

# Creating a Unique Voice for your Character

Stan C. Smith

Some of these ideas and examples are borrowed from the Writers in the Storm blog (<https://writersinthestormblog.com/2021/07/5-steps-to-creating-a-unique-character-voice>) and from the Creative Penn blog (<https://www.thecreativepenn.com/2017/07/15/develop-character-voices>).

It isn't uncommon for authors to gradually get to know their characters as they write the book's first draft. Then, in the second draft, they give the characters the unique voice they have acquired while writing the first draft.

Well, that sounds like *rewriting* to me, and you probably know how I feel about rewriting! Yuck. (Hint: big waste of time... that's my opinion only, of course)

Why not get to know your characters *before* you start writing? (Hint: big time saver)

One of the most important ways to make your character interesting is by giving him/her/it a unique voice. This is an essential element for a compelling story, so why not plan it out ahead of time?

Perhaps the most important aspect of this:

*Allow your characters to be who **they** are, not who **you** are.*

This concept will form a common thread throughout the following set of tips.

We already know the importance of fleshing out a character's background, strengths, flaws, occupation, religious tendencies, philosophies, and all that. Well, the character's unique voice is just as important.

Actually, it's *more* important. Why? Because the voice is what the readers see more than any other aspects of the character (other than perhaps the character's actions).

If you don't give each character a unique voice, they all end of sounding more-or-less the same. They sound like you, the author.

*Consider this:* If you took out all your dialogue tags, would your readers still be able to tell who is talking?

*Consider this:* If you are having a discussion with a group of your friends, and you close your eyes, you can still tell who is talking at any given moment, right?

Well, your readers can't actually hear the sound of your characters' voices, so you must make them each unique in the way they talk, the words they use, how they answer questions, how they respond to anger, how they greet people, and so on. This is what we call a character's "voice."

*Consider this:* When characters have a unique voice, readers remember them and form a connection to them. If they connect to them, they *care* about them. If they care about them, they care about what happens to them. Now you've hooked them on your *story*.

## Simple tips for developing your character's unique voice *before* you start writing your first draft:

### ***How does your character greet people?***

This is a distinctive characteristic for people, and it says a lot about our personalities, where we grew up, and how friendly we are. Consider how you greet people. How do your friends greet people? Do you know anyone who often uses a unique greeting?

If you meet someone in the waiting room at the dentist, and they softly say "Hi," what does that tell you about them? But what if they loudly say, "Yo, whassup!" See how this immediately gives you an impression of personality?

#### Interesting greetings:

"What's happening?"

"Holy crap! How long has it been?"

"Howdy-doodly! Bring me up to date!"

"There's my pumpkin!"

"Waddup Brah?"

"Ghostbusters! Where did you come from?"

"Howdy Einstein! Solved the theory yet?"

The possibilities are endless, and it's a great idea to make up totally new greetings for your characters.

### ***How does your character answer questions?***

Like with the greetings, this tells you a lot about a person. Some people are shy and give brief answers, others are non-stop talkers and deliver a speech for each question.

Keep in mind that dialogue is a great way to deliver background information (without an info dump), so you can't make all your characters shy!

Also keep in mind that once you establish this habit for a character, you can change it to *show* (not *tell*) that something is bothering the character. For example, when a very talkative character starts answering questions with a single word, the readers wonders what's wrong.

#### Interesting answers that reveal a character's personality:

"Yeah, sure. You got any food around here?"

He shrugged. "Nothin' better to do."

"Oh, you didn't know? I should have called you. I'm terribly sorry."

"None of your damn business."

"Sure I did. Joe and I went to that old art theater they just remodeled on Main. They're showing these cheesy old westerns. It was a total blast."

"Of course. You're the boss, applesauce."

Again, the possibilities are endless, and answers are a great opportunity to develop a unique voice.

### ***How does your character respond to problems?***

This is when a person's true personality reveals itself, when a person is faced with a quick decision, and there's no time to lie or contemplate what to do. The response is instinctive.

Some people immediately start solving the problem, others immediately try to shift the blame.

Some people are analytical, others are emotional. Their voice should reflect that.

Interesting reactions to problems:

“I’m not cleaning that mess up.”  
“Okay, walk me through the problem. Exactly what happened?”  
“Screw that—here’s what you do.”  
“I don’t have time for this crap.”  
“Whoa... sucks to be you.”  
“Great! As if this day wasn’t bad enough already.”  
“Well, look at that! This isn’t a problem, it’s an opportunity.”

Endless possibilities. Be creative and come up with something completely original, based on the personality you wish. To give your character.

***Does your character’s voice reflect his/her education?***

Schooling is a big part of education, obviously, but there’s more to it than that. Education includes family life, ethnic background, previous occupational experiences, hardships, and more.

Consider why your characters speak the way they do. Are they ashamed of their graduate degree and therefore try to sound uneducated? Are they a high school dropout and try to sound more educated? Are they ashamed of their cultural accent and work hard to hide it? Do they ask questions a lot instead of making statements because they are afraid of saying something that is incorrect?

Interesting statements that might reveal past education (responses to someone making a mistake):

“Unfortunately, you’ve exacerbated the situation.”  
He scoffed. “Dumb fuck.”  
“Out of the frying pan and into the fiery pits of despair.”  
“Oh man, here we go. Hold on to your butts.”  
“Just relax and get yourself undiscombobulated.”  
“Damn, would you look at that.”  
“Jeeze, ya made things worse.”

Again, the possibilities are endless. Again, be creative. Make your character’s voice completely unique.

***Does your character’s voice reflect where he/she came from?***

South of Houston, where one of our daughters lives, they say “crawdad” instead of “crayfish.” If you’re from Missouri, you say “Missouri.” If you’re from outside of Missouri, you might say “Missoura” (or maybe it’s the other way around. Obviously, people speak differently in different regions (and different time periods).

In my current WIP, *Seven* is a construction worker from southern Missouri:

“Killer question,” he replied. “We might ought to wait until the others reanimate too.”

And *Ember* is an upper middle-class veterinarian from Saint Louis:

(this is narration from Ember’s POV): Anger, confusion, tears, and vomiting were inevitable, and they all occurred in the minutes that followed. Eventually, the cylinder became calm enough for some rudimentary conversation.

Other interesting examples:

“Sweetie, I don’t mean to pry, but you look sadder than a soaked kitten.” She patted the couch beside her. “Come now, tell me all about it.”

She tossed her head and her multitude of tiny braids swayed, free as branches on a tree. “You just don’t get it, man,” she told her mother, dressed in a suit that cost enough to feed a starving village for a week. “You can’t think in that designer strait jacket. I gotta be *me*. I gotta be *free*.”

***Most Important Tips:***

*Allow your characters to be who **they** are, not who **you** are.*

*Plan your character’s voice before you start writing.*

*Come up with your own creative expressions and words.*

**Bonus Tip:**

*Read your story aloud!*