

Spring 2024

Highlighter

SCBWI Mid-Atlantic Journal

Characters



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Spring 2024 // Characters

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For more information on our region, see <https://www.scbwi.org/regions/midatlantic>

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Submissions

Are you interested in contributing an article, illustration, or other content to *Highlighter*? Please send your ideas and/or portfolio link to Denise Taranov at MidAtlanticHighlighter@gmail.com

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A Season of Growth

Spring has sprung here in the Mid-Atlantic!

When we think of spring and new creative endeavors, we often think of character first. Thus, we're excited to see character featured in this issue of the *Highlighter*. Many thanks to this issue's contributors for sharing their character insights and work.

We're also happy to start out the season with some in-person and virtual events.

The one-day Editors and Agents event in Dulles, Virginia, on April 27 is sold out. The morning will feature publishing panels that will bring together four agents, four editors, and an art director. In the afternoon, members of the faculty will join moderated roundtables, and attendees may choose to attend a pitch session. In the lead-up to the event, a webinar with freelance editor Julie Scheina will help participants prepare for submitting query letters. Editors and Agents event attendees will automatically receive the link to this virtual "How to Write an Effective Query Letter" event on April 16; others interested in the session can register [here](#).

We're also pleased to announce an Advanced Writers and Illustrators Working Retreat in Richmond, Virginia from May 31 to June 2. Our focus will be on productivity and connection.

The goal is for attendees to have a chance to get what they most need at a retreat—a chance to work uninterrupted with meals provided and no responsibilities, connect with peers in person, compare notes at peer-led roundtables, seek feedback in peer critiques, or just relax. Whether you come alone or with critique partners, we hope you'll enjoy this opportunity to reconnect and recharge and come away with new work or a path forward on your work-in-progress (register [here](#)).

We will have an in-person social on April 12 at the Wegmans in Fairfax. Join the SCBWI Mid-Atlantic E&I (Equity and Inclusion) team for a Spring Forward and Be Inspired in-person social with authors and illustrators Chiêu Anh Urban, Rashin Kheiriyeh, Terry Jennings, and Zara González Hoang. The event is free. Premium members can register [here](#).

Happy spring, happy creating!

Warmest regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Erin".

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Han Nolan



Telling Your Story's Truth

by Han Nolan

When I was hoping to get my first novel *IF I SHOULD DIE BEFORE I WAKE* published, I got my manuscript returned with a message from my soon-to-be editor saying that she found the chapters set in the past very powerful, but the present-day chapters felt weak in comparison. As soon as I read this, I knew exactly what I had done.

My editor had caught me in a lie. I had lied about who my main character really was. I was afraid that people reading my book would think I was the main character, so I made her too sweet instead of the sometimes cruel and angry person she needed to be. I realized here was my chance to get this story that meant so much to me out there, to get it published. All I had to do was to tell the truth about who this young girl really was. Not who I was, but who my character needed to be for the whole story to be powerful, and for the story to work the way it needed to work.

This experience taught me a great lesson. Now, when I look at gifted writers who haven't yet published, I understand that what's often wrong with the manuscript is that they're not telling the story's truth.

What's holding them back? Fear usually. They're unable to go to those deep, dark places within themselves that even humorous writing must take us. They're unable to go to the true place within themselves, so their writing doesn't ring true, and their characters are flat.

If we're not writing from that deep well within, letting the story flow, and only gently guiding it in the direction we want it to go, even if working from a carefully plotted outline—if we're locking it into some

... what's often wrong with the manuscript is that they're not telling the story's truth

-Han Nolan

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 Han Nolan

Favorite resources

- Critique croup: Hill City Writers
- *WRITING DOWN THE BONES* by Natalie Goldberg, which helped me start writing again when I swore I never would after surviving the only writing course I took in college.
- *MAKE YOUR WORDS WORK* by Gary Provost, a great book for both before and after you've written your story. It helped me a lot with revisions before sending my manuscripts out.
- *THE ARTIST'S WAY* by Julia Cameron, which was so helpful after the first of many times over the years I had been told to cut at least a hundred pages from my manuscripts. It helped keep me from stalling out.



Meet a Writer

(continued)

Han Nolan



preconceived notion of how it should be, then we lose a chance to see what it is we really need to say to the world.

There are so many books out there, so many people already published and self-published. How will your stories have any chance of getting noticed, of standing out? By reflecting your passions, your fears. By being about things that make you laugh or cry, or that infuriate you.

Why do we fear doing this? Because our deepest secrets, our tragedies, embarrassments, and pains, come from that same place within. They're those things we've hidden all our lives that we didn't want the kids at school to ever find out about because they marked us as different, weird, odd, or unstable. They're where the family secrets lie, where our fantasies lie.

But all of that is our gold. It sets us apart from everybody else. Those differences, those freak show things about us, are our entrance into successful, original, novel writing. You tap that and you've got a great chance of succeeding with that manuscript you've worked so hard on for so long.

Just remember, when you sit down to write that first draft and you allow all this stuff to rise to the surface that might be scary, nobody has to see anything you don't want them to see—ever. You alter it, you fictionalize it, but what you've most likely written is truth, so you keep the truth and

disguise the rest
how you will.

The first several books I wrote were about so many different made-up characters, and all their stories were different, but they had one thing in common.

Underneath each story, I was writing about the loss of my son. If you read any of those books you would never know this. I don't tell that story anywhere, yet in so many ways that's what they're about. I had to go where the pain of that loss lay buried to access what needed to be told in each story.

Writing was a way for me to scream on the page. This wasn't easy. Daily, it was such a challenge to sit down and go to where that sadness lay within me, or the fear, or loss, or embarrassment, or humiliation—all those tough human emotions. Even writing humor can feel scary. Will readers laugh, or see how lame my sense of humor really is?

We take that risk because that's what good writing calls us to do. Don't run from it. Embrace it. Remember, therein lies your gold. //H//

I had to go where the pain of that loss lay buried to access what needed to be told in each story.

-Han Nolan

Kim Holt



Self-portrait



<https://www.kimscollectionof-stuff.com/>

 @kimholt

Favorite tool

My favorite digital illustration tools are Procreate on the iPad and Painter on the computer. I have also fallen in love with painting in acrylic on canvas again.

What inspires me

My family, the funny things children say and do, old photographs, expressing joy, reflecting on good times

Design influences

Assorted portrait artists, artists like Vanessa Brantley-Newton, Alice Neel, and Barbra Walker

Favorite things to illustrate

Children, people from the 1940s-1980s, and people enjoying food

What I'd like to explore in the coming year

I would love to do more picture books and anything that sparks conversations and stimulates memories of good times and bonding. //H//

Meet an Illustrator

(continued)

Kim Holt



A peek into the process



Six—OK, Really Just Five—Rules for Character Development

by Kat Spears

Even after publishing four manuscripts and writing many dozens more, whenever I'm asked for advice on writing, my first thought is ... I really have no idea. Part of me thinks the only reason I am able to write believably flawed characters is because I've spent a lifetime around believably flawed people.

I worked as a bartender in a dive bar in DC for almost twenty-five years, fifteen of those before I published my first book. It was the kind of bar that attracted everyone from international tourists to midtown lawyers to college students. Besides serving drinks and cleaning up chicken wing bones, the most important part of my job was listening to and sharing stories.

I once overheard a conversation between four young women who were trying to outdo each other with stories about who had the most horribly embarrassing experience from middle school. The winner of those cringe-worthy stories ended up in my second book. If you take nothing else away from this article, know that bartenders hear everything you say—and some of them are writers.

I'm sure most of you won't follow my advice to get a bartending gig to expand your storytelling abilities, though I can't recommend it highly enough. But if you decide that bartending is not for you, there are a few things I've learned about developing fictional characters that might be useful.

What does my character look like, and does it matter?

Raise your hand if you've ever seen a movie adaptation of a favorite book and thought that the

actor didn't resemble the character's appearance in your head.

With a nod to Gen X readers, I'll use the example of Dallas Winston from S.E. Hinton's *THE OUTSIDERS*. In the movie version, Dallas is played by the master of brooding—brown-eyed, brown-haired Matt Dillon, whose chiseled cheekbones sold millions of copies of *Tiger Beat* magazine in the '80s. I read *THE OUTSIDERS* before I saw the movie and didn't think about the book again until my son was assigned to read it in sixth grade. I picked the book up for a nostalgic read, and imagine my surprise when Dallas Winston, who will forever be Matt Dillon in my mind, turned out to have, according to the original text, "long white hair" and "blue, blazing ice" eyes.

The point I'm making is that even if you, the writer, have a mental image of a character as you craft your prose, you have little to no control over the mental image your reader will carry around in their head. I never spend a lot of time writing a description of my characters' appearance. When I'm reading a book, it's usually the part I skim, or skip altogether. Instead I'll give a few hints here and there and let the reader imagine the rest.

I'm convinced that, unless a character's appearance is germane to the story (think August Pullman in *WONDER*), a physical description is more distracting than helpful. Oh sure, some readers will always criticize you for not telling them what to think, but as a reader, I like to have some freedom to use my imagination. And, if you return to the text of *WONDER*, you will discover that even R.J. Palacio doesn't spoon-feed the reader anything. Instead, Palacio invites the reader to imagine Auggie's appearance, then tells us the reality is probably worse. Brilliant.

Six—OK, Really Just Five—Rules for Character Development (continued)

The theory of omission applies to characters as well as plot.

Now, instead of physical appearance, let's think about who your characters are as people (or dogs if you're Jack London). Hemingway, who often gets credit for saying really clever things that other people thought of independently, wrote about the iceberg theory, or theory of omission. By that theory, the parts of the story that are left unsaid—the parts for which the reader has to fill in the blanks, so to speak, with their own feelings or imagination—are often more powerful than the written part. And just like omitting a physical description, your character becomes more real for the reader when they are allowed to imagine as much (or more!) than you show them.

Doubtless you have heard this advice applied to character development before: to imagine your characters are like icebergs. The part that is visible above the surface of the water (dialogue and actions) are driven by that which is not visible (past trauma, family history, mental illness, love, passion, insecurities, *ad infinitum*). Think about omitting that



Character iceberg (original artwork by Asa Williams)

initial information dump of a character's appearance, then think about omitting that same information dump about who your character is on a deeper level. I promise you that the more a reader has to work to interpret dialogue and actions to develop a mental image of who a character is, the more that character will come to life on the page.

I promised rules, but really these are just a few guidelines I follow for writing believable characters.

#1: Write dialogue and actions that are realistic and believable for your character.

We are talking about writing fiction, after all, so why do we need to think about "realistic" or "believable?" Realistic and believable doesn't mean the story has to be based in reality, it means that the dramatis personae can't speak or behave in a way that is out of character for them.

The movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* has been lauded for accurate portrayals of spacecraft engineering and principles of space travel. Unfortunately, other than my dad, no one seems really sure what the movie is about or, even, whether it is entirely watchable. By contrast, the original *Star Wars: A New Hope* movie was an absolute failure at portraying space travel according to the physical laws of the universe as we know them.

But ... who cares? No one, and I'll tell you why. The characters were well-developed, with back stories, personalities, and passions that were realistically conveyed through their actions and dialogue. *Star Wars* is evidence that you can write science fiction that is all fiction and no science as long as the characters and story are strong.

#2: Trust your reader.

When it comes to character development, trust your reader to draw some conclusions on their own.

Six—OK, Really Just Five—Rules for Character Development

(continued)

Hemingway's theory of omission is a protracted version of the "show, don't tell" rule we're always hearing about. Show me that your main character is an unrepentant jerk by their actions or dialogue, don't tell me in your narrative. This rule applies even—maybe especially—if your manuscript is written in the first person.

#3: Know that once they are written, your characters no longer belong to you.

A few years ago I was chatting with a friend who had recently read one of my books and she was referring to a central character when she said, "Of course, she was an abuse survivor so that reaction was completely believable ..." I kept silent about her comment, but I was so intrigued by this interpretation. To my knowledge—and as the author, I feel like I would know—this character had experienced no abuse in her upbringing. But that is what the reader saw.

I would never tell someone that their interpretation of a book or story was wrong. There's no such thing. We are all just bringing our own feelings and experiences to the art we encounter and our interpretations are a reflection of who we are and what we can and want to see. Leave space in your writing for the reader to see their own experiences.

(This theory of literary interpretation led to a failing grade in every English class I took in high school, by the way. If you're reading this Ms. Bartlett, I appreciate that you gave it your best effort.)

#4: Stay true to your character's voice, which includes knowing the rules of grammar and when to ignore them.

If you are writing in the first person, as I always do, your character's voice is the entire manuscript. If you

prefer the omniscient third person perspective you, of course, have the freedom to write in a voice that doesn't match that of your character. You will only need to worry about the dialogue and about ensuring that dialogue is believable and realistic for your characters. Even if you have written a bit of dialogue that is so clever and funny you can't imagine not using it, if it isn't realistic for your character, shelve it and save it for a future manuscript.

True story: When I got the first copyedits for my book, *SWAY*, the copyeditor had dutifully corrected every instance in which the main character, Jesse, used "who" when "whom" would have been grammatically correct. The copyeditor had even corrected the who/whom misuse in spoken dialogue! *SWAY* is written from the first-person perspective of an 18-year-old drug dealer. I haven't known many drug dealers, but the ones I have met were not, as a rule, strict grammarians. In order to be true to Jesse's voice, all whoms were left out of the final product.

(Occasionally I will read a YA novel, and when I come across a "whom" in first-person prose it is jarring, and I feel for that author who didn't know they could and should ignore a copyeditor when it matters.)

#5: Steal dialogue unremorsefully from the world around you, but don't confuse slang or vernacular with character development.

For one of my young adult novels I liberally used forgotten slang from 1930s pulp fiction due to a former phase in reading that particular genre. I've read enough young adult novels that hopelessly date themselves with the abuse of contemporary slang (or technology trends), and I didn't want my manuscript to be dated six months after its release. Slang can be helpful in small doses to develop a character but shouldn't distract the reader.

Follow Elmore Leonard's 10 Rules for Writing.

We all go through phases of mimicking the authors we love as we develop our own unique voice. I went through notable phases of mimicking Nora Ephron, Richard Peck, and even Hemingway. It's the combination of those influences that helps to, eventually, mold your own personal style.

But I don't think any author influenced me as a writer more than Elmore Leonard. I didn't read his rules for writing until many years after I read most of his novels, but I realize now that the rules he followed are what kept me reading. True to Leonard's style, his *10 Rules* are short and to the point.

Now that I think about it, you should just write what you want.

As I told you in the beginning, I really don't know how to tell you to write. You probably shouldn't listen to me. There are definitely people out there who want to

read lengthy physical descriptions of your characters and want to be told every detail of your characters' back stories on the first page. After my first book was published, about half of the reviewers complained that the ending was too pat and tied everything up in an unrealistically neat bow. The ending was prescribed by my agent and editor, who said I needed to resolve the story for the reader, though it went against my instincts.

After seeing that so many readers would have appreciated the initial ending I wrote, which left the future uncertain, I trusted my gut for my second book. My second book left things up in the air and readers had to use their imagination to fill in the ending. And you know what? About half of the people complained that I hadn't tied up the ending with a neat bow.

The moral of the story is that you can't make every reader happy with your stories and characters. Just focus on writing the manuscript you want to read. //H//

Elmore Leonard: 10 Rules for Good Writing¹

1. Never open a book with weather.
2. Avoid prologues.
3. Never use a verb other than "said" to carry dialogue.
4. Never use an adverb to modify the verb "said" ... he admonished gravely.
5. Keep your exclamation points under control. You are allowed no more than two or three per 100,000 words of prose.
6. Never use the words "suddenly" or "all hell broke loose."
7. Use regional dialect, patois, sparingly.
8. Avoid detailed descriptions of characters.
9. Don't go into great detail describing places and things.
10. Try to leave out the part that readers tend to skip.

¹ Excerpted from the *New York Times* article, "Easy on the Adverbs, Exclamation Points and Especially Hooptedoodle" by Elmore Leonard, July 16, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/16/arts/writers-writing-easy-adverbs-exclamation-points-especially-hooptedoodle.html>.

Putting in the Time

by Denise Taranov

The musical composition "Peter and the Wolf" by composer Sergei Prokofiev was commissioned by a children's theater. It's about a boy that sees a wolf attack a creature in his grandfather's backyard and decides to catch it to protect the other animals. Each character in the story is played by a specific instrument in the orchestra based on their personality.

Like characters in a book, the instruments in "Peter and the Wolf" express emotion and work together to tell the story (see <https://fcsymphony.org/fos/peter-and-the-wolf/> for more about the piece).

A lot of practice and soul searching is behind notes that can move an audience to fear or joy or tears. Musicians make playing the instrument look easy because they they put in the work before they stepped on stage.

Before readers experience our story—our version of a performance—we need to spend time with our characters to know them so we can express them through words. Developing a character can take it from being a fuzzy, dreamlike shape to a vivid presence that makes the story compelling. A

The Characters & Their Instruments



Peter = The Strings

Peter's character is played by the entire string section which includes violins, violas, cellos, and double basses. His melody is played by the violin.



Cat = The Clarinet

A clarinet is a lively woodwind instrument that is usually made of African blackwood with a straight round body, a flared end, and played with a single-reed mouthpiece.



Wolf = The French Horn

The French horn is a brass instrument made of 16 feet of coiled tubing. It has a rich, mellow sound that blends well with both the woodwind and brass families



Bird = The Flute

Even though it is usually made of metal, the flute is a woodwind instrument. It is played horizontally, has lots of keys, and makes light and airy high notes.



Duck = The Oboe

The oboe is a type of double reed woodwind instrument. Oboes are usually made of wood, can play in a high or low range, and have a mellow or nasal-like sound.



Grandfather = The Bassoon

The Bassoon is a woodwind family instrument that is played with a double reed. It's deep, rich sound is mostly in the lower ranges.

Hunters = The Timpani

Timpani (also called kettle drums) are in the percussion family. They are made of a hollow brass bowl with a calfskin head whose tension can be changed to vary the pitch. They make a low booming sound.



Instrument pairings from the Fort Collins Friends of the Symphony "Peter and the Wolf" guide

Putting in the Time

(continued)

strong character can move readers just by noticing a strategically placed detail or saying the barest of dialogue. Such power in writing! Just as we can enjoy "Peter and the Wolf" without knowing how an oboe reed works, our readers don't need all our character information. As creators, character knowledge informs our writing and illustration choices; readers just need to understand the characters relative to their role in the story and connect with their emotions.

Which brings us to *our* practice room: our workspace with our writing or illustration tools. Like learning how to play a piece of music, fleshing out our characters may be fun or boring (or start out boring, then become fun). Regardless, like musicians, we need to put in effort to get the result we'd like.

There are various approaches for bringing characters into focus, from observing them in different scenarios and settings to interviewing them like an investigative reporter (see the "[Resources](#)" pages in the back of this issue for leads).

In her "Revision Half-Marathon Creative Lab" session at the SCBWI Winter Conference in February, Kate Messner recommended sneaking into the character's bedroom to uncover their backstory and personality. After a casual survey of the room, she goes into detective mode, sniffing the air, digging through the character's drawers and closet, peering under their bed, examining their trash, reading their diary—nothing is off limits!

Building out these details in our minds will define our characters (following James Joyce's adage, "In the particular is contained the universal") and potentially spark ideas. A conjured item at the back of the closet may give the character a unique hobby or become an emotionally charged thing that delivers a deafening note at the end of the story. A detail could also inspire a subplot, like Esme's obsession with the sugar bowl in *A Series Of Unfortunate Events*.

For illustrators, building out the characters can fill in where the manuscript is silent. A 400-word picture book manuscript leaves much to the illustrator's

imagination to create 24 pages plus endpapers. Capturing and extending the information about the characters can make the design more intentional and improve consistency. Building out a character profile can also inspire visual subplots and through lines, like using a character's favorite stuffed animal as an Easter egg throughout the book or giving the family pet a parallel adventure in the background.

The following is a list of things you may want to know about your characters.

Character name:

Character role:

(e.g., protagonist, antagonist, guide, contagonist [secondary antagonist], sidekick, love interest, temptress, confidant, foil; for more information, see <https://kindlepreneur.com/types-of-characters/>)

Baseline info.

Age:

Nickname (if any):

Current grade/education level:

Where born:

Where living now (location and geography):

Time period/timeframe in story:

Nationality and language(s):

Hobbies/activities:

Family's income level:

Family members:

Pets:

Personality traits:

-
-
-
-

Greatest personal flaw:

Greatest personal strength:

Favorite person:

Putting in the Time

(continued)

Enemy/antagonist:

(for the antagonist, this may be the protagonist!)

Physical features:

(e.g., skin/hair/eye color, build/stature, hair texture/style/length, complexion, teeth, braces, glasses, moles or freckles, scent/smell, impairment and/or disability, tattoos, scars, piercings, health concerns or issues)

-
-
-
-

Clothing essentials:

(e.g., everyday outfits, special occasion, sleepwear, favorite items)

Greatest want:

Problem being faced:

Biggest fear:

True need:

For more insight on your character, try these prompts.

Character prompts – Writing

1. If the character could do anything for a whole day, what would it be?
2. What does your character carry in their pockets or backpack/bag, and why?
3. Describe how the character acts when feeling strong emotions (e.g., facial expressions, body posture and movements, interjections)
4. What would the character's friends say about them when they're not around? What would their enemy say?
5. What was happening in the character's life a year before the story began?
6. What is something the character has never told anyone?

Character prompts – Illustration

1. Design the character and check that their profile (i.e., contour or shape) is distinct from other characters
2. Sketch the character in different poses from different angles and with a range of expressions
3. What are the character's favorites (e.g., color, food, toy, music, school subject, sport, game)?
4. What would the character pack for a sleepover or vacation?
5. Where does the character feel safest? Where do they feel most afraid?
6. How does the character change (e.g., mood, viewpoint) and how might that show up in the design (e.g., color tint/tone, perspective)?

Think your characters are still holding back? You could nonchalantly ask them some of these questions: <https://kindlepreneur.com/character-development-questions/>.

Character building is relationship building. Be warned—after getting to know your characters, you may fall in love with them. They might show up in your thoughts in real-life situations as you imagine what they'd say or do.

If you end up there, it's a good sign. They've come to life. //H//

Using Personal Projects to Improve Your Character Design Skills

by Scott DuBar

Although it's not always easy to find time, personal work is where we have the opportunity to be led by what excites or interests us the most. It's how we can best learn to infuse our work with the kind of energy and enthusiasm needed to stand out to publishers and art directors.

Here are three tips for creating personal projects to improve your character design skills.

TIP 1: Pick a descriptive word and make a list of characters you'd like to draw with that quality.

For example, I once chose the word "cute" and made a list of characters I thought would be fun to draw that way. The three that interested me the most were viking, cactus, and bumblebee. By focusing on a specific characteristic (cute, angry, shy, etc.) I found it much easier to infuse my character with a personality.

Practicing this skill can go a long way when doing client work since it trains you to identify a character's most prominent personality trait. Once you have that down, their look and how they move or pose or interact will naturally flow from that primary trait. *Added bonus:* The viking and cactus garnered a noticeable increase in positive



"Cute Bee" and "Cute Cacti" by Scott DuBar

feedback on social media. The bumblebee, however, was so popular (and the most fun for me personally) that I began doing a series of them. I have gotten several assignments based on clients' enjoyment of those bees.

TIP 2: Turn everyday objects into characters.

If you're feeling stuck with your whole approach to designing characters, a great way to have fun getting unstuck is to collect a few interesting looking objects from around your house (you likely have a few on your desk!) and try turning them into human or animal characters based on their shape.

This is a really fun exercise because it frees you up from any fear that your characters need to conform to your usual approach to drawing. Normal body proportions get thrown out in favor of more exaggerated, more expressive, and often more comical ones. If you work digitally, photograph a few objects and bring them into your favorite drawing program. Lower the opacity and work on a new layer.



Scott's sketch inspired by a bottle

Do your best to constrain yourself to working within the silhouette of whatever object you chose. You'll quickly find yourself working out solutions to that challenge that result in character designs wildly

Using Personal Projects to Improve Your Character Design Skills

(continued)

different than what you would typically draw!

Added bonus: If you work from home it just might make you see your surroundings in a whole new light, one where each and every object has the potential to help you unlock new ideas.

TIP 3: Consider doing a 365 drawing challenge.

A 365 drawing challenge, also known as a daily drawing challenge, is one of the best ways to improve as an artist. If you're not familiar with 365 challenges, they're based on the simple idea that if you want to get really proficient at something, spend a little time doing it each day for one year. You will be amazed by the results!

It may sound daunting at first, but by working out a game plan ahead of time, you'll find yourself filling up that sketchbook with growing confidence and ease!

I began my first 365 drawing challenge several years ago as a way to develop consistency in drawing an original character for a graphic novel I was developing called "Kid Hercules." When drawing for comics, it's natural that your characters' design will become more refined as you get better and faster at drawing them over dozens (or even hundreds!) of panels.

I also wanted an opportunity to develop my designs for the supporting characters, and explore how each of them would interact with each other. By the end of the challenge, I found I was much faster and more proficient at drawing in general and was able to approach client work with more confidence and speed.



Illustrations from "Kid Hercules" by Scott DuBar

A few tips when planning a 365 drawing challenge

Create your own characters. If you don't have your own original characters, brainstorm ideas and create some, however roughly or loosely.

Draw from your world. One idea might be to base your characters on your own family members or on yourself as a child. Consider keeping the number of characters small (around three to five) and make sure to identify who you want the main character to be. If you get bored with the character, make up new ones!

Gather prompts. Next, make a list of as many daily prompts as you can. You'll want at least enough for one month. A good resource for drawing prompts is inktober.com. Think about your favorite illustrators or children's characters and start collecting images you'd like to try to copy or use for inspiration, substituting their characters with yours.

Pinterest can be really handy for this, as it lets you curate collections of images. I used Pinterest a lot for my own 365 Challenge since I didn't plan ahead very well and ran out of prompts quickly. That's when I got the idea to redraw classic comic book covers, substituting Kid Hercules as the hero. I learned a tremendous amount about composition, lighting, inking, and more—all from the most talented illustrators in comics history.

Use a sketchbook. Consider using a sketchbook. Since sketchbooks are easily portable, they allow you the chance to get away from your desk and draw anywhere you feel comfortable.

Keep it light. Don't worry about making a finished piece of artwork. I did almost all of my drawings in pencil so I wouldn't encroach on client time. The upside was that I was able to extend my challenge the next year by going back and inking everything.

With just a little bit of planning, it's possible to create fun, invigorating personal projects that are achievable and rewarding. You might even end up with some strong portfolio pieces that lead to creating similar work for clients! //H//

RESOURCES

Understand character types and tropes

["Character Type and Trope Thesaurus"](#) by Writers Helping Writers

"The upside of these tropes is that they're familiar to readers ... The downside? They've been used so many times ... familiarize yourself with the commonalities for a certain kind of character while also exploring ways to elevate them and make them memorable, more interesting, and perfectly suited for the story you want to tell."

Find inspiration for your picture book characters

["Ame Dyckman: My Characters Won't Let Me Write This Post: Seven Tips for Creating Really Really Real Characters"](#) by The Nerdy Chicks

"It's the usual chaos in here. Boy and Bot just rolled by in the wagon. Cub and the girl are playing cookie tag and keep dropping crumbs on my keyboard. And Wolfie wants another carrot—and is drooling all over my arm ... Where were we? Oh, yeah. Seven Tips For Creating Really Really Real Characters. Let's go!"

Use mentor texts to discover character building strategies

["KidLit Craft's Comprehensive Guide to Character"](#) by KidLit Craft

"Looking at voice, interiority, internal arc, character relationships, and more, our writers have analyzed mentor texts in all categories to discover strategies for creating characters that leap off the page and into readers' hearts."

Try writing exercises to uncover your characters' personalities

["17 Character Development Exercises for Writers"](#) by Jason Hamilton, Kindlepreneur

"Character development exercises are short forms of deliberate practice to improve your writing skills and round out your characters ... Because for some of us, nailing down that perfect character can be hard."

Get to know your characters better

["Creating Memorable Characters Means Being Patient and Asking a Lot of Questions"](#) by Sarah Aronson for the Highlights Foundation

"Nothing makes me understand my characters MORE than seeing them in scene, than hearing them speak when the stakes are high, when seeing what they will do when their worldview is threatened."

Breathe life into your characters

["11 Secrets to Writing an Effective Character Description"](#) by Rebecca McClanahan, *Writer's Digest*

"Are your characters dry, lifeless husks? Author Rebecca McClanahan shares 11 secrets to keep in mind as you breathe life into your characters through effective character description, including physical and emotional description."

Use small things to humanize your characters

["Want Memorable Characters? Focus on the Little Things"](#) by Angela Ackerman for Writers Helping Writers

"It's common to pay close attention to the big ticket items when character building ... Once these blocks are set though, some writers get impatient—they want to write ... the writer goes with whatever seems 'good enough.' After all, these are small bits. They don't matter much ... right? But here's the thing ... they do."

Expose how your characters interpret their world

["Breathing Life into Characters"](#) by Lisa Poisso, Writers Helping Writers

"Whenever something significant happens in the story, readers expect the characters to sit up, notice, and process its impact at some level ... This means exposing your characters' interpretive process—their emotions, thoughts, and reflections about what's happening around them."

Learn how to make character relationships relatable and believable

["Strong Character Relationships: From Friendships to Romance"](#) by Jami Gold, Writers Helping Writers

"As a romance author, I've learned how to portray deep romantic relationships between my characters ... Believe it or not, some of those same techniques can also help us portray strong friendships in our stories."

Uncover your characters' underlying desires

["6 Requirements for Writing Better Character Goals"](#) by K.M. Weiland

"When we talk about the symbiosis of plot and character or characters who 'write themselves' (and therefore the story), what we're usually pointing to is a cast with powerful underlying desires. This is a secret of good writing. Why a secret? Because it's so easy for authors to overlook."

Diagnose and treat flat characters

["7 reasons your characters feel flat"](#) by Nathan Bransford

"Readers have to love your characters. Full stop. Characters who feel lifelike and relatable will compel your readers to turn the pages and breathlessly await the sequels. Characters who are dull or flat will send your readers scurrying for another book. And yet it's so tricky to really nail a lifelike character and to translate your vision of them onto the page. Here are some reasons why your characters might be falling flat."

Learn why readers may not care about your protagonist

["What 'So Undercover' and 'Miss Congeniality' Can Teach Us About Character Arcs"](#) by Janice Hardy

"What happens when a great plot meets a character readers don't care about? ... I love plot as much as the next gal, but plot alone does not an awesome novel make. And as a hardcore plotter, that's hard to admit. But that's the difference between a plot-driven and a character-driven story. Unless the story is about the heart pumping action, readers want to care about the characters."

Make your illustrated characters come to life

["Character Design and The Illusion Of Life: With James Woods"](#) by Chris Oatley

"Is there more to you than what other people see? Character design is a fundamental aspect of visual storytelling ... but there's much more to character design than the visual aspects. Disney visual development artist James Woods—best known for his animation character design work on *Mary Poppins Returns*—joins me for today's lesson: Character Design and the Illusion of Life."

Learn design concepts for illustrating characters

["How to Illustrate a Great Children's Book Character"](#) by Teresa Martínez for Domestika

"Teresa Martínez (@teresa_mtz), an illustrator specializing in children's and youth publications, shares her professional advice which will help you build attractive and charismatic characters aimed at children's audiences."

GET CONNECTED

ONGOING

SCBWI regional events

Various dates (*virtual*)

Find events with children's literature industry professionals from all around the world: <https://www.scbwi.org/regional-virtual-events/>

APRIL

SCBWI Mid-Atlantic: Indie and Self Publishing Networking Social

April 22, 7-8 p.m. (*free virtual event*)

Join this virtual social and Q&A session on self and independent publishing hosted by our Mid-Atlantic region Indie and Self-publishing Coordinator, Joyana Peters. (For more information: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/indie-and-self-publishing-networking-social-pf-x6ctanmy>)

SCBWI Mid-Atlantic: Spring Peer Critique Event

April 28, 1-4 p.m. (*free, virtual event*)

Our Mid-Atlantic region Critique Coordinator, Terry Catasús Jennings, will facilitate this event. Before the event, attendees submit the first ten pages of a novel or a complete picture book manuscript and critique the manuscripts from their assigned group. During the event, they participate in discussions about the work and a Q&A session. (For more information: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/spring-peer-critiques>)

SCBWI Illinois: "2024 Words in the Woods"

April 29-July 14 (*paid, virtual and in-person event*)

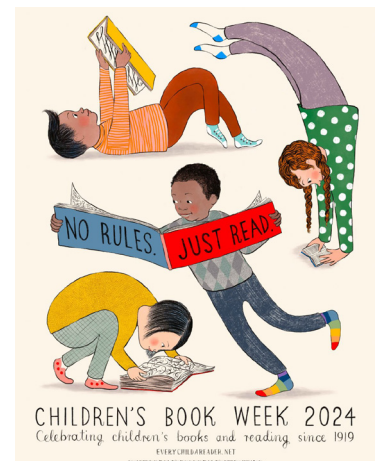
Join our 10-week intensive and overnight retreat to take your WIP to the next level. Weekly online professional programs, critique groups, and power hours culminate in a two-day retreat (July 13-14) at Allerton Park & Retreat Center in Monticello, IL. Submit, revise, and resubmit for additional review at the retreat roundtables. (For more info: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/2024-words-in-the-woods-allerton-pf-1b4lej89>)

MAY

Annual Children's Book Week

May 6-12 (*various events*)

Established in 1919, Children's Book Week is the longest running national literacy initiative in the country. Every year, young people across the country participate by attending events at schools, libraries, and bookstores, celebrating at home, and engaging with book creators online and in person. The 2024 Children's Book Week will take place during two dedicated weeks of celebration, May 6-12 and November 4-10. (For more info: <https://everychildareader.net/cbw/about/>; to learn about the poster design: <https://everychildareader.net/cbw/poster-2024/>)



Poster by Sophie Blackall

SCBWI Mid-Atlantic: "Writing in Different Categories from Board Books to Chapter Books"

May 14, 7-8:15 p.m. *(paid virtual event)*

Author and illustrator Vicky Fang talks about how to expand your storytelling skills to different categories, including board books, picture books, early readers, graphic novels, and chapter books. She'll share her process for diving into a new category, as well as basic information to get familiar with each one. She'll also provide insights into her overall approach to crafting and pitching. (For more info: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/writing-in-different-categories-from-board-books-to-chapter-books>)

SCBWI Mid-Atlantic: Advanced Writers and Illustrators Working Retreat

May 31-June 2 at the Roslyn Retreat Center in Richmond, VA *(paid, in-person event)*

Join us for a writer's and illustrator's retreat designed for SCBWI PAL members and advanced writers and illustrators. Our theme is "productivity and connection." The event will be held at the Roslyn Event Center, a relaxing 150-acre venue on the James River. Lodging, meals, snacks and WiFi are included, so all you need to do is focus on your own work. You may prefer to work alone or you may want to attend the retreat with a partner or with members of your critique group. (For more info: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/working-writers-retreat>)

JUNE

SCBWI Rocky Mountain: "Creative Approaches to Revision With Elizabeth Law"

June 6, 9-10:30 p.m. *(paid, virtual event)*

While everyone approaches revision a little differently, you can learn a lot from hearing how writers, from picture book to nonfiction to YA, have attacked specific challenges. Elizabeth will be including examples from books she's worked on and quoting from interviews she's done with writers on their process. Included in the talk will be a few tips for getting unstuck, as well. (For more info: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/creative-approaches-to-revision-with-elizabeth-law>)

Highlights Foundation Working Retreat: "Writing for the Educational Market"

June 20-23 *(paid, in-person event)*

Join writers and editors Jan Fields, Paula Morrow, and their special guest to discuss the opportunities for writers entering this kid-centered market. The working retreat is lightly structured with one lecture each day, informal conversations, optional consultations with faculty, and time to create in the Highlights Foundation retreat center. For more info: <https://www.highlightsfoundation.org/workshop/working-retreat-writing-for-the-educational-market/>)

JULY

SCBWI Mid-Atlantic: "Transforming True Events Into Picture Books"

July 9, 7-8:15 p.m. *(paid, virtual event)*

Longtime SCBWI member Nancy Churnin shares craft techniques that help her segue from award-winning biographies to picture books that make events as compelling and emotional as narratives about people. (For more info: <https://www.scbwi.org/events/transforming-true-events-into-picture-books>)

MOOD BOARD



JACKIE DUBIN

Journal: When we were little, Cait and I would swish around in the bathtub pretending to be mermaids, then one time, out of the blue, Cait reached out and pinched me. I splashed water in her face and said, "Ow! What did you do that for?" She splashed back and said, "To see if it hurt." And I'm like, "Course it did. What'd you think?" "No," she said. "I mean, to see if it hurt ME." "Oh. So did it?" "Yes." I nodded. That's about all anybody needs to know about being a twin.

- Excerpt from *RUNNING PAST DARK* by Han Nolan, Margaret K. McElderry Books (2023)



DEB JOHNSON

