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If you have done all this work, you have taken a HUGE step toward planning your novel. Now you're ready to move on to the next part of your planning process—getting to know your characters.

This chapter and the next one will focus on preparing the character section of your novel planning binder. In this chapter, we're going to focus on your main characters.

Before we go on, you might be wondering how many main characters your novel needs.

As a general rule, you need at least three main characters:

1. Your hero or heroine—the main protagonist in the story
2. The antagonist—the main opponent to your hero or heroine
3. A supporting character who can interact with your hero and heroine and you're your hero or heroine someone to interact with and share thoughts with.

A complex story will have more main characters, but start with at least these.

Novel characters are not, or at least ideally they aren't, as complicated as human beings. If they were that complicated, novels would be incredibly boring. You can't possibly tell enough about a character, enough history and enough inner thoughts, to cover everything that makes up an ordinarily complex human being. Although some authors try. The ones who try usually end up writing very deep, slow-moving books that are rather tedious to read.

Remember, a complete character study of an individual is not a story. It's just a character study. You can overdo a "real" character and go off the deep end with too much complicated psychology.

The opposite end of the character mistake extremes is not attempting to explain characters' actions at all. When you simply make your character a collection of a few facts—a face, some quirks, a little history—and then have the character do whatever you want the character to do, you haven't created a real character. What you have is a paper puppet. Paper puppet people in novels make for very bad novels. You don't want to do this.

The way to find the happy medium between too much and too little character development is to focus on the basis of human behavior. You want to focus on your character's motivation for action.

People don't take action for no reason at all. One of the biggest mistakes you can make as a novelist is to forget this statement.

So I'll repeat it.

People don't take action for no reason at all. Said a different way: People take action for some reason, either conscious or unconscious.

Before we talk about your novel's characters, let's look at real people for a second. If you want to create a believable fictional character, you need to understand real-life characters, right?

Think about yourself for a second. Why do you do the things that you do?

You do them because you have some motivation.

Webster's Dictionary defines motivation as "the act or process of motivating."

That doesn't help us much, does it? Okay, how about the word, motivate? It means "to provide with a motive."

Fine. So let's take a look at motive: "[S]omething (as a need or desire) that causes a person to act."

Ah ha. There it is. This is why you do everything you do.

Every action you take is preceded by something that is causing you to act. There is a reason that you do the things you do.

This reason may not make sense to other people all the time, and sometimes it may not even make sense to you, but the reason is there. The reason is related to your needs or desires—whether those needs or desires are conscious or unconscious. Being aware that much of human motivation, and therefore human action, is unconscious, i.e. not something that we're consciously aware of, is a big key to being able to create believable, rich characters in your writing.

Beneath needs and desires is the real source of your actions. This source is your beliefs. It is your beliefs that create your needs and desires.

Let me give you an example to show you what I mean.

Let's say you desire chocolate. In fact, let's say you need chocolate. (This is an example I can really relate to.)

Where does that need come from?

It comes from one or more beliefs that you hold. Here are a few beliefs that can lead to a desire or need for chocolate:

Chocolate tastes good.
Chocolate is comforting.
Chocolate gives you energy.
Chocolate is sexy.
Chocolate can make you forget your troubles.

Notice something about these statements. It's possible that if you agree with any of these statements, you think of them as not just beliefs, but facts.

We often feel that way about beliefs. We think our beliefs are the truth about the world. That's how powerful beliefs are.

In truth, beliefs are simply conclusions we've drawn about the world based on our experiences. They are choices that we're making about how we see the world.

Once we make those choices, i.e., take on our beliefs, we then form our beliefs and desires. It's our beliefs, then, that are at the core of our impetus to act. It is our beliefs that are at the foundation of all of our motivations.

Here's another example:

A woman needs to find a husband. She's 33 years old, and she's never been married and she desires to have a family.

What beliefs underlie this woman's need and desire?

You shouldn't have to go through life alone.
Families are good things.
You can't be truly happy unless you're in a relationship.
Women are meant to have children.
Marriage is a good thing.

There are more beliefs that would create a woman's need to be married and desire to have children, but you get the idea. A person's wants are created by that person's beliefs.

Now, think for a second about the last chapter. Remember that at the core of your plot, you're concerned with conflict. And what's conflict? Your characters' wants coming up against obstacles.

So in order to make your novel rich and believable, your characters' wants must make good sense. How do you make sure that they do?

You create believable, compelling character desires and needs. When you do this, you in turn make your character's motivation believable and compelling.

The way you're going to determine your characters' motivations is by creating for your main characters two essential pieces of background information:

1. Major Motivating Experience (MME)
2. Major Motivating Belief (MMB).

Before I tell you how to create a MME and a MMB, let me explain why you only need to do this for your main players in your story. Minor characters, the ones that play peripheral roles in your novel, don't need to be as complex as your main characters. If you make all your characters complicated, your story will get bogged down.

Think about one of your favorite TV shows for a second. Since I like *Lost*, I'll use it as an example. Even though there are at least a couple dozen survivors of the plane crash on the island in *Lost*, we don't know much about most of those characters. We see them. They occasionally interact with the main characters, but they're mostly in the background.

That works because if we knew a lot about every character, the story would move way too slowly. So the writers of the show have picked the characters they want to focus on, and they've let those characters needs and desires be at the forefront.

This is what you need to do in your novel as well. So you only need to know the Major Motivating Experiences and Major Motivating Beliefs of your major characters.

Major Motivating Experience (MME)

The MME is the most important experience or experiences your character has had in his or her past that explains why he or she is going to act the way he or she acts in this novel. This is basically complex psychology simplified tremendously.

In real life, all of us have multiple MMEs that then create multiple MMBs. But for the purpose of a novel, you want to only create one or two for your main characters.

Let me give you an example of Major Motivating Experiences from my life. One is negative and one is positive. One is from early in my life and the other is more recent.

1. When I was a young teen, I was trying on clothes with my mother. Although I wasn't fat (I was 5' 7" and about 120 pounds), I had trouble getting the waistband closed on a pair of size 7 pants.

My mother said to me (and this wasn't the first time she'd said it), "Your waist is bigger than mine was at your age. I had a 24 inch waist until I had you. Then it was a 25 inch waist."

My waist was 26 inches. My stomach was flat, but it was bigger than my mother's had been when she was my age.

2. Five years ago, I had a dream about a boy I knew in high school. Tim was a sweet boy who I dated for a month or so during my freshman year of college. Tim and I lost touch, but I never forgot him because he was the kindest person I'd ever known.

After I had the dream, I felt compelled to find Tim. I did a search online and found 4 men by his name in the country. I didn't want to pick up the phone and call all four men (I was too hesitant and shy), so I kept looking online. I found classmates.com, and I signed up for our class. Tim wasn't there. Not a surprise. We had over 700 people in our graduating class.

So I stopped looking and decided that if I was meant to find him, something would happen to help me. Apparently, I was meant to find him.

Less than two weeks later, I got an e-mail from classmates.com letting me know that new people had signed up in my class. I went to the site, and to my amazement, Tim had signed up. Within 2 weeks of my doing so.

I sent him an e-mail. He was in North Carolina. Even though we had numerous obstacles in the way of our reuniting, we did reunite. Just a month later, he moved here to be with me.

People in my life thought I was insane. I was taking a HUGE risk, they said. What if Tim had changed in the 20-some years since I'd seen him? My friends were afraid I was getting into a bad situation.

But I wasn't. Tim and I merged our lives easily. We got along perfectly from the very beginning. We are head over heels in love, and we are now happily married.

You'll see how these Major Motivating Experiences impacted my life in just a bit—after I tell you the resulting Major Motivating Beliefs and show you how those beliefs influence my actions.

First, let me give you an MME for a fictional character.

In my novel, *Alternate Beauty*, the main character is Ronnie. Her boyfriend in our reality is Gilbert.

Gilbert loves Ronnie deeply, and he thinks she's beautiful. He doesn't care about the fact that she's obese. He doesn't care about her flaws. He sees her inner light and that reflects on how he sees her.

I didn't want to just create a plaster man who feels warm and fuzzy about a 300 pound woman without explaining why. At the start of *Alternate Beauty*, Ronnie isn't the most sympathetic character in the world. It's not abundantly clear why a man would love her. She starts the book

out a bit whiny, and I haven't revealed her good qualities yet. So why would this guy see past her exterior?

To explain that, I gave Gilbert this MME:

Gilbert has a younger brother who was the star athlete in high school—really good looking, quite a walking ego. During high school, the brother had an accident that resulted in him being severely burned and disfigured. Gilbert, who wasn't close to his brother before the accident, helped his brother through the suicidal despair and they became quite close.

After the accident, Gilbert saw his brother as a far more attractive human being than he'd been before the accident because his brother was no longer hiding his natural warmth and sensitivity beneath big-time jock posturing. Gilbert's brother was at his core, warm and creative, and Gilbert was finally able to see that.

This experience didn't happen until Gilbert's teenage years. Gilbert probably had major experiences before then, but for the purposes of my novel, this one was the most important, so this is the one I used.

The when of the MME isn't important as long as it happened long enough ago to make a major and lasting impact on your character.

Now, as a result of the major experience, the character forms a belief.

Major Motivating Belief (MMB)

Our beliefs are created by our experiences. As a result of the things that happen to us, we begin to see the world in a certain way, and we begin to believe certain things about the world and ourselves.

Your character's Major Motivating Belief is the most important belief or beliefs your character took on as a result of his or her Major Motivating Experience. To show you how this works, let's go back to the two MMEs I shared from my life. The first one was the one where my mother told me that her waist was 2 inches smaller than mine when she was my age.

As a result of that experience, I formed conclusions. These conclusions became beliefs.

Here are a few of the beliefs I took on as a result of that experience:

A 26 inch waist is too big.

I'm fat.

I need to lose weight.

I need a smaller waist in order to be okay.

The second MME was the one where I looked for and found Tim and I took a huge risk by inviting him to come be with me even though I hadn't seen him in over 20 years. That experience created new beliefs and solidified some beliefs that I'd been trying to form before that:

Amazingly wonderful things happen when you take risks.
Long odds can be overcome.
Miracles are possible.
When you really want something, you can have it.
When you follow your whims, great things happen.

Now, take a look at the beliefs that Gilbert formed as a result of his experience with his brother:

A person's exterior is irrelevant.
Real beauty is on the inside, not the outside.
You can't tell what a person is like by the person's exterior.

Do you see how this works? Your character has some pivotal experience. That experience causes your character to draw a conclusion about him or herself, about others, or about how the world works, or all three. This conclusion is a belief that then drives her actions through the course of the novel.

So here's how you put the MME and MMB together to form character motivation:

The Reason Behind The Action

Remember what we talked about at the beginning of this chapter? What a person believes determines what the person needs or desires—in other words, beliefs determine wants.

Wants determine action.

Let's apply this equation to the MMEs and MMBs I shared about my life.

In the first example, the beliefs I had about my body created my desire to be smaller than I was. So what action did that want create? Dieting. Exercising. Constant obsession with my body size.

It may seem simplistic, and even a bit silly, when you dissect behavior this way, but years of actions can often be traced back to one little event. And you see how the MME isn't always something earth shattering.

The MME can be a truly traumatic experience. But it can also be a seemingly innocuous experience. Certainly any fly on the wall in the dressing room the day that my mother made her comment to me about her waist size wouldn't have predicted that that apparently inconsequential statement would drive my actions for years to come. And certainly, if I had been conscious of what was motivating my actions, I would have thought the whole thing ridiculous. My mother

didn't mean to put me on the road to years of dieting and bingeing when she made that statement.

But this is why humans are so complicated. We are brilliant at turning molehills into mountains.

The second example I shared with you from my life had a more positive impact. The beliefs that I have about miracles and following whims has created in me a desire to take risks and go after what I want.

Since Tim came into my life, I have worked harder and been more focused on my goals than I ever was before. The result is that I've sold 4 books since then, and I've begun many other projects that I wouldn't have started if I didn't now believe that when you really want something, you can have it, and when you follow your whims, great things happen.

Do you see how this works?

In Gilbert's case, his belief that beauty is found within makes him want to be with a woman who is, at her core, warm and loving. Even though Ronnie weighs 300 pounds and is currently complaining about everything, he sees past that to her warmth and kindness. That's what he loves, and that's why his action is to keep loving her even when she tries to put her body size between them (figuratively, not literally).

Okay, so you see how this works?

MME + MMB = Wants

Wants + Motivation = Action

So how do you put these equations to work in your novel?

Determining Character Motivation In Your Novel

In real life, MMEs come first. MMBs come second. Wants come next. Motivation follows wants, and actions are the result.

In the world of creating a novel, the process is backwards. Why? Because you have a specific story to tell. You have conflict and story questions to create.

You've done this already, in Chapter One. So what you need to do now is go back to all that work you did in chapter one and use it to figure out your MME and MMB.

You need to think about what your character is going to be facing, what her obstacles will be and what you're going to need her to do. You walk through your plot and think about the story you want to tell, and you create your MMB and MME so your character's actions will be believable.