Module 4 Exercise – Character Work

In this exercise, the goal is to analyse your characters and determine which ones need further development and which ones need pruning. Answer the following questions to see:

Step 1 – Determine if the right characters are in place

Do you have the right protagonist for this story? The right protagonist has a strong reason to drive the plot, and the story would fall apart or change significantly if this person wasn't part of the tale.

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Do you have the right antagonist for this story? The right antagonist has good reasons for acting, and is in conflict with the protagonist. She's also a worthy foe for the protagonist to ensure every win is earned.

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Do you have the right number of characters? Readers can keep track of only so many people at a time. Too many characters make it hard for readers to follow the story; too few make it feel coincidental or contrived.

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Step 2 – Determine if the characters are working overall

Do you like the point-of-view character(s) or find them interesting?

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Do you care about these characters enough to read their story?

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Do the characters seem real?

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Are the characters believable in their roles?

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Are the characters flawed in ways that affect their decisions in the story?

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Do they have virtues that affect their decisions in the story?

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Do they have contradicting beliefs, both with themselves, and the other characters?

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Step 3 – Determine if the character descriptions are working

How much physical description do you want?

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Are the main characters adequately described?

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Is there too much focus on physical details?

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Are the secondary characters described?

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How many details do you use to describe the various characters?

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Do the descriptions all fit the same format?

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Determine if the character arcs are working

What does the protagonist learn over the course of the novel?

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How does the internal conflict affect that growth?

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What lie is she telling herself or does she believe at the start of the novel?

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When does she realise it is or isn't true?

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What does she want most of all as a person?

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Does the external plot facilitate her achieving this personal desire?

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What is she most afraid of?

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When does she face this fear?

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Where do the turning points of growth occur?

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Determine if the backstory is working

Is the backstory relevant to the scene?

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Does this information help readers understand what's going on in this scene?

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Will know this information hurt the tension or mystery of the scene (or story)?

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What would be lost in this scene if you took the backstory out?

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Why do you want it in the scene?

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Determine if the theme is working

What is the theme (or themes) of this story?

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Where examples of this theme are found in the novel?

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Where and how does the theme deepen the character arcs?

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How does the theme tie into the resolution of the novel?

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If you think you have the wrong protagonist

Determine who has the problem – (to fix the existing protagonist) look for ways to make the core conflict problem apply to the protagonist. How is this problem going to make her life worse?

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Determine who has the ability to act - (to fix the existing protagonist) look for ways to make the protagonist able to affect a change.

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Determine who has reasons to act - (to fix the existing protagonist) look for ways to add a personal motivation to the protagonist.

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Determine who has something to lose - (to fix the existing protagonist) look for ways to give the protagonist personal stakes and serious consequences if she fails to resolve the problem.

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Determine who has something to gain - (to fix the existing protagonist) look for ways the protagonist will benefit from solving the problem, especially if it also fits into her character arc (if the protagonist has no character arc, that could be why the character isn't working).

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Determine who has the capacity to change - (to fix the existing protagonist) look for ways to cause a change in the protagonist. The problems overcome should have a long-lasting effect (you may need to do the character arc exercises for this character).

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Determine who has a compelling quality - (to fix the existing protagonist) look for ways to make the protagonist more compelling. Add a trait or characteristic to make her more interesting.

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Determine who has an interesting flaw - (to fix the existing protagonist) look for ways to give the protagonist flaws that connect to her character arc and the problem at hand.

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Determine who has something or someone interesting in the way - (to fix the existing protagonist) look for ways to give the protagonist a worthy foe to overcome.

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Choose your protagonist - (to fix the existing protagonist) is your protagonist now the right person for the story? If so, revise overall to fix the problem areas revealed in the questions. If not, and you're sure this is indeed the right person, then the issue might not be the protagonist but the core conflict or premise of the novel.

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If you think you have the wrong antagonist

Determine who causes the problem - (to fix your existing antagonist) look for ways to make the antagonist responsible for the problem. Note: the antagonist doesn't cause every story core conflict, but they will at least try to take advantage of it.

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Determine who benefits from the problem - (to fix your existing antagonist) look for ways to make the antagonist benefit from the problem.

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Determine who is motivated to cause this problem - (to fix your existing antagonist) look for ways to motivate the antagonist to want to see the problem occur.

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Determine who has reason to prevent the protagonist from acting - (to fix your existing antagonist) look for ways to put the antagonist in direct conflict with the protagonist. Make sure their goals are at odds with one another.

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Identify your antagonist - (to fix your existing antagonist) Is your antagonist now the right person for the story? If so, revise overall to fix the problem areas revealed in the questions. If not, and you're sure this is indeed the right person, then the issue might not be the antagonist but the core conflict or premise of the novel.

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If you think you have too many characters

Write down your protagonist and antagonist

Take a sheet of paper (or do this on your computer) and draw two boxes in the middle, evenly spread apart. Write your protagonist's name in one box, and your antagonist's name in the other. Add more boxes if you have more than one of either. If you find yourself adding a lot of boxes, then there's a problem.

Add the other characters in the novel

Start adding boxes with the other characters' names in them. Put them below the protagonist if they are directly connected to her, above the antagonist if they are connected to them. To quickly see what level of importance they are, try using different colours per level. List them order as follows:

- Major secondary characters first (friends, sidekicks)
- Important characters (people the plot or story hinges on, but who aren't hanging out with the main characters)
- Minor characters (recurring people who play smaller roles and are seen multiple times)
- Named walk-on characters (people in one or two scenes who don't do much, but have names anyway)
- Any remaining people who interact with your protagonist or antagonist, named or not