

LESSON 2: Character Back Story – Part 2

In the previous lesson, you posed some questions to your main character and started figuring out their back story and things that might have happened before the story starts. Today we're going to continue exploring that back history, but also take a closer look at what is happening in the present.

The Ordinary Life

If you're familiar with the Hero's Journey, then you've heard the term "ordinary life" before. This simply means, **the current state of affairs** when the story opens, before things go all crazy and your main character is sucked into the adventure of the book.

The ordinary life is the way things are right now. **Everyday life.** Your character's job, family, hobbies, etc. And most importantly, their dissatisfaction with the way things are, or their feeling that something is missing.

An important aspect of all stories is how the main character grows and changes as a result of the events in the story, to become a better person by the end. So that means there's an **emotional problem** at the beginning that needs to be worked on. Exploring your character's back story will help you figure out what that issue is, so you can construct scenes throughout the story to address it.

Revealing Back Story in Context

Too much back story at the start of a book—the evil info dump—is usually pretty easy to spot and correct. When your eyes glaze over or you start to skim at the opening of a book, chances are there is too much unnecessary detail clogging the scene.

What is a little more difficult to spot, but equally annoying to readers, is **irrelevant back story**. It's harder to spot in your work, because it's not that the information isn't needed, but rather that it's in the wrong spot. You know it should be there, you want it in the book, but you've put it in a spot that has absolutely no relation to the information you're trying to reveal.

This may leave the reader wondering, why is this mentioned here? Or worse, skipping over it as something unimportant and forgetting about it. Neither of which you want. So, when you think about a piece of back story you want to incorporate into the story, think about why a particular scene is the right place to put it. **Why would the character be thinking about this now?** What triggers it?

For example, maybe you want to reveal something about your hero's contentious relationship with his grandmother. If he enters a room where an object reminds him of something in her house or something she used to like, then that could segue smoothly into an information reveal about the grandmother. If something happening in a scene evokes an emotion the character can relate back to his grandmother, that could also work. But it's important that there be something

there to trigger the recollection or the information may come across as a random drop of unnecessary details.

Start Forming a Timeline

As you're completing the exercises and learning things about your character's history, also start thinking about *when* different events happened. That worst day of their life, for example. When was that? How old were they? Start putting the pieces of information in order and this will help paint a chronological picture of your character's life that you can then use to help flesh out your story.

Affixing back story events to a timeline is also a great way to identify which pieces are back story (the past) and which are ordinary life (the present). It can even help you brainstorm events yet to come (the future). A timeline will also help as you're writing the story to keep setting details like the day of the week or time of year straight and avoid continuity errors.

Seeing the back story in an organized way can also help you to pick and choose the information that is relevant to the story you want to tell, and offer clues as to where in the story the information should be revealed.

For example, if you have a childhood event on your timeline that you feel is relevant to your story, looking at what came before the event and what happened after might help you see what in the present story could trigger this info reveal, because nothing happens in a vacuum. So each of the events on your timeline are connected to something else. Understanding those connections can be helpful in fleshing out your story triggers.

Back to the Question of "Why?"

This was mentioned in the first lesson, and I want to mention it again here, because it's really important to understand "Why?" in everything that happens in your story, and many of those answers are found in the character's back story.

The "Why?" behind your character's feelings and actions is crucial to understanding your main character's motivation, that driving force that propels the character through the story. If the character has no good reason for doing what they're doing, the readers will be left scratching their heads and wondering what's going on. Worse, they might not care.

The "Why?" behind something is key to helping your readers relate to your character. Motivations such as guilt, shame, regret, fear, and revenge are all universal feelings and easily identifiable by the reader. A clear motivation not only pulls the reader into the story, but also creates sympathy for your main character. When the reader cares, the reader keeps reading.

But before you can convey the "Why?" to the reader, you need to understand it yourself. Again, we're going to turn to some journaling exercises to ferret out this information, and anything else we need to understand about what drives our character throughout the story.

Exercise

Journal from the perspective of your main character, writing out the answers to the following questions **in first person** (starting with pronoun "I." I did this, or I feel this... etc.), ...) and keep writing until the answer seems complete.

Ask each of the following questions, one at a time. Take a break between them to recharge.

If the answer seems to be too short, or you feel stuck, review the response you have so far and then ask "Why?" Make that character tell you more to explain their answer.

Ask the character about their hopes and dreams for the future:

- 1.) What do you wish were different about your life?
- 2.) What's stopping you from having the perfect life?
- 3.) What's your biggest regret?

NOTE: These questions are not exhaustive. Feel free to come up with your own questions for your main character that you want answers to and journal about those.

Do not post your journaling text on the loop (*that's for your use only*), but **do post what you think your main character's overall desire in life is, in a single sentence like:**

My character wants _____, because _____, but can't have it because _____.

Then let me know if you learned anything new about your character through this exercise.

Reading Assignment

In the book you've chosen for your reading assignment, read the second chapter (or through the next chapter that features the same main character from the opening), and look at what **new information** is revealed. How does it compare to what was revealed in the previous chapter? More information? Less? Or about the same?

How does the information revealed relate to the context of the scene or scenes in the chapter? Why do you think the author chose to reveal this information here and not in the opening chapter? How does the new information revealed advance the story?

Save your answers to the reading assignment for the last day.