

# 30 Questions for Creating Complex Characters



A Story-Craft  
Workbook



Amelia Wiens Editing

## Table of Contents

*A Quick Introduction*

*Your Character's Upbringing*

*Your Character's Central Motives & Morality*

*Your Character's Personality*

*How Your Character Deals with Conflict*

*Specific Details about Your Character*

## A Quick Introduction

Upon leaving high school, I knew there were two things I wanted to study: English literature and psychology. I, like many other writers, initially struggled with writing characters that were significantly different than myself. If I was to write books, I didn't want all my characters to come out as carbon copies of myself. I thought that formally studying psychology, among other things, would help me write more diverse characters. And I wasn't wrong.

Four years later, I had completed my double major in English literature and psychology. I love these two fields independently, but the parts where they overlap bring me so much joy. And to a certain degree, they both study the same thing – fundamental truths about the human experience – just from different perspectives. Storytelling examines those truths through art and emotion whereas psychology studies them through science and reason.

So here are some questions I've built upon both lit and psych theories that can help you develop complex and interesting characters.

### *The Psych and Lit Theories Behind these Questions*

From the world of psychology, I've found inspiration for these questions from major theories on [personality](#), [parenting styles](#), and [conflict management](#). I personally find these theories really interesting, so go on and click those links if you want to learn more about them directly.

I've also pulled a lot of inspiration for these questions from K.M. Weiland's discussions on character arcs in her blog, particularly her posts on characters' goals, ghosts, and lies. Her blog, [Helping Writers Become Authors](#), is a phenomenal free resource for writers. I highly recommend it or her blog's companion podcast. She knows how to write about writing and make abstract theories practical.

I've also learned about internal and external goals from Shawn Coyne's book [The Story Grid](#), which is another excellent resource on story craft.

Finally, I'm also a table-top role-playing nerd, so I've pulled in the model of morality that gets used a lot in Dungeons and Dragons and other role-playing games. [Role-playing](#) is another fantastic way to get to know your characters. That's why I've put all these questions in the second person, directly talking as though you are the character.

So, with my sources listed and without further ado, here are thirty questions to help you develop complex characters.

## Your Character's Upbringing

- 1. What was your home situation like growing up? For example, do you have any siblings? What was your family's social class and economic status? What were your parents' primary occupations? And so on.*
- 2. Were your parents (or other primary caregivers) warm and affectionate? How has this experience affected your personality and worldview?*
- 3. Were your parents (or other primary caregivers) good at setting and enforcing rules and boundaries, or did they give you free rein to do as you pleased? How has this experience affected your personality and worldview?*

## Your Character's Central Motives and Morality

4. *Do you have an emotional ghost, a defining negative life event that has given you a protective but ultimately inhibiting worldview? If so, what is the destructive lie that the experience taught you that you'll need to overcome to achieve your true goals?*

*For example, in A Christmas Carol, Ebenezer Scrooge's early experiences of poverty, loneliness, and rejection from his lover combined to make him believe that the only way to live a safe and painless a life is to spurn all familial connections and accumulate as much wealth as possible. While this worldview helps protect him to a certain degree, it ultimately leads him to live a hollow and empty life. To actually live a fulfilling life, which is his true goal, he will need to grow and abandon this protective but ultimately destructive worldview.*

5. *What is your internal goal, the most fundamental part of your identity that underpins your every decision?*

*Not every character is aware of their internal goal, but consciously or unconsciously, it drives their every decision. This internal goal will be tied to your character's moral alignment. For example, Katniss Everdeen's internal goal in The Hunger Games is to provide for and fiercely protect the good, innocent, and vulnerable. As a result, her moral alignment is inherently good.*

6. *What is your external goal, the explicit thing that you're currently trying to achieve?*

*Your external goal will likely be the external expression of your internal motives. For example, Katniss Everdeen's external goal in The Hunger Games is to survive the games. Part of her motive is rooted in self-preservation, but she is primarily fighting to survive for the sake of her sister Prim, which ties back to her fundamental internal goal.*

7. *What is your moral alignment within the two spectrums of good-neutral-evil and lawful-neutral-chaotic?*

*The good vs. evil designation is fairly straight forward. The lawful vs. chaotic spectrum is about how willing you are to break laws to serve your moral alignment. For example, lawful evil characters are willing to hurt other people to achieve their goals but will do so within the bounds of society's norms and laws. Chaotic good characters, on the other hand, are willing to break laws if they morally disagree with them.*

## Your Character's Personality

8. *How open to new experiences are you? Does the idea of a new adventure excite you, or do you prefer staying in a familiar and safe place?*
9. *Are you open to exploring new ideas and enjoy engaging with abstract concepts? Or do you dislike engaging with new ideas and prefer staying grounded in the practical world?*
10. *Do you prefer schedule and structure, or do you prefer being able to act on whatever idea or impulse comes your way?*

*11. Are you organized and detail oriented, or do you tend to be messy and often find yourself procrastinating on important tasks?*

*12. How mindful are you of how your behavior affects others?*

*13. Do you enjoy being in the centre of attention or staying in the background?*

*14. Do large social events energize you, or do you find solitude more rejuvenating?*



*15. Do you prefer hanging out with a large friend group or being one-on-one with a close friend?*

*16. Do you tend to trust or distrust others?*

*17. Are you highly empathetic, or do you have little interest in how other people feel?*

*18. Do you enjoy making other people happy, or do you enjoy insulting and belittling others?*

*19. Are you comfortable being manipulative to get what you want?*

*20. Do you tend to be emotionally stable, or are you prone to anxiety and dramatic mood swings?*

*21. Are you carefree or prone to worry?*

*22. How emotionally resilient are you? Do you find it easy to bounce back from stressful or traumatic events, or does the stress or trauma tend to linger with you for a long time afterward?*

## How Your Character Deals with Conflict

23. *There are five main ways that people can respond to interpersonal conflict. People also tend to respond to low and high levels of conflict in different ways. How do you tend to respond to minor conflicts and major conflicts?*

- a. *Are you competitive, focusing on fighting or manipulating others to get what you want, regardless of the other person's desires?*
- b. *Do you avoid the conflict altogether and hope that if you ignore it, it'll just go away?*
- c. *Do you accommodate the other person by either bending, yielding, or being generous towards the other person's will and wishes?*
- d. *Do you look for a compromise, with both of you only getting a bit of what you want?*
- e. *Do you collaborate with the other person, putting in the time and energy needed to search for and find a solution that makes both of you happy?*

## Specific Details about Your Character

*24. What is your current occupation? What skill sets do you have?*

*25. Do you have any quirks? What about any weaknesses?*

*26. How do you speak? For example, what's your accent like? Do tend to use the slang or jargon of a specific group? Are you soft-spoken or loud or sarcastic? Does your tone of voice tend to be bubbly, cold, or commandeering? And so on.*

*27. What kinds of relationships have you had? Any close friends, past lovers, enemies? What are those peoples' names, and what was the last contact you had with them?*

*28. What are you afraid of? How do you respond when confronted with that fear?*

*29. Are there any other key life events that you haven't mentioned yet?*

*30. What is your name?*