

# Scriptwriting for Television

## Part 1: Character

### ***The importance of Character***

Character not usually considered the most important part of screenwriting. Writers would rather focus on story or suspense.

Not true. Character is the basis from which all things sprout. It is the *life* of your script.

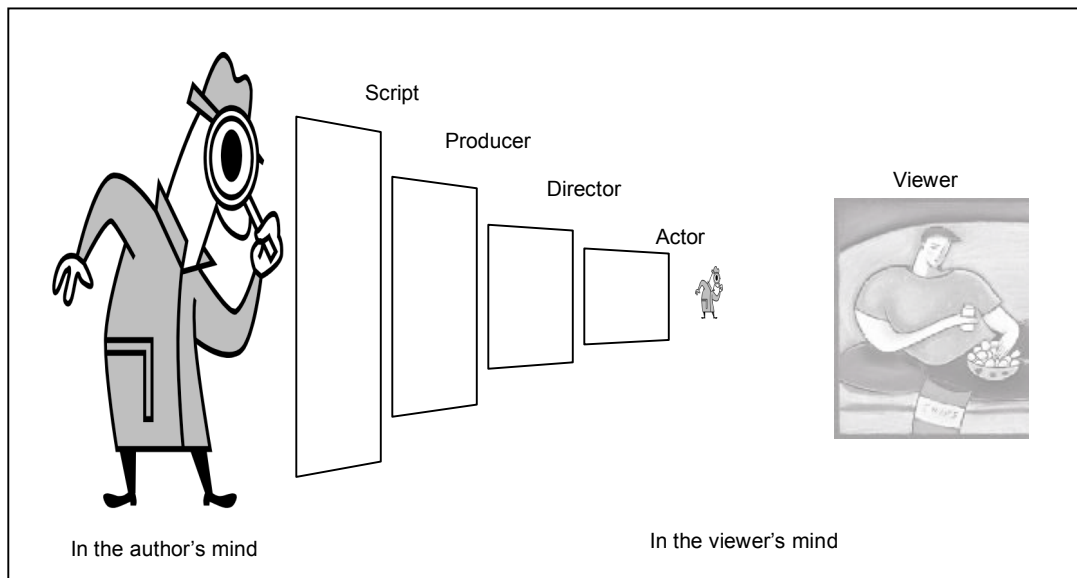
Syd Field: “Character is the essential inner foundation of your screenplay... It is the heart and soul and nervous system of your screenplay” [Syd Field, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*, Delta trade paperback revised edition 2005, p 46]

True characters are what differentiate hack scriptwriting from real, honest and artful scriptwriting.

### ***The Dilemma of Character***

What the writer sees is quite different than what the TV viewer sees.

The “Inverse Telescope” of Television:



A writer is more sensitive to his/her characters than the reader. So, to get your characters through the telescope, they have to be the kind that “make the hairs on your arm stand up” [Madeline Dimaggio, *How to write for Television*, Simon & Shuster 2008, p75 (although she is talking about ideas, not characters, the maxim applies)].

One of the ironies of the “Inverse Telescope” is that caricatures become **more** prominent as the size of the character gets smaller. So be very careful to avoid:

- Racial stereotypes
- Character stereotypes (the Coward, the Jokester, the Ne'er-do-well, etc)

Although you may have a full view of your character, you only have a small window to display your character:

- A specific dilemma (dramatic need)
- Actions, locale and words only (other elements such as camera angles, music, facial expressions are in the hands of the director and/or actor)
- A specific time window

A scriptwriter doesn't have internal dialogue or the ability to limit what & how the information is presented, which are tools of the novelist, to present character

## ***Tools for Creating Character***

Spend time fleshing out the parts of the character the viewer will never see. Syd Field: “KNOW YOUR CHARACTER” [ibid, p59]

Some suggestions by Syd Field:

- Write a biography of your character from birth
- Identify profession, home life & what he or she does when alone
- Free-associate, write in fragments, don't worry about consistency or grammar.

Exercise # 1: Create a character and background.

More questions to ask about characters:

- What is their moral compass?
- What are their priorities?
- What are the mundane, meaningless facts of their lives?
- Family more important for Asians than for Westerners:
  - o identify their family characteristics
  - o Where do they sit in their families?
    - eldest/middle/youngest sibling
    - eldest/middle/youngest generation
- Where do they sit in the social sphere?

Psychology of character

- Having a sense of why people do things helps us understand what people will do in various situations
- Helps us build consistency in character, avoid pitfalls of doing things to advance the plot

- Modern western psychology quite developed in this regard, but is not the only way to understand character
- Psychology, Myers-Briggs, 4 Humors, EQ content
  - o Whatever means you use to construct a character, the audience can use to deconstruct it (often happens subconsciously)
  - o If they find nothing at the end of the deconstruction (i.e. you started with nothing), then they will not invest their emotions in the character.
  - o There has to be something “unknowable” about your character

Other things to note:

- Be careful to differentiate yourself from your character
- Don't become too attached to your character. Sometimes a major change in character is what is needed to move a story from good to great.

## Writing for Pre-existing Characters

In many cases, you will be writing about a character who has an existing history. (e.g. sitcom, drama series.)

Some tools for working with existing characters:

- Need to study character closely
- Identify consistencies and inconsistencies in their character
  - o Consistencies help you identify the character
  - o Inconsistencies provide dramatic tensions
- Separate your reaction to their character from the character himself/herself
- Imagine a back-story behind the character that would be consistent with the actions you do observe
- Remember the complex relationship between the Actor and the Character.
- Show producers always want a way to show something new about their characters.

Exercise 2: Biography of an existing Singapore TV character

Discussion on creating characters.

Exercise 3: Describe an in-between scene that shows character (for the given TV show.)

Some Reading:

Syd Field, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*, Delta trade paperback revised edition 2005

Madeline Dimaggio, *How to write for Television*, Simon & Shuster 2008