What is Your Character’s Arc? Syllabus

Instructor
Alex Sanchez

Quarter: Spring 2022
Start – end date: 8 sessions between March 29 – May 17
Session day/time: Tuesday 6-8:30 pm CT
Course Code and Section: WRIT32407 22S1

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Modality
Remote learning

Course Overview
At the heart of any compelling character throbs a dynamic arc. By analyzing successful examples, studying craft techniques, and doing in-class writing exercises, we’ll learn to create characters that change, grow, and come alive through their own unique arcs.

Required texts
No required texts. Handouts will be provided.

Course outline


• Class discussion/participation: What is a character? What is a character arc? Beginnings and Endings. Plot + Character Arc = Story. What are some models of character arcs? Positive, Negative, Flat; Story Grid’s Internal Genres; Reedsy truth and lies; Hero’s Journey; Virgin’s Promise.
• In-class writing exercise: What is your character arc?
• Video and discussion: Breaking Bad by Vince Gilligan Act 1. What is Walter White’s character arc? What is he like at the beginning? How is he different at the end?
• In-class writing exercise: Choose a character to work with. What are they like at the beginning? List/mind-map who is your character? What are their dreams, hopes, flaws, problems? Reference: Save the Cat ‘Six things that need fixing.’

Class 2: Empathy for a Character.

• Class discussion/participation: What is the role of empathy in a compelling character arc? How to create empathy for your character? How can you make your reader care about your character? Sympathy, jeopardy, admiration, vulnerability.
• Reading and discussion: First pages from various novels.
• Video and discussion: Breaking Bad by Vince Gilligan Act 1. How does the writer create empathy for Walter White?
• In-class writing exercise: List/mind-map how to create empathy and make a reader care about your character?
Class 3: Character Wants, Needs, and Yearning.

- Class discussion/participation: What is a character’s tangible external goal/problem? What is the deep yearning that drives a character to their goal/solve their problem? How does a character need to change in order to achieve their goal/solve their problem? What is the role of wants, needs, and yearning in a character’s arc?
- Reading and discussion: “Fish Cheeks” by Amy Tan. What does the narrator want? What is her deep yearning? How does she need to change in order to achieve her goal?
- In-class writing exercise: What are your character’s wants, needs, and yearning?

Class 4: Antagonists.

- Class discussion/participation: What are the external forces (individuals, groups, society, social forces, nature) and internal forces (flaws, misbeliefs, lies, fears, doubts) that act as obstacles to a character achieving their goal? What is the role/relationship of antagonistic forces in a character arc?
- Reading and discussion 1: “Thank You, Ma’am” by Langston Hughes. What are the antagonistic forces?
- Reading and discussion 2: “The Sound of Summer Running” by Ray Bradbury. What are the antagonistic forces?
- In-class writing exercise: What antagonistic forces must your character overcome?

Class 5: Building Scenes.

- Reading and discussion 1: “The Wig” by Brady Udall. Outline the story points of the scene.
- Reading and discussion 2: “Notes of a Native Son” by James Baldwin. Outline the story points of the scene.
- In-class writing exercise: What scene can you build for your character?

Class 6: Setups and Payoffs.

- Class discussion/participation: What are setups and payoffs? How can actions be used to reveal a character’s transformation arc? How can dialogue be used to reveal a character’s transformation arc? Working backwards from payoffs to setups.
- Reading and discussion 1: “Powder” by Tobias Wolff. Identify the setups and payoffs.
- Reading and discussion 2: Rainbow Boys movie scene. Identify the setups and payoffs.
- In-class writing exercise: What is a payoff for your character? Work backward from a payoff for your protagonist to plant a setup.

Class 7: Point of View, Narrative Device, Perspective, and Voice.

- Class discussion/participation: What is Point of View? Narrative Device? Perspective? Voice? How can each be used to show a character’s arc? To whom is a character telling a story (narrative device)? What is the concept of a ‘container’?
• In-class writing exercise 1: Two-step point of view exercise.
• In-class writing exercise 2: Two part narrative device exercise (teen telling story).

Class 8: Setting and Putting it All Together.

• Class discussion/participation: How can setting be used to show a character arc?
• Reading and discussion: “Letting it Fly” by Joyce Maynard with commentary
• In-class writing exercise: How can you use setting as an obstacle in your character’s arc? As an aid? As a symbol?
• Course review: Putting together all you have learned. Questions/Comments.
• Developing an action plan for your writing.

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Questions? Contact Zoë Eisenman at zme1@uchicago.edu.