life

BEST TIME FOR THIS

Any time you need to know a character better or find new story ideas

USING EMOTION TO WEAVE STORY

When we see a great play or film, we are not just told the story, we experience it. We live through the characters and share their feelings. In the end, we may say that we are “moved.” This is a movement which is primarily emotional and which pulls us from a place of detachment to a place of involvement. We start out with no knowledge of the characters and end up not only knowing them well, but also caring about them.

Dramatic characters can stir our feelings because they are themselves emotional in nature. When they have strong needs and face increasing pressures, they tend to experience a gamut of feelings that reveal different dimensions of who they are and lead them to different paths of action.

When choosing subjects to write about, look for people, events, and issues that trigger strong feelings in you. These will most likely lead to your best writing, and your passion for the subject can help carry you through many of the challenges of developing story. Since you also need to bring analytical vision to your work, however, beware of personal subjects that still feel too close or emotionally overwhelming. These will be great to write about later when you have enough psychological distance to understand them more clearly.

Whether positive or negative, emotions signal that a limit has been reached or crossed. The character has been shaken out of complacency to feel sympathy or love, irritation or anger, anxiety or fear. The stimulus may have been internal—such as an idea or memory—or external—such as a physical event or social interaction. Either way, the emotion can produce physical and psychological responses that can, in turn, affect the charac-

ter's behavior and speech. Emotion is thus both a cause and an effect of dramatic action, as well as an essential fabric of story.

ABOUT THE EXERCISE

You are about to explore causes and effects of a character's three defining emotions: anger, fear, and love. Use the same character for the whole exercise, and try it first with your main character. For best results, stay true to what you already know about the character, but remember to keep looking for new insights in each round.

■ YOUR CHARACTER AND ANGER

I am so angry because . . .

What makes your character really mad? Anger is a powerful emotion that can range from annoyance to rage, and what stirs it can reveal much about who your character is. Use these steps to find three examples of what causes—or could cause—extreme anger in your character:

1. **Actual story.** Fireworks erupt in the Alexander Payne film *Sideways* when Stephanie finds out that her devoted new boyfriend Jack is secretly engaged to someone else—and the wedding is this weekend. Imagine how different characters might explain their anger in a similar situation. One might say: "I am so angry because . . . he's a selfish heartless bastard who lied to me and used me." Another might say: "I am so angry because . . . now I'll never be able to trust anyone ever again." And yet another might say: "I am so angry because . . . we had tickets for Vegas this weekend and they're not refundable."

Find the time in your story when your character gets most angry. Identify the reason for this anger in a line that begins "I am so angry because . . ." and is completed in your character's unique voice. See if you can find an explanation that surprises you.

2. **Backstory.** Step into the past. Find an important time when the character got boiling mad. Try to see and feel what happened as if it were now. Then let the character explain it in a line that begins "I am so angry because . . ." Look for an explanation that ties somehow to the here and now of the story.

3. **Possible story.** Return to the present and, as an exercise, find something new that would make sense for your unique character: an example of anger that is not actually in the script now but could possibly be added. Identify the cause of this possible anger in a line that begins "I am so angry because . . ." and is completed in the unique voice of your character.

Because I am so angry . . .

Strong feelings can lead characters to do things—good or bad—that they might not otherwise have done: tell the truth, tell a lie, give up drugs, cheat on a test, rescue someone from a burning building, or rob a bank. Emotion

can thus evolve from an effect of experience to a cause of it. Use these steps to explore possible effects of your character's anger:

1. **Key anger.** Look back at your three anger examples and choose one to explore further—no longer as a response but as a stimulus.

2. **Responses to anger.** Imagine your character feeling this anger and wanting to do something about it. Any number of responses is possible. Each would reflect a different side of the character. When betrayed by a lover, for example, one character might decide, "Because I am so angry . . . I'll never speak to him or even look at his face ever again." Another might say, "Because I am so angry . . . I'll go out and meet someone new." And yet another might say, "Because I am so angry . . . I'll find him wherever he is and beat him to a pulp."

Each of these emotional responses would trigger a different chain of events. In *Sideways*, Stephanie goes for the third possibility and ends up breaking Jack's nose—an injury he will have to explain to his fiancée as they prepare for the wedding.

Imagine three things your character might do as a result of the specific anger you are exploring. Think of them as separate possibilities rather than as a sequence of steps. Identify each in a line that begins "Because I am so angry . . ." and is completed in your character's unique voice. Even if you are working with the actual story example, take creative leaps and look for new discoveries about what your character might do.

■ YOUR CHARACTER AND FEAR

I am so afraid because . . .

What makes your character afraid? Fear is another powerful emotion, and may range from caution to terror. Use these steps to find three examples of what causes—or could cause—extreme fear in your character:

1. **Actual story.** Find a time in your story now when your character is afraid. Explain why in the character's voice: "I am so afraid because . . ."

2. **Backstory.** Find a time in the backstory when your character got scared. Explain why in the character's voice: "I am so afraid because . . ."

3. **Possible story.** Find an example of fear that is not actually in the story now but could possibly be added. Explain the cause of this possible fear in the character's voice: "I am so afraid because . . ."

Because I am so afraid . . .

How might fear affect your character's actions at a critical time? Use these steps to explore some specific possibilities:

1. **Key fear.** Look back at your three fear examples and choose one to explore further—no longer as a response but as a stimulus.

2. **Responses to fear.** Imagine your character doing something as a result of this fear. Find three separate alternatives that could make sense for your character and identify each in his or her voice: "Because I am so afraid . . ."

■ YOUR CHARACTER AND LOVE

I am so loving because . . .

What would lead your character to love? The subject of countless stories through centuries of storytelling, love is a powerful emotion that may range from simple caring to true romance to spiritual love. Use these steps to find three examples of what causes—or could cause—love in your character.

1. **Actual story.** Find a time in your story when your character feels love. Explain why in his or her voice: “I am so loving because . . .”

2. **Backstory.** Find a time in the backstory when your character felt love. Explain why in his or her voice: “I am so loving because . . .”

3. **Possible story.** Find a new example of love that could possibly be added to the story. Then explain the cause of this possible love in the character’s voice: “I am so loving because . . .”

Because I am so loving . . .

Love can make one foolish or wise, honest or deceitful, generous or possessive. It can turn cowards into heroes, and beasts into beauties. Use these steps to explore specific ways that love might affect your character:

1. **Key love.** Look back at your three love examples and choose one to explore further—no longer as a response but as a stimulus.

2. **Responses to love.** Imagine your character wanting to do something as a result of this love. In your character’s voice, identify three separate alternatives that would make sense for him or her: “Because I am so loving . . .”

WRAP-UP

As you work on your script, continue to look for new opportunities to use emotions like anger, fear, and love to shape and reflect the dramatic action. Remember that there is no generic cause for any one emotion and no generic effect. You will learn a lot about your characters from how they feel in a certain situation, why they feel that way, and what they do about it.

Related tools in *Character, Scene, and Story*.

To explore a character’s emotional life in more depth, go to the “Developing Your Character” section and try “The Emotional Character.” Or go to the “Causing a Scene” section and try “The Emotional Onion.”

INTO THE PAST

THE QUICK VERSION

Explore the backstory of an important character

BEST TIME FOR THIS

During early story development

PAST IS PRESENT

A key ingredient of a great story is a great backstory. You don't need to know every single thing that ever happened in the character's past, but if you are aware of the most significant relationships and events in this history, you will have a rich source of material to tap as you chart the character's dramatic journey in the present.

ABOUT THE EXERCISE

Try this with your main character or a principal character. As you step back through time, focus on what's relevant to your story. If your character is in mourning like Madame Popova, the melodramatic widow in Anton Chekhov's comedy *The Bear*, for example, you might find more story action by going back to the time of death and seeing what actually happened.

■ STEP 1: SET THE CLOCK . . .

. . . to the “point of attack” time for your story. This is simply when the story begins. At a certain moment, something happens—a nervous soldier on a moonlit night hears a noise and asks “Who's there?”—and a chain of dramatic events is set into motion.

Your main character may or may not be present to your audience at the point-of-attack time. In *Hamlet*, for example, the title character is elsewhere doing something as the soldiers gather in the moonlight to wait for a ghost. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* on the other hand, we meet the main characters right away as they trip home at 2:00 a.m. from a Saturday-night party.

Most stories communicate a general sense of the point-of-attack time, but not a precise one, because the details of this time often don't matter to the audience. However, this is an exercise where time is of the essence, so the first step is to decide exactly and precisely when your story begins. Think about that opening moment and define it in time by identifying the hour of the day, day of the week, month, date, and year—for example, 11:57 a.m., Friday, April 1, 1894.

Whether or not your character is present to the audience at this time, he or she is somewhere in the world of the story. Locate the character and answer the following seven questions. Then move to step 2.

AT THIS MOMENT IN TIME

1. **What is your character doing now?** Whether it's trivial or profound, positive or negative, your character is doing something. Even just the act of sitting usually involves more than that: perhaps the character is resting, waiting, thinking, daydreaming, praying, listening to something, or watching something. The activity may or may not involve others. Briefly describe what your character is doing—for example, Madame Popova is dabbing tears from her eyes with a handkerchief as she studies a large photograph of her deceased husband Nikolai Mikhailovich.

2. **Where is your character doing this?** This may be a setting where important story action occurs, or it may be some place in the offstage world of the character. Briefly describe the setting—for example, the drawing room of Madame Popova's house in the country. Though it's a lovely spring morning outside, the curtains are drawn. The room feels like a tomb, stale and musty.

3. **When is your character doing this?** You have been given a general time frame. Flesh it out by adding specific circumstances—for example, today is the seven-month anniversary of her husband's death.

4. **Who else, if anyone, is here and what are they doing?** If others are present, identify them in relation to your character and briefly describe what they are doing—for example, the only other person here now is Lookah, her elderly manservant. He is trying desperately to cheer her up.

5. **How does your character feel now?** This may or may not be a moment of high emotion. Either way, the character feels something. Describe it—for example, Madame Popova is in deep mourning, as if her husband had just died the night before.

6. **What is your character thinking about now?** Whether it's deep thought or an idle daydream, something is on the character's mind. Briefly describe it—for example, Madame Popova is thinking about Nikolai Mikhailovich, and how lonely and dead she feels without him.

7. **What is the next thing your character says?** Your character's next line may be self-directed or to someone else. It may be the launch of a new subject or a response to something just said. It may occur here and now, or later on. In any event, it's the next line out of your character's mouth. Identify whom is being addressed and write the line—for example, to Lookah, who has been admonishing her for never leaving the house, Madame Popova says, "And I will never go out. Why should I? My life is over. He lies in his grave. I have buried myself in these four walls. We are both dead."

■ **STEP 2: MOVE THE CLOCK BACK . . .**

. . . one day from the point-of-attack time, give or take a few hours. Go back and answer the same “At this moment in time” questions again. Look for what’s important and what’s new here and now.

■ **STEP 3: MOVE THE CLOCK BACK . . .**

. . . one week from the point-of-attack time, give or take a few hours or even a day. Answer the “At this moment in time” questions again.

■ **STEP 4: MOVE THE CLOCK BACK . . .**

. . . one month from the point-of-attack time, give or take a few days. Answer the “At this moment in time” questions again.

■ **STEP 5: MOVE THE CLOCK BACK . . .**

. . . one year from the point-of-attack time, give or take a few days or weeks. Answer the “At this moment in time” questions again.

■ **STEP 6: MOVE THE CLOCK BACK . . .**

. . . five years from the point-of-attack time, give or take a few weeks or months. Answer the “At this moment in time” questions again.

■ **STEP 7: MOVE THE CLOCK BACK . . .**

. . . ten years from the point-of-attack time, give or take a few weeks or months. Answer the “At this moment in time” questions again.

WRAP-UP

The backstory offers a wealth of ideas and insights for your story. However, when you spend time figuring out the backstory, you may find yourself wanting to write as much of it as possible into the story so nothing is wasted. This can lead to a lot of explanations and enlightened analyses from the characters, and can be the dramatic equivalent of meeting a wind-bag at a party who wants to tell you his life story.

To keep the dramatic journey moving forward, try not to explain the past so much as suggest it. Remember that we will be making inferences about your characters and their lives as we follow story events and read between the lines. We are more likely to be emotionally engaged when we are leaning forward, piecing clues together, and figuring out the characters rather than being told about them.

Related tools in *Character, Scene, and Story*. To learn more about a character's backstory, go to the "Developing Your Character" section and try "Meet the Parents." Or go to the "Causing a Scene" section and try "The Past Barges In."

DEFINING TRAIT

THE QUICK VERSION

Explore one of your character's dominant traits and its impact on the story

BEST TIME FOR THIS

Any time you need to know a character better

THE BOLD STROKES OF THE CHARACTER

A complex character has a wealth of physiological, psychological, and sociological traits that are revealed scene by scene through the character's actions. Among these traits, some are more important than others: they dominate the mix and often play a pivotal role in story events.

For example, certain physiological traits may come to mind first when you think of Helen Keller from *The Miracle Worker* or the title characters of *Hunchback of Notre Dame* or *Edward Scissorhands*. However, when you think of Ophelia from *Hamlet*, McMurphy from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, or Norma Desmond from *Sunset Boulevard*, your strongest associations might be psychological traits. And, when you think of Walter Lee Younger from *A Raisin in the Sun* or the title characters of *Norma Rae* or *Erin Brockovich*, your strongest associations might be sociological traits.

Whether inherited or acquired, positive or negative, what traits most loudly and clearly define your characters? How might these traits alter the course of the story?

ABOUT THE EXERCISE

This discovery exercise can help you find new story ideas by exploring a defining trait of an important character. You may wish to do the exercise more than once to explore other traits of the same character or other traits of other characters. For best results, think of "defining trait" as a dominant feature of character identity that has—or could have—a significant impact on the dramatic journey. Most of the exercise examples are from *Long Day's Journey into Night* by Eugene O'Neill.

■ A TRAIT THAT DEFINES YOUR CHARACTER

In O'Neill's play, a defining trait of the father, James Tyrone, is his attitude toward money: he is a cheapskate. Many people may be stingy, and this quality may not matter much except occasionally to irritate others. In O'Neill's play, however, James Tyrone's stinginess is paramount to the story.

It's what has led to the ruin of his family and will incite the here-and-now crisis that erupts around the failing health of his son Edmund.

Think about the physiological, psychological, and sociological dimensions of your character, both positive and negative, and select a defining trait to investigate. Then describe it in a word or phrase. If your character were Helen Keller, for example, you might write "deaf mute." If your character were Ophelia, you might write "mentally unbalanced." If your character were Walter Lee Younger, you might write "economically deprived."

THE ROOTS OF THE DEFINING TRAIT

1. **Primary Cause.** Why is James Tyrone so stingy? The reasons lie in a backstory which we can infer from story events. Perhaps he grew up in a poor family with barely enough to eat and much suffering from lack along the way. This childhood poverty could have made him fearful of ending up that way again and might be the main reason for his stinginess now.

Think about your character's defining trait and how it might have developed. Its causes may be rooted in heredity or environment or both, and may trace back to the recent or distant past. You can probably find a number of different reasons that this trait has become so prominent now in your character's identity, but what is the main reason? Take a creative leap, find an explanation that makes sense, and briefly describe the primary cause of your character's defining trait.

2. **Secondary Causes.** Other factors besides childhood poverty may have contributed to James Tyrone's penny pinching. Perhaps his rise to fame as a commercial actor gave him a taste of wealth that makes it even more unbearable to lose. The fact that his income was tied to an unstable career—the life of an actor on the road—also must have made his good fortune seem all the more impermanent and easy to lose.

The roots of your character's defining trait probably include a number of other contributing factors as well. Take another creative leap, look for explanations that make sense, and briefly describe at least two secondary causes of this trait.

THE EFFECTS OF THE DEFINING TRAIT

1. **Backstory.** James Tyrone's stinginess has led him to make a lot of bad decisions that have, in turn, led to major family crises in the past. For example, when his wife Mary took ill, he searched for the cheapest doctor he could find and ended up with a quack who overprescribed morphine. Mary became addicted, had to be institutionalized, and has been struggling with addiction, on and off, ever since. Her addiction is, in part, an effect of her husband's stinginess.

Think about your character's dominant trait and how it may have affected the world of your character before the story begins. If you haven't

thought much about the backstory, this is a prime time to do so. Take a creative leap, look for specific examples from the past that make sense, and briefly describe one important positive or negative consequence of your character's dominant trait.

2. **Actual story.** After the curtain goes up on *Long Day's Journey into Night*, James Tyrone's stinginess has an immediate impact on much of what we see. Some of the effects are small. In the dark of night, for example, he has a fit if anyone lights more than one lamp in the house. Other effects of his stinginess are far more significant. When his youngest son Edmund is diagnosed with tuberculosis, James Tyrone wants to send him to the cheapest possible treatment center. In other words, he would rather risk his son's health than spend the money needed for proper medical care. This decision unleashes the family's demons. It sends the older son Jamie into a drunken stupor, pushes his wife Mary back into morphine addiction, and leaves Edmund feeling alone and helpless.

Think about the effects of your character's dominant trait during the here and now of the story. If you haven't worked out much of the actual story events yet, this is an opportunity to explore some possibilities. Take a creative leap, look for specific examples from the story that make sense, and briefly describe one important positive or negative consequence of your character's dominant trait.

3. **Potential story.** Think about your character's dominant trait and how it could affect your story in ways you have not yet considered. Let this final step of the exercise be your biggest creative leap yet. Look for at least one new positive or negative event that could possibly occur as a result of your character's dominant trait. Try to make a choice that surprises you but still makes sense in the unique world of your story. Briefly describe what might happen.

WRAP-UP

As you develop your story, the dominant traits of your characters can guide you through deeper more complex explorations of who the characters are, what they have experienced in the past, and how they might behave and influence events in the present. These bold strokes also give you a simple way to compare and contrast your characters so that you can see how they work together as a story population.

Related tools in *Character, Scene, and*

Story. To explore a character's true nature, try any exercise in the "Developing Your Character" section, particularly "Beyond Belief," "Nothing but the Truth," and "What Is the Character Doing Now?"
