

content and manner of speech should accurately reflect the character's social and ethnic background without stereotyping. This is a matter of vocabulary and speech rhythms, not of phonetic spelling. If a character "speaks prose," his or her background should justify that rather artificial manner. If a character is inarticulate, that in itself should convey something.

### Behavior

From table manners to performance in hand-to-hand combat, each new example of behavior should be consistent with what we already know of the character, yet it should reveal some new aspect of personality. Behavior under different forms of stress should be especially revealing.

### Motivation

The characters should have good and sufficient reasons for their actions, and should carry those actions out with plausible skills. If we don't believe characters would do what the author tells us they do, the story fails.

### Change

Characters should respond to their experiences by changing — or by working hard to avoid changing. As they try to carry out their agendas, run into conflicts, fail or succeed, and confront new problems, they will not stay the same people. If a character seems the same at the end of a story as at the beginning, readers at least should be changed and be aware of whatever factors kept the character from growing and developing.

### The Character Résumé

One useful way to learn more about your characters is to fill out a "résumé" for them like that shown in Worksheet 1 — at least for the more important ones. You may not use all this information, and you may want to add categories of your own, but a résumé certainly helps make your character come alive in your own mind. Again, remember to ask yourself *why* the character is of a particular ethnic background, or of a particular age or education. The particulars could trigger (and perhaps challenge) readers' stereotypes; that's a response that you as writer must reckon with.

The résumé can also give you helpful ideas on everything from explaining the character's motivation to conceiving incidents that dramatize the character's personal traits. You may also find that as your characters tell you about themselves as you write, you can include what you learn in their résumés. It's often easier to consult your project bible about such traits rather than riffle through the manuscript to remind yourself of the countless details you need to keep straight.

### Worksheet 1: Character Résumé

Name: Coggy!

Address and Phone Number: A: 1786 Tea Tree Lane  
PN: 789-124 FROG

Date and Place of Birth: May 7th, 2006  
Hole in the wall Hospital, left corner of Peds wing, Royal London Hospital.

Height/Weight/Physical Description: a bit short, slightly chunky. white and green in colour.

Citizenship/Ethnic Origin: frog and cat.

Parents' Names and Occupations: Froggo: nurse  
Catette: engineer

Other Family Members: gramma frog, grandpa cat!

Partner's Name and Occupation: none; they lonely

Friends' Names and Occupations:

Rakki: model

Brad: homeless inventor

Pingoo: floor cleaner

Social Class: they are too cool for class

Education: high school!

Occupation/Employer:

mushroom chef

works at The Mushroom

Salary: \$17.53 per hour!

Community Status: average, bit odd but he has friends

Job-related Skills: cooking, harvesting

Political Beliefs/Affiliations: radical leftist, socialist :)

Hobbies/Recreations: painting, cooking

Personal Qualities (imagination, taste, etc.): big imagination, hates bitter food

Greatest Strength: creativity

Greatest Weakness: travelling far

Ambitions: wants to find a 'fairy inkcap' mushroom

Fears/Anxieties/Hang-ups: hates <sup>big</sup> social video

Intelligence: smart! more book smart than street smart.

Sense of Humor: funny!

Most Painful Setback/Disappointment: can't walk far, lots of anxiety

Most Instructive/Meaningful Experience: \_\_\_\_\_

being validated  
being told to just live

Health/Physical Condition/Distinguishing Marks/Disabilities: bad legs:c

Sexual Orientation/Experience/Values: bisexual

Tastes (e.g., in food, drink, art, music, literature, decor, clothing): likes forest things, loves candles, crystals, Kate Bush.

Attitude toward Life: tries to live it:)

Attitude toward Death: not scared of it.

Philosophy of Life (in a phrase): remember that we are on a floating rock in the middle of space and nothing we do actually matters.

## 9 Plotting

Plotting drives many writers crazy. They can't seem to find enough for their characters to do, or reasons for them to do it. They feel their characters are wandering around aimlessly, without so much as a theme, let alone a goal.

That was the problem a student brought to me a few years ago. She was writing a romance about a torrid affair between a legal secretary and a rock star. She herself was a legal secretary, so this was an entertaining form of daydreaming in print, but the daydream wasn't getting anywhere.

That was because she wasn't giving her characters enough problems. So I suggested ways to make her lovers' lives absolutely miserable.

Give the secretary a boss whose legal practice is on its last legs, I told her. She may be out of a job at any moment because her boss can't find enough work. And put her in a town where legal secretaries are fighting each other for jobs.

Then, when she and her new sweetie come up for air and start to get acquainted, she learns he's locked into a lousy contract that pays him almost nothing and forces him to go on the road all the time — and our hero wants to keep him close at hand. What's more, most of the local rock musicians are tied into similar contracts framed by unscrupulous managers and record-company executives.

When her boss and her boyfriend both face the ruin of their careers, our hero introduces them. Boss shows boyfriend how to fight and break his contract. Boyfriend not only gets a better contract; other musicians swarm in, demanding similar help. Boss launches a hot new career in entertainment law, while boyfriend makes pots of money and our hero becomes his new manager.