

Developing Characters - Prompts

1. The Moment Before

Number lines on your paper from 1 to 12. Choose a sample line (or write your own). Put that line on line 12.

Now ask yourself “What happened 30 seconds before this line was spoken?”. Write that on line 11. Then, write what happened just before that on line 10. Continue working backwards one moment at a time.

Don’t jump back too quickly, build the scene gradually as if you are a detective solving a mystery clue by clue. As the details emerge pay attention to the emotional perspective, the setting, the relationships, and the physical details surrounding the character.

Sample lines

“I didn’t think you’d come back.”

“I should never have come back here”

“It was my sun and moon once.”

“Happiness comes unexpectedly.”

“I heard it whisper in the sound of the traffic.”

“I have kept my promises, despite trying not to.”

“I cannot hold them any tighter.”

“I’m tired now, but I won’t be tired long.”

“The world has gone mad, and I am with it.”

“Stone by stone, I built this wall”

2. Sense Memory / Environmental Recall

Imagine a room from your past, somewhere vivid in your memory. Set a timer for two minutes, close your eyes, and sit quietly inside that room. Then write answers to these questions.

1. What does the room smell like? What causes that smell? Have you ever smelled it somewhere else?
2. What is the temperature of the room? Why is it that way?
3. What sounds can you hear? What is creating those sounds?
4. What textures can you feel or see?
5. How is the room lit? Where does the light come from? How does the light change throughout the day or night?
6. What objects are in the room? Which ones feel most significant? Why are they important? Why are they arranged the way they are?

Finally, imagine you are someone else walking into that room for the first time. What assumptions would you make about the person who lives there? What would the room reveal about them?

3. The Unspoken Thought

Choose five emotions from the outer edge of the feelings wheel. Write each one as a simple statement: "I am feeling _____."

Now imagine a character trying NOT to openly reveal that emotion. How might they suppress it, redirect it, disguise it, or avoid it entirely?

Instead of directly naming the emotion, write: physical actions, observations, habits, fragments of dialogue, objects, memories, environmental details, etc. that indirectly reveal what the character is truly feeling.

For example, instead of "I'm lonely," a character might "Leave the television on while they sleep."

Instead of "I'm ashamed," they might "Keep changing the subject every time someone asks about home."

Write the simple emotional statement. Then write the line about how they are trying to suppress it. Then, in prose, write about what behaviors reveal the emotion indirectly? What details "leak the truth"? What does the audience understand that the character may not admit openly? What kinds of imagery belongs to that emotional state the character is in?

4. Object Association Exercise

Look around at your surroundings and find an object in the vicinity. Describe its condition, wear, damage, smell, etc. Now imagine who owns it, and why the object has been significant in their life. How did all those marks, that wear, the patina, etc. get on that object? Write the story of how that object got from that person's hands to where it is now. Prose or verse

5. Emotional Contradiction Exercise

Look at the feelings wheel graphic. Choose a feeling from the outer ring. Look at the feeling straight across the wheel from that one. Write those two emotions down with the word "but" in between them. Do this five times. With each combination of emotions, write a character description about a person who is feeling both of those things simultaneously. What is the scenario? How did they get there?

Examples:

*Energetic but numb
Indifferent but ashamed
Loving but excluded
Joyful but jealous.*

6. The Character Interview

A reporter is interviewing your character. Write the answers to each question.

*What happened to bring you here today?
What is something you wish people understood about you?
What has this town been talking about lately?
Why do you think people misunderstood what happened here?
What is oversimplified about this issue?
When do you think you first knew about this?
Why do you think people should know about this?
Who else could help with this? Why do you think they are the right people?
How much more of this do you expect?
Who do you expect will be the most affected by it?*

After answering the questions, read them back carefully. What do the answers reveal about the character's background, worldview, fears, priorities, and emotional state? What can you infer about where they come from and what their life has been like?

Then write four paragraphs (or more) describing the character, the situation they are in, and the world surrounding them.

7. The Room Exercise

Think of a person from your family, or close circle of friends. Someone you know intimately. Describe them as vividly as possible by writing about an important room in their life (their office, den, rec room, bedroom, kitchen, etc.) Don't talk about them directly. Concentrate on the objects in the room, the smells, the clutter (or lack thereof), the damage, the decorations, the background noise, etc.

Write in prose and start your writing with "From the doorway I can see..."

8. The Folded Map Exercise

Where are you from? Visualize a national or regional map that includes your home. Fold the map randomly so your home touches some other place. Where does it touch? Imagine a working class person from that place. What is their occupation? What does a day in their life look like? What was their family like? What kind of clothes do they wear? What does their accent sound like? What kind of food do they like to eat? Be as descriptive as possible!

As you write, think about how geography, class, culture, and work shape a person's voice, emotional perspective, and way of communicating.

9. The One Memory Exercise

Think about a memorable piece of clothing you saw a stranger wear on the street. With that person in mind ask yourself "What memory shaped this person most?" In prose, describe that situation. Tell us about the other people, places, and/or things involved in that memory. What made it so formative? What parts of that memory continue to influence their life, worldview, or emotional state?

Finally, how is that unique piece of clothing involved in, or reminiscent of that memory?

Using that unique piece of clothing as the title of the song, condense your prose into verses.

10. The Voice Swap Exercise

Think of a song or lyric you have already written (or use someone else's song). Now imagine the character from the song many years later. How has time changed their understanding of the situation? What emotions have faded, intensified, softened, or become more complicated?

Write a few paragraphs describing how that older version of the character now views the events of the song differently.

Alternative:

Instead of aging the character, imagine someone who despises, resents, envies, or fundamentally disagrees with the narrator of the song. Write a few paragraphs from that person's perspective.

As you write, think about how the emotional perspective changes:

- the language
- the imagery
- the pacing
- the rhythm of speech
- the emotional tone
- and the worldview of the narrator.

Then consider how the music itself might change to reflect this new perspective:

- Would the melody become more restrained or dramatic?
- Would the groove slow down or intensify?
- Would the harmony feel more stable or more tense?
- Would the phrasing become conversational, reflective, bitter, exhausted, nostalgic, or defensive?

Finally, use your prose writing to create new lyrical lines or verses that match the emotional texture of this altered perspective.