

WRITERS' EASY GUIDE



A Variety Of Voices

**Devise a Voice Profile
For Each Character**

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Devise a Voice Profile for Each Character

Who can forget Eliza's "oawoo!" from *My Fair Lady* or Yoda's "stubborn you are" from *Return of the Jedi*? Distinctive characters not only come instantly alive and draw us deep into the story world, they also live on in our minds. We quote them. We admire them or fear them. We even refer to them as if they were real folks.

Who but Sherlock Holmes would say, "The game's afoot"? Who but Scarlett O'Hara would say, "Fiddle-de-dee?"

Viewpoint characters should sound the same in their thoughts as in their words. For this reason, if no other, we want to avoid strong dialect with its plethora of apostrophes. Instead, devise a language for each character that consists of simple choices.

Like other novelists, I develop character profiles:

Where is he from? What does she read? When did he marry? Who does she trust? When I advanced that process a step further and created speech profiles, I found my characters more engaging and their dialogue free-flowing.

Individuals from widely different backgrounds are easy to distinguish. An educated person speaks more eloquently, for example, than does one with little schooling. But among characters of the same ethnic derivation, educational level, and socioeconomic scale, giving each a personal language, or *idiolect*, takes a bit of work. And it pays off.

***Decide on
Sentence Length
and Complexity***

You've heard the old saw, "Ask him the time, he'll tell you how to build a watch." Some people are economic in their speech, others are elaborate in detail as well as delivery. Listen to these three characters order lunch.

Lily: *Chicken Caesar Salad,
iced tea. Dessert later.*

Astra: *I'll have Caesar Salad,
please, with chicken not
salmon. And to drink I think
I'll have tea, plenty of ice.
Maybe you could bring the
dessert tray?*

Karen: *What sounds good?
It's so hot out—salad, I
guess. And iced tea. Is the
Romaine fresh? Then I'll
have the Caesar. With...oh*

my...Last night we had fish for dinner, but that salmon does sound good. No, I'll have the chicken. And dessert. Would you mind bringing the tray around? I can never decide until I see it.

***Assign Specific
Word Choices***

Some people speak in complete sentences, others don't. Some, like Karen, think out loud while they talk, interspersing their speech with asides and rhetorical questions.

As you originate characters' speech patterns, consider their interests, vocations, hobbies, marital situation, family background. Do they come from a fast-paced city or from a country town? Did they graduate cum laude or drop out of high school? Would they use expletives? Repeat phrases?

Consider how two neighbors, similarly educated, might discuss erecting a fence between their yards. But first, let's give them each a specific vocabulary.

- Sara is a young wife with two dogs and a strong sense of decor. She recently moved from Texas, where ample space is taken for granted. A human resource recruiter at a bank, she is expecting her first child. Sara's vocabulary might include such words and phrases as romp,

rambunctious, elbow room, spacious, cramped, enough room to spit, picket, rail, neighborly, as well as such job-related terms as offer, inclusive, expectations, needs assessment, opportunity.

- Britt, a divorced woman with two teenagers, takes pride in her burgeoning flower garden. She works as a CPA in a large firm and has lived in her Colorado home for two years. Her previous neighbor was elderly. Britt's vocabulary might include such words as schedules, busy, quality time, wind down, sunlight, fresh air, rocky, outdoor, color, odor, scent, fertile as well as such job-related words as money, balance, upside, increase, debit.

Sara needs the fence to keep her dogs in the yard. Britt enjoys her garden in its relation to the neighboring yards. Choosing words from their respective vocabulary lists, how would each woman express her views?

Assign Sensory Preferences

A rich source of word choices comes from our sensory preference. Like being right- or left-handed, each of us is either visual, auditory, or kinesthetic (VAK). We use all the senses, just as we use

both hands, but tend to strongly favor one VAK style over the others.

- Visual people might use such words *as clear, colorful, imagine, bright, show me, cloudy, view, envision, pale, vivid, picture, outlook, spectacle.*
- Auditory people might use *resonate, listen, tell me, talk, noisy, lyrical, sound, tone, dulcet, timbre, musical, loud, clamorous.*
- Kinesthetic (feeling) characters would use touch words, *open, soft, hard, cool, warm, fuzzy, rough, give it to me, get a handle on, approach, angle, standpoint, smooth, unruffled.*

***Assign a Visual,
Auditory or
Kinesthetic
Preference to Open
an Entire Vocabulary***

Simply by choosing a VAK preference, you can open up an entire vocabulary for each character.

- A visual person might say: *“I looked at the situation again and now I’m envisioning a brighter, more spectacular scene.”*
- An auditory person: *“I listened to what everyone was telling me and now I’m considering a more resonant and harmonious presentation.”*
- A kinesthetic person: *“I took note of what we’re up against and now I’m moving toward a stronger, more striking approach.”*

These passages are exaggerated to make the point, of course. You would sprinkle VAK like pepper. But build

your characters without considering whether they are auditory, visual, or kinesthetic, and their language will likely reflect your own sensory style. They might all sound alike.

Yet another rich source for characters' language is their interests and avocations.

***Give Each
Character
a Hobby***

- An avid fisherman might use such terms as *hooking into, catching up, reeling in, sinking feelings, baiting a sucker, floating a loan, netting results, waiting for a boat to come in, trawling for leads, holy mackerel, dumb as a gull, smelly as fish bait.*
- A seamstress might speak in sewing terms, such as *button your lip, cut the strings, thread your way, tight as a bobbin, stitch it up, snip it, line his pockets, spool it, coat of another color, dress it up, seamless, wash-and-wear, take the starch out.*

Again, if you build a straightjacket of colorful words, you'll create a caricature instead of a character. A good way to work is to design an idiolect made up of all the background, interests, and sensory material in the character profile, then keep this word list handy while you write and edit. Get into the character's head. Imagine yourself a Texas fisherman, retired, arthritic, cranky. How would you answer a simple question like "How are you doing?" differently from a disabled coach who still turns out to cheer the high school football team to glory?

***Vary Your Characters’
Speech Cadence***

The rhythm in which your characters speak is also a reflection of who they are and where they’ve been. By altering inflection and/or sentence length, you present your characters in a whole new light.

A person who riddles his speech or internal narrative with prepositional or parenthetical phrases will speak in a completely different rhythm from one who uses few or none.

- Simple: *The table legs splayed, causing a tilt that sent dishes crashing.*
- Complex: *The legs of the table, obviously improperly attached, splayed, which caused a tilt in the surface of the table; the dishes, a legacy from my grandmother, crashed to the floor.*

Adverbs, which modify verbs, create a different cadence from adjectives used to modify nouns or pronouns.

- Adjectives: *Fine wine after an excellent program put Chelsea in a warm and generous mood.*
- Adverbs: *After the program, wine flowed lavishly, turning Chelsea’s mood warmly generous.*

A character who uses multi-syllable words will have a different cadence from one who uses mostly words of one syllable.

- *Bees flit from bloom to bloom.*

- *Bumblebees flutter among the blossoms.*
Dropped articles (the, a, an) or incomplete sentences will also affect rhythm.
- “*Car won’t start. New battery might fix it.*”
“*The car won’t start. A new battery might fix it.*”
- “*No chance. Won’t get to first base.*”
“*You have no chance of making it to first base.*”

***Avoid Excessive
Dialect and
Colloquialism***

Used sparingly, dialect or colloquialism can bring walk-on characters quickly to life and make them instantly memorable when they appear again later in the story. But rather than use an apostrophe to indicate dropped letters, play around with word arrangement and spelling. Your copy editor will thank you, and the reader will find the dialogue easier to scan.

- *I tol’ ‘im I wasn’t goin’ t’ th’ store ‘til late.*
- *I tole him I wasn’t goan to the store till late.*
- *Didn’t I tell him I wasn’t about to go to the store, not till late?*
- *The store? I was not going yet and I told him so right off.*

Remember Valley Girl speak? Geek speak? Attitude and jargon can spice up the dialogue – buzz off, muscle

in, over the top, bottom line, totally awesome, cool beans, cute as a kitten, dull as dishwater, slick as snot on a doorknob, meter it, patch me through, in the pocket, base-lining...the list can go on for miles, but a little goes a long way.

Fashion a character's voice as you similarly invent clothing style, body type, mannerisms, social structure, education, psychology, and attitude. Allow speech to spring from the character as a whole. Create a profile that includes words and phrases only that person is allowed to use. The result will be characters who come alive on the page and linger in a reader's mind long after the story ends.

Note: The Writer's Digest version of this piece was edited slightly to fit their 900-word format.