

DSDT

Developing Unique Characters

Writing compelling dialogues

Introduction

Characters are really the heart of any story. Think about it, when you watch a movie, read a book, or even binge a show, what usually sticks with you the most? The people in it. You might forget a plot twist, but you'll remember how a character made you feel. That's why building characters that feel real, layered, and interesting is so important. If the characters are flat, even the most action-packed story can end up feeling empty.

In this session, we'll dig into a few key areas:

1. Realistic vs. exaggerated characters – Sometimes you want a character who feels like they could be your neighbor, and other times you want someone larger than life, like Jack Sparrow or Willy Wonka. The trick is finding the right balance for your story so the characters don't feel either boring or unbelievable.
2. Believable dialogue – Nothing pulls a reader out of a story faster than clunky dialogue. We'll look at how to write conversations that sound natural (like how people actually talk), while still being sharp enough to move the story forward. For example, think of how Tarantino's characters chat about random things like burgers, but it still tells you so much about who they are.
3. Internal monologues – These are the little windows into a character's head that can make them feel three-dimensional. It's not just about what they *say*, but what they *think* and sometimes can't say out loud. Think of Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*, his inner thoughts are what make him such an unforgettable character.

By the end of this lecture, you'll walk away with some practical tips and examples to help you create characters that feel alive, characters your readers will care about, laugh with, cry with, and maybe even miss when the story ends.

1. Crafting Realistic vs. Exaggerated Characters


When you're building characters, one of the first choices you'll face is whether to make them feel like real people or to lean into exaggeration for drama, comedy, or sheer impact. Both are great approaches, it just depends on the tone of your story. The big thing to remember is consistency: if you're writing a grounded drama, even your wildest characters need believable edges, and if you're writing something more stylized or over-the-top, the world should support that level of exaggeration.

A. Realistic Characters


Realistic characters are the ones that feel like they could exist in real life. They remind us of people we know because they:

- Have complex motivations – They're not purely heroes or villains. Instead, they're driven by their own mix of desires, fears, and messy personal conflicts.
- Show flaws and contradictions – Just like real people, they'll make mistakes, act impulsively, or say one thing and do another.
- Grow and change – Their experiences shape them. Over the course of a story, they should evolve in some way, even if it's subtle.

Example:

 *Elizabeth Bennet* in *Pride and Prejudice* (Jane Austen) – She's clever, independent, and funny, but also judgmental and a little stubborn. Those flaws make her human, and her eventual growth (overcoming her biases) makes her arc satisfying.

Another example:

 *Walter White* in *Breaking Bad* – He starts as a mild-mannered teacher but slowly transforms into someone darker and more ruthless. His motivations (fear of death, desire to provide for his family, hunger for power) are complicated but believable.

Tips for Writing Realistic Characters:

- ✓ Base them on real people, observe how your friends, family, or even strangers act. Their habits and quirks can inspire characters.
- ✓ Give them clear wants and fears, knowing what your character desperately wants or dreads will guide how they behave.
- ✓ Avoid clichés, real people aren't one-dimensional. Add contradictions to make them feel layered.


B. Exaggerated Characters

Exaggerated characters, on the other hand, are the big personalities, the ones who take up space on the page or screen. They can be hilarious, outrageous, or dramatically intense, but they still need some emotional truth to keep them from becoming empty caricatures.


- Amplify one trait – Maybe they're overly dramatic, ridiculously brave, or outrageously sarcastic.

- Play with contrast – They often stand out more when paired with grounded characters.
- Keep their emotions real – Even if they’re absurd, their core feelings should resonate.

Example:

 *Tyrion Lannister* in *Game of Thrones* (George R.R. Martin) – His wit and intelligence are dialed way up, but what keeps him compelling is his vulnerability and his need for respect.

Another example:

 *The Genie* in *Aladdin* – He’s loud, magical, and constantly over the top, but his loneliness and desire for freedom make him relatable.

Tips for Writing Exaggerated Characters:

- ✓ Push one trait to the extreme, but make sure it fits the world of your story.
- ✓ Pair them with more realistic characters so their quirks shine even brighter.
- ✓ Ground them with emotions, fear, love, insecurity, so readers can still connect.

Bottom line: whether you’re going for realism or exaggeration, your characters should feel alive and consistent within your story. Think of them as people readers (or viewers) want to hang out with, or at least can’t stop thinking about.



2. Writing Believable Dialogue

Great dialogue is what makes characters jump off the page. It’s not just people talking, it’s how readers get to know who your characters really are, how they feel about each other, and what’s driving the story forward. The right line of dialogue can reveal more about someone’s personality than an entire paragraph of description.

A. Common Mistakes in Dialogue



✗ Too formal or stiff speech

People rarely talk in perfect sentences. If your dialogue sounds like it belongs in a textbook, it’ll feel fake.

-  Bad: *“I will now proceed to the kitchen to prepare dinner.”*
-  Better: *“I’m gonna throw something together. You want some?”*

✗ Dumping backstory into conversation

Characters don’t explain things they both already know, it feels clunky and forced.

-  Bad: *“As you know, John, we’ve been best friends since college, and we started this detective agency five years ago.”*
-  Better: *“Five years, John. Five years running this agency, and we still don’t have a coffee machine.”* (You get the history without it sounding like a lecture.)

✗ Everyone sounding the same

If all your characters talk alike, it's hard for readers to tell them apart. Dialogue should feel like fingerprints, distinct for each person.

B. How to Write Natural Dialogue

✓ Use contractions & informal phrasing

Nobody says, "I do not know" in casual conversation, they say, "*I don't know.*" Keep it simple.

✓ Give characters their own voice

Different characters should sound different based on who they are.

- A professor might say: "*That's a fascinating hypothesis.*"
- A teenager might say: "*Bro, that's insane.*"
- A tired mom might say: "*Can we not do this right now?*"

✓ Use subtext (what's really being said)

Sometimes what a character says isn't what they actually mean.

- "*You always forget your umbrella.*" → What they really mean: "*I worry about you.*"
- "*That's your third drink.*" → What they really mean: "*I'm scared you're spiraling.*"

✓ Add interruptions, pauses, and overlaps

Real conversations aren't perfectly polished. People trail off, get distracted, or cut each other off.

- 🗨️ "*I was just thinking, wait, did you hear that?*"
 - 🗨️ "*If you'd just let me, no, hold on, that's not what I meant!*"
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Example of Good Dialogue

🗨️ *From The Catcher in the Rye (J.D. Salinger):*

"Boy, when you're dead, they really fix you up. I hope to hell when I do die somebody has sense enough to just dump me in the river or something."

This line nails Holden's sarcastic, cynical voice. It's funny, sad, and totally unique to him, you couldn't mistake it for another character.

Another example:

🗨️ *From Avengers (Tony Stark to Loki):*

"There's no throne, there is no version of this where you come out on top. Maybe your army comes and maybe it's too much for us, but it's all on you. Because if we can't protect the Earth, you can be damn sure we'll avenge it."

Tony's wit, confidence, and defiance all come through. It's not just information, it's personality.

👉 Bottom line: Dialogue should sound like *real people talking*, but sharper, funnier, or more emotionally charged. When it's done right, readers feel like they're eavesdropping on an actual conversation.

3. Writing Compelling Internal Monologues

Internal monologues are basically your character's private thoughts, the stuff they wouldn't (or couldn't) say out loud. They're powerful because they let the reader peek behind the curtain and see what's really going on in a character's head. Done well, they make characters feel deeper, more human, and more relatable.

You can use internal monologues to:

- Show hidden emotions – Maybe your character is smiling on the outside but panicking on the inside.
 - Create dramatic irony – The audience knows what the character is really thinking, even if the others in the scene don't.
 - Build tension – By showing a character wrestling with choices, fears, or regrets, you make the stakes feel bigger.
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A. Examples of Effective Internal Monologues

📖 The Hunger Games (Suzanne Collins)

"At some point, you have to stop running and turn around and face whoever wants you dead. The hard thing is finding the courage to do it."

- This shows Katniss's fear and determination all at once. She's terrified, but she's also building the strength to fight back. Readers instantly connect with that vulnerability and courage.

📖 The Bell Jar (Sylvia Plath)


"I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked... I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest."

- This paints a vivid, poetic picture of indecision and anxiety. We feel the weight of Esther's choices and her fear of losing possibilities.

🕸 Extra Example: Spider-Man (Peter Parker's inner thoughts)

Peter often thinks about the balance between his normal life and his hero life: *"I can't tell Aunt May the truth. She'd never forgive me for hiding it, but if I tell her... I could lose her forever."*

- That inner struggle is what makes him more than just a guy in a costume, it makes him human.

 Extra Example: Harry Potter (J.K. Rowling)

Harry often doubts himself: *“What if the Sorting Hat was wrong? What if I’m not brave at all, what if I end up failing everyone?”*

- This shows us Harry’s insecurity, even while others see him as “the Chosen One.”
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B. How to Write Strong Internal Monologues

✓ Keep it in the character’s voice

A teenage gamer will think differently than a middle-aged detective. For example:

- Teen: *“God, did I really just say that? Smooth. Real smooth.”*
- Detective: *“The kid’s lying. I’ve seen that twitch a hundred times in interrogations.”*


✓ Use sensory details

Instead of *“She was nervous,”* try: *“Her palms were slick, and her heart hammered like a drum in her chest.”* The body can show what the mind is feeling.

✓ Balance thoughts with action

Too much internal monologue can slow down the story. Mix in actions or dialogue to keep the scene moving.

- Example: *“I can’t tell him how I feel. Not now. Not here.” She busied herself with the coffee cups, hoping he wouldn’t notice her hands shaking.*
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 **Bottom line:** Internal monologues let readers feel like they’re living inside your character’s skin. They make the story richer by showing the hidden struggles, fears, and desires that characters might never say out loud.

Conclusion

Creating unique characters is all about blending realism with imagination. You want them to feel believable enough that readers connect with them, but also creative enough that they stand out. Whether your character is down-to-earth or wildly exaggerated, the key is making sure their dialogue and inner thoughts feel true to *who they are*.

✓ **Realistic characters have depth, flaws, and personal motivations.** Think of Elizabeth Bennet in

Pride and Prejudice, she’s smart and independent, but also stubborn and judgmental. Those imperfections are what make her relatable.

- ✅ **Exaggerated characters are bigger than life, but they still need something real at their core.** The Genie from *Aladdin* is ridiculously over-the-top, but his longing for freedom makes him feel human and worth rooting for.
 - ✅ **Dialogue should sound natural, like something your character would actually say.** It's not just about words, it shows personality and how they relate to others. For example, a sarcastic character might answer “Nice weather, huh?” with “Sure, if you like sweating through your shirt in five minutes.”
 - ✅ **Internal monologues let us peek inside a character's head.** They reveal hidden emotions, secret doubts, or big decisions the character might not voice out loud. For instance, a soldier might joke with his comrades, but inside he's thinking: “If I don't make it back, who's going to take care of my little sister?”
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Assignment

Dialogue Writing Assignment

Objective:

Write a short dialogue (at least 20 lines) between no more than two characters. Your dialogue should showcase a clear conflict, emotion, or humor.

Instructions:

1. **Choose a scenario** – Your characters should be in a situation that creates an interesting exchange. Examples:
 - A detective questioning a suspect.
 - Two best friends arguing over a secret.
 - A time traveler meeting their past self.
 - A barista dealing with an unusual customer.
2. **Develop distinct voices** – Make sure each character has a unique way of speaking. Consider their tone, word choice, and personality.
3. **Show, don't tell** – Use dialogue to reveal emotions and information rather than explaining them.
4. **Include stage directions** (optional) – Use short descriptions to show actions, facial expressions, or setting details.

Example:

Liam: (nervously) So... about your sandwich... I, uh, might have taken a bite.

Emma: (raising an eyebrow) A *bite*? Liam, half of it is gone!

Liam: In my defense, it was *really* good.

Emma: And in *my* defense, you owe me lunch.

Submission: Write your dialogue below and make sure it is at least 20 lines long. Be creative!

Your submission will be shared in class.