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5 TIPS FOR CREATING CHARACTERS FOR KIDS

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Remember when you were listening to your parents reading you bedtime stories? Which were your favorites? Did any have a character that continues to live on in your mind?

The best characters stay with readers and listeners long after childhood is over. That's why some books stay in print for generations—think Ferdinand from *The Story of Ferdinand* by Munro Leaf, Peter from *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter, and Madeline from the book with the same title by Ludwig Bemelmans. These charming characters' books go on and on and are remembered with warmth and affection for generations. Sometimes people even name a child after a favorite storybook character.

So how do you go about creating characters so memorable? The answer is you have to know your characters inside and out. It is not enough to have a general picture of a character in your head when you start writing. I learned the hard way. "Who," I thought, "wants to spend time composing a character study? Better to just write the story." Wrong! Crafting a detailed character study is the only way you can really get to know details like whether or not your main character enjoys playing games, is full of energy and loves to be at Grandpa's house.

Think about your main character and carefully consider the following five items. Take the time to write down your ideas and observations—they could come in handy later!

NAME

What's in a name? A lot! Alexis O'Neill named her character in *The Recess Queen* Mean Jean. Would "Mean Alice" have the same impact? What kind of character might you name Amanda, which comes from the Latin, meaning "worthy of love"? Would you name a happy-go-lucky child Miriam, from the Hebrew meaning "sea of sorrow, or bitterness"?

What type of character might have the hard-sounding name Curt? What kind of personality might a boy have to be named Misha, with its soft sounds? Or should you go against the expected and name the gentle character Curt and the tough guy Misha? Names should be word pictures of the character. While discussing names, here's the fastest way to get your story noticed by an editor for the *wrong* reasons: Call your characters, like I did in one of my early picture book stories, Sammy Skunk and Billy Beaver. **Alliterative** names shout out "cute," and "lack of respect for the child listener."

A good rule of thumb is to call the animals simply Fox, Mole, Hare, Otter and Squirrel, as Alan Durant does in his touching book *Always and Forever*, which deals with coming to terms with death. Or give the character a human name like Owen, as Kevin Henkes did (he then drew him as a mouse). Another thing you need to keep in mind is not to give characters names that might confuse the **child listener**. Names that are too similar, like Matthew and Martin, probably belong in separate stories.

Does your character have a nickname? What does it say about your character? How was it **bestowed**?

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BIRTH DATE AND AGE

The birth date helps set your story in a certain time period. For example, a 5-year-old child born in 1700 will be very different from a 5-year-old child born in the year 2000. If you write about a child born in the mid-1700s, you would be able to use words like *carriage*, *blacksmith*—words you wouldn't have chosen if your character were born in our current century.

Age at the time of the story is critical. What are the characteristics of the age of your character? A 2-year-old behaves unlike a 4-year-old or an 8-year-old. Does your character act her age? Does she speak baby talk? Does she try to act tough like her big brother? How old do others see your character?

APPEARANCE

It's important to know how your characters look. Sometimes when I'm working, I keep a photograph that represents a character in front of me. I'll take images from family snapshots or magazine and newspaper photos. Of course, this description or image of your character is only for you. If your book is going to be illustrated, the artist may paint a character far removed from what you imagine. However, having an image in your mind, whether it matches what your readers will see or not, makes for stronger writing.

Does your character spend a lot of time on appearance, or is it **of little consequence**? Does he want to look like someone else? Is he neat? Is he sloppy? What kind of clothes might he wear? Does he have a favorite outfit he wears every day?

RELATIONSHIPS

Start first with the family members, especially if they are an important part of the story. Who are the parents, siblings and **extended family** of your character? It's not enough to just come up with names for them when developing your main subject. What are they like? Are there any problems your character has with them? Is the family from a foreign country? Do they have activities and beliefs unique to their culture? If so, what are they? How comfortable are they adjusting to their new land? What about friends? Neighbors? Teachers? If they play a part in the story, we need to know your main character's **interactions** with and feelings about them.

PERSONALITY

I've saved the most important area to focus on for last. It might help you to look at some children's books you love and think about the characters in them. How would you define the personality of the mouse in Laura Joffe Numeroff's *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*? Does the mouse have the same personality as Grace in Karen Winnick's *Mr. Lincoln's Whiskers*? What makes them **dissimilar**? How do these characters compare with Babar? **Differentiating** between characters in published books will help you better define your own characters.

Get to know your character's strengths and weaknesses, attitudes, fears, special talents and hobbies. Think about whether she might have a favorite phrase, like "go for it," or a habit of running her fingers through her hair whenever she's bored. Then, try to hear your character's voice. Pretend you are the character and write a letter to yourself, the author, about what happens in the story and his feelings about it.