

The Ultimate Character Questionnaire

Create multi-dimensional characters who breathe on the page and defy stereotype.

By Nanci Panuccio

Motivation
Confucius
Character
Virtue
Ethics
Intention
Goodness
Intent
Aristotle
Buddha
Words

Getting Under the Skin

We spend a lot of time thinking about what our characters want.

Wanting something, and wanting it bad, is fundamental to developing character and plot.

But often all we come up with is what our characters want in the most immediate sense.

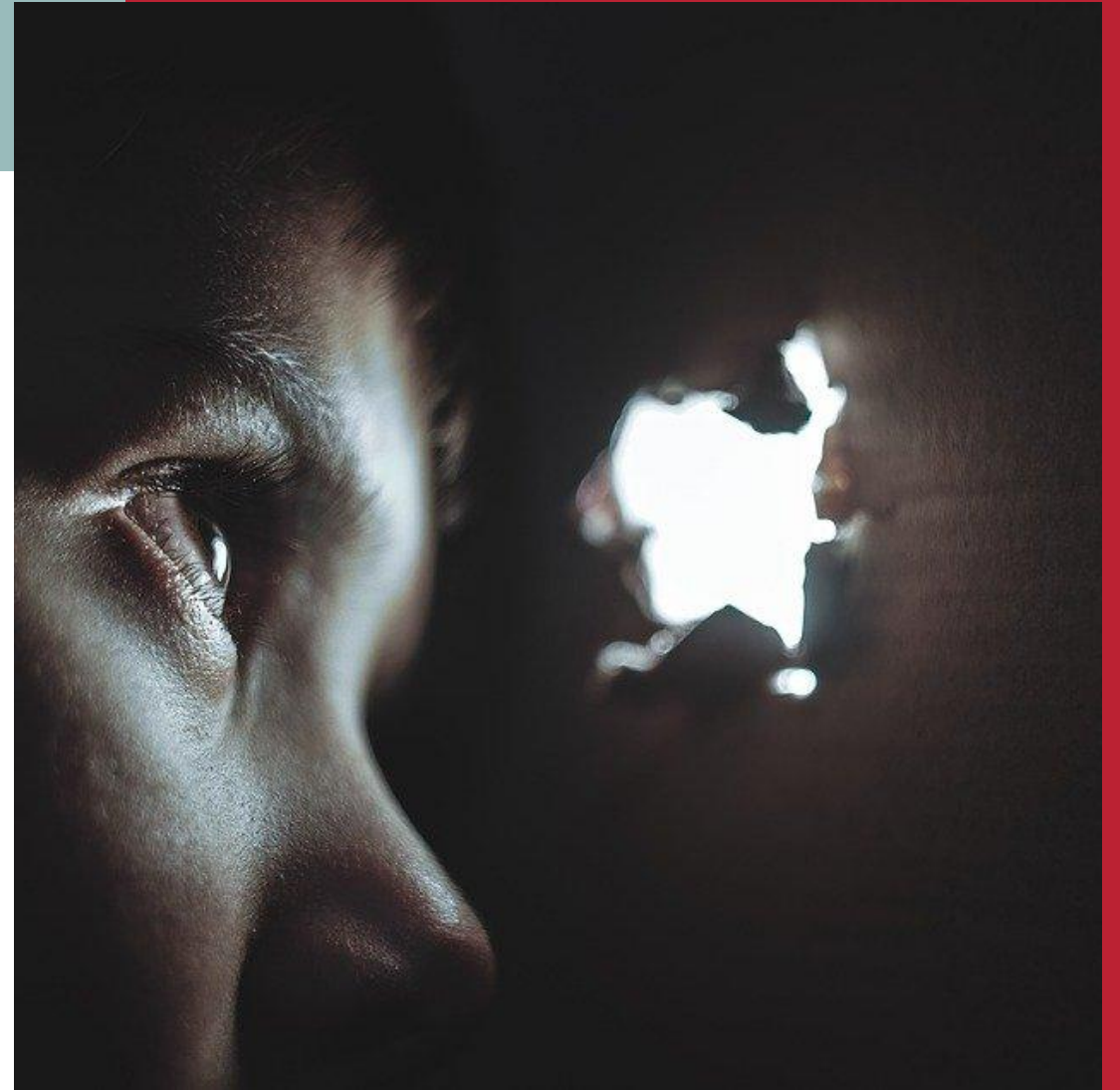
The concrete goal.

Humbert wants Lolita.

Anna wants to be with Vronsky.

Hannibal Lecter wants brains for dinner.

But to dig even deeper into characters, to humanize them, you need to understand where they're coming from.



Why Do They Want What They Want?

And why do they do what they do?

You need to tap the invisible drive urging them through the story, the fears, shame, and motivations they're not consciously aware of.

Forget about eye color and horoscope, the strawberry birthmark on their thigh, the serpent tattoo on their hip, what town they were born in, which parent they felt closer to, the contents of their refrigerator, or who the love of their life was in high school.

This is all surface fluff, and it rarely leads to the kind of insight you or your readers crave.

To create true intimacy with your characters, to let them pulse and breathe on the page as multidimensional human beings, you need to get under their skin. You need to slip inside their soul.



Ask Better Questions

Sometimes these questions will unearth an unexpected insight. They might give you a line or two, or even change where you thought your story or character was going.

The questions themselves won't write the story for you. They may not even provide a clue about where to take your story's plot.

But that's not the point.

Not yet.

Because before you nail down plot, you need to develop character. And you need to develop your character deeply.



Character is Story

Plot is what happens.

The story is how your character reacts to what happens, those emotional impulses rooted in your character's psyche.

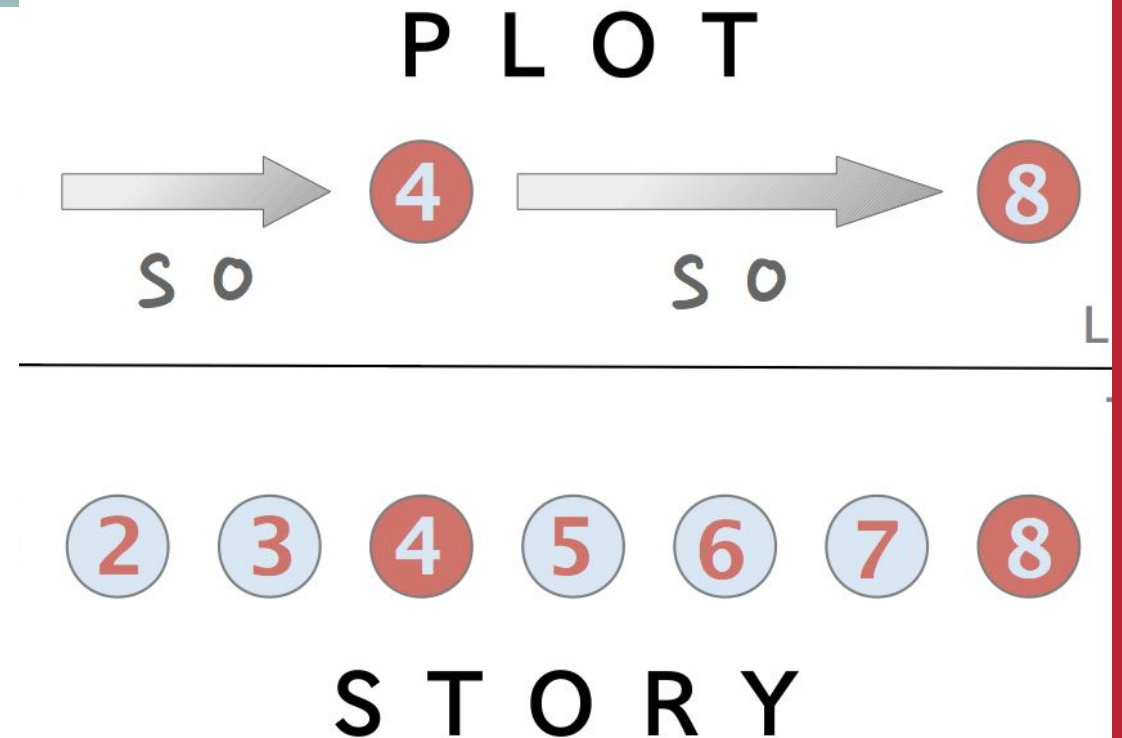
The following 13 questions will help you infuse your prose with your character's humanity.

Use them to develop all your characters or any character you haven't nailed yet. For now, just choose one.

This is a free-write. There are no right or wrong answers. Trust what comes up.

Grab something to write on, and something to write with.

Now, onto the questions...



13 Questions

Choose a character and go...

01

What are you most afraid of?

02

What's the worst thing that could happen to you?

03

What are you most afraid of losing?



04

What do you think heaven is like?

05

What is hell?

06

What do you want?

07

What's keeping you from getting it?





What could they do to you?



What would you do to get what you want?



What are you willing to give up?



11

What aren't you willing to give up?

12

Why are you hanging onto the things you're not willing to give up?

13

What's the worst thing that could happen to you?

(You may have a different answer this time.)



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