

5 Tips for Writing Better Characters into Your Screenplay

By [Noam Kroll](#) |

Writing a screenplay is a balancing act, and while all the components need to work together in harmony, the one component that can really make or break the script (in my opinion) is the character. In other words, you could have the most beautifully written story arc, and perfect structure to your script, but if your lead character is dull and flat then everything else falls to pieces. Conversely though, you may have story that needs work and the general pacing may be off, but if your lead character is compelling, your audience will remain engaged in the film regardless of some of the flaws it may have. In ideal world, you want to find that balance I mentioned above, where all of the components are working together harmoniously, and one sure way to start out in the right direction is to first focus on writing layered characters with meaning and purpose.



L.A.-based filmmaker Noam Kroll is currently working on his second feature. He keeps a production blog at his website NoamKroll.com. In this blog post, he writes about focusing on characters in order to build a better screenplay. Check out Kroll's blog [here](#), and his production company post-production house [Creative Rebellion here](#)

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#1 – Make your character likeable early on

If you expect your audience to root for your lead character for the next 90 minutes of the film, you had better do something early on to make sure that you've earned that. Some screenwriting gurus (Blake Snyder in particular), stress this point above all else – and for good reason. Without

a character to root for, your story has nothing going for it. The audience needs to identify with someone early on, and if your characters are generally unlikeable (even if you may think they're interesting), it simply won't be enough to sustain a script. Often times screenwriters will write their lead character in a way that would be more suitable to write an antagonist. They might have a few snappy lines of dialogue here or there, but generally they feel like a negative, self serving force in the grand scheme of the film and often have no redeeming qualities of their own.

Writing likeable characters can be done in an infinite amount of ways. For instance, simply as writing strong dialogue that shows how witty or charming the character may be can go a long way. Or they could be made likeable through their actions, showing a selfless act early on in the film to establish them as a positive force. And keep in mind, all of this can be done in the context of the world you are writing in, and by no means has to paint your characters as perfect people. If you're writing "The Sopranos," you can still make the audience root for Tony Soprano, because you see the value that he puts on his family and the vulnerability that he has as a person struggling with depression. Within the context of a different story, Tony Soprano may be a flat out bad guy with no redeeming qualities, but in the Sopranos he is surrounded by people that are objectively worse than him, and as such he can still rise above and show the audience that he is the character that is the most like them. The bottom line is however you do it, whether it's through dialogue, actions, humour or any other means – get your audience rooting for your lead as early as possible.



#2 – Build realistic & detailed characterization

Character refers to the essence of who anyone in your script truly is on the inside. Is he or she a good person or a bad person? A fighter or a wimp? Character is the spirit of that person, while characterization is the quantifiable result of who they are. For example, let's say you have ego-driven female antagonist with a high powered job and chip on her shoulder. She might drive a big SUV to work, drink black coffee, and have developed a nervous tick. All of these points are characterization details. The details don't change who the character is at their core, but they are simply a realistic bi-product of who that character is and how they developed. Take for instance the character of Derek Vinyard in "American History X" (played by Edward Norton). While the film exposes him to be a changed man, he is still covered in tattoos that are a constant reminder of his dark past and life before prison.

Writing strong characterization is important on so many levels. First off, a realistically depicted character will add a lot of realism to your piece. I can't count how many times I've seen the same generic antagonist in a film that had zero original characterization, which ultimately completely diminished their importance in the film. But even outside of just adding realism to the characters, it can also help you as a writer to tell your story more intuitively and dramatically. For instance, one of the exercises that I'll often use before jumping into a screenplay, is writing a few pages of characterization notes on every character in the script. I do it quickly, almost as a free association exercise, and it is immensely helpful. I highly suggest doing this, as by the end of the exercise, you will have multiple pages of notes that will not only give detail and meaning to your character, but also help to spark ideas for your story in other ways – namely by clarifying choices your character might make. This last sentiment leads me to the next point on our list -



#3 – Let your character make the decisions for you

Although it's very important to have an idea of your film's structure before actually doing any writing, you also want to allow for the story to unfold organically and naturally, and the only way to do this is to give your characters some breathing room. Rather than forcing your character into an arc and dictating all of their actions before even writing "FADE IN", try to let your character make their own decisions that will move your story forward. This is something that I've believed for a long time to be an important component to any script, and the notion of doing this was really solidified when I heard Vince Gilligan talk about using this very approach to developing characters in "Breaking Bad". This is likely one of the reasons the show had so much critical success and was able to break new ground.

As you're writing any given scene, continually ask yourself how your character would react to the circumstances that they are in. Don't think about what another character in another film would do, or what you would do in that scenario, or you'll wind up with the most generic, boring lead character you could possibly write. If you've done your homework and followed my suggestion in tip #2, you should already know your character really well and have an easy time judging what they will do next. You know what type of shoes he buys, the fact that he hasn't smoked in three years but still gets agitated when he smells a cigarette, and that he falls asleep to the TV every night. You also know why he's like that – you understand kind of upbringing he had and the fact that he got bullied at school. If you know all of this, then you naturally have a

deeper understanding of what he will do in any given situation and how he will react to any given event. So go into your scenes and story with an open mind, especially in early drafts. If your screenplay is going to be good, it's going to need to go through many, many drafts no matter how good of a writer you are. So don't get too hung up on having a perfect character arc in the first version. Let it unfold naturally, and in later drafts you can go back in and highlight the arc more once your character has shown you what it really is.



"Pulp Fiction"

#4 – Give your character compelling dialogue

I touched on this a little bit at the top of the article, but it really deserves it's own section. Your character needs to have compelling, interesting, and original dialogue. And this doesn't only apply to your lead character, it applies to every last character in the script. Strong dialogue will tell the audience exactly who this character is within moments of them speaking their first lines on the screen. We know where they're from based on their accent, how educated they are, whether or not they are introverted or extroverted, and so much more. An immense amount of information can be conveyed with dialogue, without even saying anything specific. A well written dialogue scene that is comprised of something as simple as a character buying groceries could tell you a world about that character and ultimately add importance to what they are saying, specifically when employing the use of subtext – another subject I would love explore further in it's own post.

The odd thing about narrative films is that although they are completely fictionalized we as the audience still want them to feel as real as possible. Even in a fantasy movie, we need to be able to relate to the characters and understand who they are on a raw, visceral level, and dialogue is the vehicle for achieving this. But keep in mind that compelling dialogue doesn't necessarily mean having lots of dialogue. You may have a character that says very little, which in turn says a lot about them without the use of words. You may have one character that's speech is filled with slang and another that sounds like a preacher. Having characters that speak in their own voices is tremendously important, and make sure that none of your characters sounds like the same person. A big issue that some screenwriters have is that they write all of their characters dialogue the same way. Ideally, you want to be able to cover the names of your characters on the script, and still know who is talking based on what they are saying and the way they are saying it. Tarantino

is arguably one of the masters of dialogue, and any of his films may be a source of inspiration for writers looking to differentiate the voices of their various characters.



"Forrest Gump"

#5 – Think like an actor and give your character a point of view

Actors always talk about finding their point of view. They need motivation for the scene. They need to know where the character was the moment before they stepped into the room that opens the scene. They need to know what their character is really thinking and feeling when they are beating around the bush and allowing for the subtext of the scene to play out. To some writers, these constructs may seem like gimmicky tools that actors need to get in the right head space, but I would argue we as screenwriters really need to think like this too. If you expect your lead actor to be able to play a character effectively, you need to write a character that will allow for the actor to use their tools to tap into the scene. But more importantly, do it for the sake of your own screenplay and ensuring that you get the best final product. A character with a strong point of view will drive the story forward by giving the audience a through line to follow throughout each scene and each act in the film. We need to know where they are coming from and what they want in order to care enough to follow their story. Look at a character like Forrest Gump with an obvious point of view that dictates his actions, adds realism to what he does, and pushes the story forward from act to act as a result.

So many screenplays that I read are severely lacking in this respect. It's obvious from the get-go that the writer didn't pay enough attention to understanding the characters point of view, and

making it clear enough for the audience to pick up on. The most common symptom of this problem are scenes that develop in a way that completely lack focus. I've read some scenes that could have been brilliant if they were cut down to a page or two, but the writer didn't understand the characters point of view and as a result it ended up being a cluttered 5 page scene that ran in circles. One way to tell if you're on the right track is to see whether or not you could write any given scene in one page if you had to. Certainly there are scenes that require many pages of dialogue, but before you make it work as an 8 page epic scene, make sure it in 1 – 2 pages as well, because if it lacks direction and focus even when condensed to that length, than it's going to have major issues when extrapolated to be much longer.

What else can we do?

These five tips are really only the tip of the ice berg. It's critical to the success of a film to have strong characters all the way through, that are likeable, realistic and have a distinct motivation and purpose in the story, but developing characters like this takes a lot of trial and error. There is no formula for it, but by using some really basic exercises like writing a 2-3 page backstory on every character, you will be will on your way to creating an original character. And once you have the bones of that character in place, don't be afraid to let the character evolve, grow, and even dictate in some cases where the story is going to go.

Outside of these 5 tips there are an infinite amount of things that you can do to write better characters, whether it be from doing your homework and watching character driven films, to eavesdropping at your local restaurant to pick up on some dialogue. But regardless of which methods work for you, make sure that you pay enough attention to your characters, especially in the early stages of developing your screenplay.