LESSON PLAN 4 – CHARACTER

In this session, students will build first their main character, and then two supporting characters, using a character armature of 'WANT, NEED, FLAW, STRENGTH.' They will examine existing characters for these drivers, and build their own characters, right down to the clothes they wear.

1.1   – INTRODUCTION

The main character of a story drives everything else about it. Story is only interesting when it's happening to someone we really care about. Same with a setting – you could have invented the most unbelievable magic system, the most intricate world, but it means nothing without the people inside it. Even nature documentaries focus on character, as opposed to plot – humanising and naming the animals we're going to follow.

The morals, the setting, the plot, the tone, the comedy, if any, it all depends on the main character.

1.2   – CLASS EXERCISE

Invite the students to share their favourite characters in stories and then, in an exercise that should be familiar to them by now, *why* they like them so much. Press them on whether it's their actions, their dialogue, what they want, how hard they try to do the right thing.

Try and get one detail from everyone, and then go through the list looking for commonalities or differences.

Inform the students that there really is no one thing that makes a character good. It depends very much on the audience and the writing.

However, there are a handful of details that make a character easier to write. From their earlier work on the elevator pitch, the students will already have a vague image in their head of a character and a problem they are trying to solve.

Now, they must discuss how to expand on that skeleton and create some more details.

1.3 - WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT YOUR CHARACTER BEFORE WRITING

WANT

This might seem obvious, but giving your character a clear want at the start of the story gives them a reason to move through it. They want to find a family. They want to fight the villain. They want to keep people safe. If you know what they want, you know what they're going to try to do, and that's going to make them easier to write.

NEED

Making a character with only one want is easy, but it's also uncomplicated. We like complicated characters because we're complicated. If WANT is where you start your character, then NEED ambushes them halfway through their story when they begin to change. NEED drags a character off the simple path and makes their life far more interesting because it gives them a second path to choose. Difficult choices are good for characters. Internal conflict is exciting.

The classic superhero choice is 'normal life' versus 'saving people.' They *want* a normal life, but a hero always puts other people first (even if we're not sure they will for some of the movie)

STRENGTH

There is a reason why our main character is the main character. When you are writing them, you are also writing the problem they're facing, and there is a reason why your character is the one who will solve the problem. It isn't because they're strongest, or because they're the best, or because they're perfect. There is something about them that makes them the key in the lock – some bit of knowledge, some bit of determination, some willingness to fight on.

FLAW

We admire people for their virtues, but we love them for their flaws. A flaw is something that holds your character back, keeps them from walking through the plot easily, and is often a far bigger problem than the actual villain. The flaw is often the most relatable thing about a character, because when they struggle, it reminds us of our struggles.

A classic example of a strength and a flaw is that most heroes in children's books are recklessly brave – because otherwise they would not put themselves out there to stand off against tyranny. With that being said, they often take risks that can get them in trouble, and often create more problems than they solve.

4.4 – CLASS EXERCISE

As before, students can wrap their heads around this concept by testing it out on characters they are already familiar with.

If you can find a character everyone in the class is familiar with, it can be a useful exercise for them to all work on the same character because even if answers differ, they could still all be correct.

Characters rarely have one clearly defined flaw, but rather overlapping elements that all tie together.

4.5– GROUP EXERCISE

Now that students are familiar with these concepts, they can apply them to their own story. We know the genre the character exists in, and the problem they will need to solve. This gives us some indications as to the want, need, flaw and strength.

Students can lay these traits down first as bullet points, and then flesh them out into full paragraphs, including whether they manage to overcome these flaws at the end of the story, or whether they simply manage and live with them.

1.6   – SIDE CHARACTERS

Once completed, students can then in their groups outline one or two other characters in the story. Antagonists, love interests, best friends – the core idea here is that every character believes themselves to be the main character of their story. Often the most successful villains in a story are the ones who come across as having complex inner machinery and motivations.

The difference often is that they make the wrong choice while the hero makes the right one, or their own flaw is left to run rampant while the hero manages to control theirs.

1.7   – FURTHER DETAIL WORK

Character creation is one of the most enjoyable parts of writing, particularly for the screen, and so there are a variety of different ways to extend this lesson plan.

For example, while it is useful to know the above four traits before you start writing, devising a character is often about spending time with them through writing. The below are a list of other traits to have in mind when writing a character, but these can be found through simply writing short stories or making art about them with the first four traits in mind.

Remind students that the internal workings of a character, that WANT, NEED, STRENGTH and FLAW will show externally in a character's behaviour, their friendships, the way they dress, how they talk.

DESIGN

What a character wears and how they move. This can be a lot of fun to work on, and can be done through art or writing.

RELATIONSHIPS

Even a loner in a story will have allies or grudging friends to call upon. Designing these tells us something about that hero.

HISTORY

Characters do not arrive onto the world fully-formed. They had childhoods, first loves, mentors, families.

LANGUAGE

Characters will have a particular way in which they speak, gleaned from upbringing, class, family, nationality, culture. This can be an interesting way to talk about history and civics with your students.

Once students have fleshed out their characters, its time to move them through the plot.