

Character Roles

What are Character Roles?

In every effective story, certain roles (functions) must be performed by someone; they must be present. If they are absent, story readers/listeners perceive the gap and reduce or withdraw their attention (either get confused or lose interest). These roles must be fulfilled by the available story characters. One character can perform multiple role functions, but somehow, each of these roles must be at least referenced. (In fact, stories are generally much stronger when all major roles are concentrated onto the central story line—see below).

Central Story Line

Identifying character roles requires that you understand the central story line of the text you are reading. You can diagram the core of any story as a straight line, the central story line:

M——>A——>(Climax + C)——>Goal——>Resolution

The main character (M) has a goal but is blocked by the antagonist (A) whom the main character confronts for the final time in the story's climax scene where the Climax Character (C) enters to decisively sway the outcome. Following this climax scene audiences need two bits of information to form the story's resolution: does the main character actually get to their goal? And, how do they feel about it?

Character Roles

The following roles should be annotated on each relevant character in a story. Who counts as a character? You should distinguish between active agents in the story, and objects, animals, or people that act merely as “props”. In particular, groups of people (e.g., “The Muslims”, “The people”, etc.) and people only referred to (but who do not actually appear on-stage in the story) do not rise to the level of a character. Generally people must physically appear in the story to be counted as a character.

- 1. Main Character** This is the character that the story is “about.” Technically, the main character is that character whose primary goal is resolved at the resolution point (end) of the story. Generally (but not necessarily) this is the character about whom we receive the most character information. It is generally (but not necessarily) the character “on stage” the most in the story. This main character often (but not necessarily) undergoes change or growth during the story. In the story's climax scene, the main character will confront, for the final time, the main obstacle (the antagonist) standing between this main character and their goal.

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- 1.1 Supporters** (Optional) These are minor characters who aid, support, and/or advise the main character. They are also those who are emotionally linked to the main character and that act to motivate the main character to act as that character does in the story.

2. Antagonist The antagonist is the physical embodiment of the greatest single obstacle blocking the main character from reaching his/her goal. The antagonist is the primary source of conflict. The antagonist is the “bad guy,” the villain. In the climax scene, the main character will confront, for the final time in this story, this antagonist.

2.1 Minions (Optional) These are minor characters who aid, assist, serve, and/or support the antagonist (often servants or slaves). They may or may not have significant roles to play in the story and/or influence over story events.

3. Authority Character Every story exists within some social structure or system (a school, a tribe, a kingdom, a dictatorship, a community, a society, a gang, a corporation, an army, nature, etc., etc.)—a system defined by lines of authority and power. Someone has to represent the authority of that system and wield that system’s authority, responsibility, and power. (ex.: teacher, priest, sheriff, emperor, king, chief, mother nature, CEO, etc.). This Authority Character helps story receivers understand the rules, expectations, and laws within which the other characters must live, maneuver, and struggle.

3.1 Deputies (Optional) These are aids, servants, assistants, etc. who serve as part of the system and under the authority of the System Authority Figure. Deputies are generally expendable pawns in the great chess game of the story. (But it is also true that a pawn can—in specific circumstances—turn into a pivotal pieces on the board, or elevate him/her self to heroic status in a story.)

4. Climax Character At the climax moment of the story, someone will act to create the final outcome of that climax and define how the story will resolve. That character is often the Main Character, sometimes the Antagonist. But it doesn’t have to be either of these two. Sometimes it is a minion under the System Authority Figure. Sometimes it is a supporter of the Main Character. Who ever it is, by assuming this role (and its associated risks and dangers) they become a central figure in defining the meaning and impact of the story.

The Climax Character is thus instantly elevated to major importance in the eyes of story receivers. If the outcome is favorable (from the audience’s perspective) they often call this character the “hero of the story.” Yet the outcome need not be positive and this defining Climax Character need not be perceived to be heroic. The value of this character comes from the deciding role they play in shaping the outcome of the climax confrontation.

5. Viewpoint Character This is the character through whose eyes we (readers/listeners) see the story. The viewpoint character creates our perspective on the story. We follow story events by “hanging over the shoulder” of this character. This is the person who tells us the story, who leads us through the story. We see the story through the viewpoint character’s eyes.

The viewpoint character defines our attitudes towards the other characters. Changing viewpoint character changes not only the story that can be told, but also how receivers understand and create meaning from the story.

In some stories an identifiable story character tells the story and serves as our

viewpoint. That character is, then, the viewpoint character. In many stories, however, the story is told by a “narrator”—not by any identifiable story character, but by an unidentified voice that reports the story to us without ever interacting with the story and without becoming part of the story.

Sometimes the narrator seems to know everything (prying into the thoughts of any and every character at will) and is able to go everywhere, instantly jumping from place to place (as no actual character can) in order to tell us what happens in every location. We call this an “omniscient narrator.” For our purposes, simply label this storyteller (viewpoint character) as “narrator.”

Sometimes, however, the unnamed narrator religiously follows just one character, as if telling the story through the eyes of that one character, as if reporting only what this narrator can see while hanging over the shoulder of this character just like a baseball umpire hangs over the shoulder of the catcher. In writing terms, this is called a “close 3rd perspective.” For our purposes, label this viewpoint character as being the character being closely followed—rather than saying that the narrator is the viewpoint character.

6. Neutrals

These are characters not associated with any major story character (the main character, the antagonist, or the system authority character) and who never contribute materially to key actions, events, or outcomes of the story. They exist as background and as “local color” for the story. Many stories have no neutrals. They begin to populate a story as the length and complexity of the story increases.

Target Audience Specific Roles

These two key roles can only be defined from the perspective of a specific Target Audience. Different groups will view/evaluate the same set of story characters very differently and, thus, evaluate the story equally differently. The two central audience specific roles are:

7. Identity Character

This is the character with whom the Target Audience identifies in this story. This character becomes the defining point for determining story influence. This character becomes the quintessential definition of the In-Group. Different Target Audience (definable groups of people) will identify with different story characters—thus, have different Identity Characters.

8. Enemy Character

This character is the character that directly opposes the Identity Character for this Target Audience. The Enemy Character is the one the Target Audience will blame if anything goes wrong for their Identity Character during the story. The Enemy Character personifies the In-Group’s view of this particular Out-Group.

Examples

I have left off Target Audience specific roles, since that can only be defined after the target audience has been identified.

Little Red Riding Hood

Role	Character	Notes
Main Character	Red Riding Hood	
Supporters	Mother, Granny	
Antagonist	Wolf	
Minions	-	
Authority Character	Mother	Mother sets the rules and dictates what Little Red must do and not do. Thus, Mother represents the power and authority of the system
Deputies	-	
Climax Character	Woodsman	
Viewpoint	Narrator (distant 3 rd)	Note that the narrator does not stay with Red, but jumps ahead to Granny's house and then back, and can even creep well ahead of Red Riding Hood in the forest to see the wolf sentences before she does.
Neutrals	-	

Snow White

Role	Character	Notes
Main Character	Snow White	
Supporters	Dwarfs	
Antagonist	Queen	
Minions	varies by version	
Authority Character	Queen	
Deputies	varies by version	
Climax Character	Prince	He is the one who steps in at the climax moment, kisses Snow White, and saves the day
Viewpoint	Either Snow White or Narrator	In some versions the narrator jumps back and forth between Queen's chambers, the dwarfs' mine, the prince, and back to Snow. In a few versions, the whole story is told from Snow's perspective and, even though she isn't telling the story in first person, she becomes the viewpoint character.
Neutrals	varies by version	

Cinderella

Role	Character	Notes
Main Character	Cinderella	
Supporters	Mother, Godmother, mice (Disney version), her father (some versions)	
Antagonist	Stepmother	
Minions	Step sisters	
Authority Character	Stepmother	They are in a kingdom. But in the world of this story, it is the stepmother who establishes and enforces all rules, order, and punishment. The story takes place in her house with her rules as the guiding dictates.
Deputies	Step sisters	
Climax Character	Prince	The prince keeps demanding to see every female in the house. His insistence overcomes the stepmother's plan to hide Cindy in the kitchen. The Prince steps in to save the climax moment as Cindy, herself, seems unable to do. Thus, he is the Climax Character.
Viewpoint	Cinderella	Even though she does not tell this story in first person, most versions never leave her side. They report only what Cindy sees and experiences. Thus, she is our viewpoint character. We are forced to see the story through her eyes.
Neutrals	King, Prince's footman	

Acknowledgements

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