

NOTO|LUX

CREATING CHARACTERS

Everything I Need To
Know Before Drafting



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Preface

This guide is built on several years of developing my writing craft, drafting countless stories of varying lengths, and self-publishing a poetry collection. Each step in my journey as a writer has improved not only my practical skills, but the understanding I hold of my own process. Half of learning to write is learning what works for you and what doesn't; planning or pantsing; editing later or editing as you go; writing linearly, by perspective, or sporadically, blending the pieces together later.

Through this guide, I think I've finally cracked the code. For myself, at least. And who knows, it could still likely change for the next novel or the one after that. A few authors have said their process changes with each new book.

Remember: nothing is set in stone. Take every

piece of advice with a grain of salt. Use what inspires and helps you and ignore the rest.

This guide is what helps me, but it might not be what helps you. That's ok. This guide is free. There is no harm in downloading, reading a bit, and then promptly deleting it. I won't take offense, I promise.

Now, let's get started, shall we?



Introduction

If you're looking to flesh out your main OCs (Original Characters) and don't know where to start, this is a guide to the key pieces of information I, personally, like to know about my characters before I begin drafting. This information can be completed prior to or *after* drafting. For the pantsers out there, building an outline or character chart after you've completed a first draft can be helpful once the initial discovery writing has laid the ground work for the story.

What is a story made of?

There are three main features of any novel:

- Character
- Plot
- Worldbuilding

The best novels combine all three in that each feature is intertwined with the other two. The characters shape both the world and the plot. The world influences the plot and the characters. The plot informs the characters and the world it's set in. This guide focuses on building the characters because they are what carry the most weight of a story. A solid plot is scant compared to complex, interesting characters.

What will this guide not be?

This is not a guide to know *everything* about an OC. We are not filling out long questionnaires or charts that include even the smallest of details. I will not ask you about your OC's favourite colour, food, or season. Those details pale in comparison to the values, beliefs, and fears your character possesses.

What will this guide be?

This creating character guide will begin with a few questions to ask of your characters from V. E. Schwab. She is, and continues to be, a strong source of inspiration when developing my craft.

The rest of the guide will include (with examples):

1. Profile and Goals
2. Strengths, Flaws, and One Fear
3. Emotional Beats and Arc
4. Backstory and Additional Notes

These are, in my opinion, the key pieces, the most important information, a writer needs to know about their characters.



Learning From The Best

V. E. Schwab is one of my favourite authors and, as reported in many interviews, events, and podcasts, she asks herself **three questions about each of her characters**:

1. What is this character's greatest fear?
2. What do they want most of all?
3. What are they willing to do to get it?

I love these three questions because they get to the heart of a character and help guide the writer on where the plot should take them. It's as I mentioned before, the character is made up of, not only normal character things like appearances and skills, strengths and weaknesses, but also what happens in the story (i.e. the plot), and the world they inhabit (or the setting in which the story takes place, i.e. worldbuilding).

The plot then becomes a discovery in:

1. How the character gets what they want more than anything,
2. By doing whatever they're willing to do to get it,
3. And facing—or not facing—their greatest fear.

These three questions alone inform so much of the story and the three key elements: character, plot, and worldbuilding.

A world has to include the existence of the characters greatest fear and the plot must address how that character confronts that fear. Another word for plot is basically conflict: internal and external, resolved and unresolved. Without conflict, without two characters, beliefs, or ideas rubbing against another and causing friction, then the story lacks depth and in turn so do the characters.

By creating a character you are really also creating the plot and world in which the character will reside in. All three are connected and important, but learning about each, one step at a time, is far easier than tackling it all at once. So, before you get too overwhelmed, let's return to the main topic: characters, and what you need to know about them before drafting.



Profile & Goals

Profile

A profile is a quick overview of the character. The aim is to capture the vibes, the key motives, or overall personality traits. A few bullet points is all you need. I find this helps when getting into the character's headspace again or you're too deep in to see the forest through the trees. The profile is an easy reference to make sure no one's acting too out of character when writing that first or second draft.

The second piece of a profile is a face claim, meaning I find a picture of a person to represent the character. I use stock photos (Pixaby, Pexels, Unsplash) to find portraits that match the character's appearance as close as possible. This also helps in creating moodboards and other visual

elements to aid in my writing.

This is the profile for Iliza Lysander, my female main character (FMC) in Unnatural Secrets (Work In Progress/WIP).

Profile:

- Abandonment issues.
- Badass.
- Survivor.
- More than a little touch-starved ok, but Oliver's working on it.
- Clever, observant, meticulous.

Five bullet points, all made up of mostly single-words and character traits. It's not much, and it's not meant to be. But let's dig into it a bit.

Iliza is an observant character, she's going to notice details others don't, however she also struggles with abandonment issues, therefore I need to show Iliza noticing these details, but also purposefully not sharing them with others.

She's also a survivor and this is in part because she is so meticulous. She plans down to the last detail to virtually guarantee her own safety. So what happens when she encounters someone just winging it, just wreaking havoc to get a job done? Conflict, of course.

Goals

Below is a list of Iliza's goals, internal and external, and known and unknown because sometimes a character isn't even aware of a certain want, need,

or motivation.

These goals differ from emotional beats in that a goal is a plot-based element, and an emotional beat is a *response*.

Here are Iliza's goals:

- **Goal No. 1:** Iliza wants connection and is tired of being alone despite not wanting to admit it.

This is a known, internal goal, however, it's not one she wants to share. Thus, I use that to create this push and pull between her and the male main character (MMC) Oliver, who is also the love interest. Her internal battle as she attempts to accomplish this goal will inform the emotional beats of the story and ultimately how Iliza's arc manifests.

- **Goal No. 2:** Iliza wants to find out what really happened to her parents.

This is an external goal, but with an internal motivation. Both her parents died somewhat mysteriously and she's never found out the truth, so with the recent disappearances and murders that form the basis of the plot, Iliza wonders if there's a connection between what happened then and what's happening now.

- **Goal No. 3:** She wants to solve the murders and find the truth, even though she suspects the truth is not one she will like.

Iliza is a character who enjoys solving puzzles, it's just how her mind works. Except, as much as she

feels she owes a debt to her community that protected her as a child in a dangerous city, she doesn't want that responsibility weighing on her shoulders. But someone has to figure out what happened and it might as well be her.

The Importance of Goals

A character's goal (or goals) help drive the story forward. They progress the plot and give the character purpose. A story must change the characters within it and one way to accomplish this is by giving them solid goals to try and fail and try again at throughout the story. It goes back to one of Schwab's three questions: what does the character want more than anything?

By creating these goals for Iliza, I've not only given her purpose but motivations. It's not enough for a story to happen to a character, a character must make things happen to the story.



Strengths, Flaws, & One Fear

To understand a character, to give them depth, they'll need to have strengths and weaknesses and fears just like real living people. Unless the character is an infant and the world is brand new to them, they're going to have skills: things they're good at, things they've learned; weaknesses or flaws that hold them back; and things they're scared of, things they'll avoid until the last possible moment and even then they might still try to turn away.

Strengths and Flaws

One of the things I love about creating characters is how a strength can also be a weakness or a flaw depending on the context.

I've written Iliza's strengths and flaws as follows:

- **Strengths:** Heightened senses, determined, secretive
- **Flaws:** Distrustful, disconnected, secretive

I included secretive in both categories because in some cases keeping a secret would literally save Iliza's life, while in others it's more likely to hinder her ability to connect with and trust others. She's so used to moving through life alone, she doesn't know how to move with someone else next to her.

One Fear

As to not give too much away Iliza's worst fear is:

- **Fear:** Facing a dangerous person from her past (who has a connection to her parents' deaths) and losing to them.

She's terrified of disappointing her parents and being unable to avenge their deaths. Her worst fear isn't failure, it's being too *weak* to face the same demons she had to witness as a child, too *scared* to truly overcome them.



Emotional Beats & Character Arc

I create, at most, three emotional beats that happen throughout the story. I don't want just an external or an internal arc, I want the characters to go through both (conflict, conflict, conflict). Their feelings will influence their experiences and their experiences will influence their feelings.

Emotional Beats

Iliza's emotional beats are:

- Her foundation of self crumbles when she learns a certain truth.
- She has to accept care when she's hurt.
- She is vulnerable and honest with Oliver.

How Iliza reacts to each emotional beat will differ, but they do build on each other. The next one is harder for her to accept and act on than the last.

Character Arc

I divide the character arc into the beginning, middle, and end so that I know not only what's happening in each act, but that there is *something happening* and planned beforehand. Each bullet point describes the kind of state Iliza is in or what she has learned. These go hand-in-hand with the emotional beats.

Beginning

- Alone and secluded. She has only herself to rely and depend on. She's had to survive so long by herself that she's not sure how to let Oliver back in.
- She is always ready to strike and never tells the whole truth.

Middle

- She starts to warm up to Oliver on a more personal level after establishing their partnership. With the prospect of secrets coming to light, she just might be able to believe everything will be ok.
- She learns it's vital for others to be kept in the loop and to trust Oliver has her back.

End

- [Redacted so there's no spoilers].



Backstory & Additional Notes

The last two sections of the table are for the backstory and any additional notes. For this WIP, I also have a semi-detailed timeline so I can keep track of what ages the characters were at key moments in history and at present.

The **backstory** provides details about the characters experiences, and also informs the shape of their values and beliefs. It's one thing to have a tragic backstory for your character, but another to flesh out the how and the why.

The **additional notes** section is for any notes I make as I write the story, details that I don't want to forget and be able to easily find later.



Conclusion

Fleshing out character's can be difficult. You're creating a person from scratch and there's a lot involved in that process. However, you don't have to know every single thing. It's a character's values, beliefs, and fears that guide them through their life and inform their decisions. Not to say, of course, you can't have fun with it and learn the tiny details because you want to. This guide is what helps me and I'm hoping it just might help you too.

Below is a copy chart of this very guide for your personal use.

To learn more about Iliza and Unnatural Secrets visit the following link: <https://tumblr.com/notolux/wip-introduction-unnatural-secrets>.

Character	
Profile	
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