

## Lesson 3: Crafting Anti-Hero Storylines

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### Balancing Relatability with Unpredictability

Crafting an anti-hero storyline requires a careful balance of relatability and unpredictability. The character must be relatable enough for the audience to empathize with their struggles and challenges, but also unpredictable enough to keep the story interesting and prevent it from becoming too predictable.

One effective way to accomplish this is by giving the anti-hero a unique set of motivations and values that drive their actions. These motivations and values may be morally ambiguous or even outright immoral, but they should be consistent with the character's personality and backstory.

An easy way to think about the unpredictable nature of your anti-hero is to think of a situation and what others (or even themselves) might think they would do and instead choose an opposite reaction, behavior, or action. Allow your anti-heroes to surprise themselves with unpredictability and then explore the consequences.

One dimensional characters are easy to predict and often result in boring storylines. We read to be surprised and anti-hero characters are practically built for surprising readers. Use this to your advantage!

Let's look at our examples again

#### 1. **Murphy Mason**

Murphy Mason is a relatable character because she has low self-esteem that she disguises as confidence because of her disability. She doesn't want others to know how vulnerable, so she acts as if she knows everything and doesn't need help to do anything. As a young woman, she faces so many of the same struggles all young adult women struggle with - her identity, her friendships and romantic relationships, her sense of purpose in life, and how she wants to show up in the world. All of these make Murphy a three-dimensional character with relatable qualities.

Her unpredictability comes in many flavors though. As someone with a disability, she constantly puts herself into risky and dangerous situations that she cannot get herself out of without help from others, often coercing or even forcing them to help her at their own detriment. She also makes terrible choices but will shift the blame or causation to others instead of owning up to her own role in the experience. Her shifting alliances also make her unpredictable when it comes to her choices. Sometimes, she will be loyal to someone for all the wrong reasons, or will simply stop being loyal when it begins to affect her own self-fulfilling needs.

#### 2. **Beth Dutton**

Beth Dutton is a woman who faces many internal struggles from childhood trauma to the often dangerous and insidious world she's been raised in on the Dutton ranch. Anyone with a dysfunctional family and childhood trauma can relate to Beth's struggle. Additionally, *spoiler alert*, when Beth discovers that her ability to have children has been taken from her, her deep pain and anger around the issue is sadly a familiar experience for many women. Beth's highly ambitious drive and dedication to protecting her family's legacy is also something many women have found relatable of her character.

Beth's unpredictability shows up in her callous and often impulsive decision making. She routinely makes poor choices and then wonders why things are turning out the way they are. When Beth sets out to achieve a goal, she will often do so at the expense of whoever is in her way or can help her get it. She'll sleep with a man to get what she wants. She'll cross another woman to tear her down so Beth can benefit from her downfall. Beth is also notorious for speaking cruel and hurtful things to others to make a point.

### 3. **Scarlett O'Hara**

One reason Scarlett O'Hara is such a timeless character is because of her relatability as a woman in a patriarchal world that wants to be free and removed from her "womanly" duties. This was particularly relatable to women in the time period the book took place and the societal implications of what it meant to be a woman. Scarlett's tenderness and love of her home and land is extremely relatable to anyone else who has experienced this deep sense of "belonging" to a physical location and having it taken from them. Additionally, Scarlett's ambition and drive is often felt deeply for other women. Even Scarlett's romantic entanglements can feel relatable to women who have endured unrequited love. Scarlett's survival instinct though is what most female readers quote as her most relatable and positive trait.

Scarlett, like the other examples in this workshop, is unpredictable in her impulsiveness and decision making. She often makes decisions based solely on her emotions and tends to only care about something if it directly relates to her. She is manipulative and has no qualms about taking from someone else if it benefits her. She's also a contradictory character -- at turns seeming loyal and then betraying a character.

### 4. **Jessica Jones**

Jessica Jones fully embodies what it means to have CPTSD from her childhood trauma. Her descent into addiction and self-harm to cope with survivor's guilt, her trauma, and the events in her life mirror that of many other women who have endured severe childhood trauma. As a trauma survivor, her inclination to keep people at a distance and put up walls are traits many women possess and struggle with. Jessica's self-loathing and twisted sense of self are common traits for trauma survivors and as such, many women can relate to it. Her cynicism and quick temper also add to the list of relatable character traits.

Jessica's unpredictability shows up in her unconventional problem-solving approaches. Rather than take an "easy" approach or a more conventional approach, she will often rely on her street smarts, her general distrust of people, and her own survival skills to find the solution to a problem. She is also unpredictably tender to certain people in her life, especially her friends. Unlike most of the characters on this list, Jessica believes she deserves nothing and therefore will save or come to the rescue of others before she will accept help or rescue from anyone else.

## **Adding Anti-Hero Pressure**

Another key to crafting an anti-hero storyline is to ensure that the character faces significant challenges and obstacles throughout the story. These challenges should test the character's values and motivations, and force them to make difficult decisions that could have serious consequences.

One way to create these obstacles is to introduce a formidable adversary for the anti-hero. This adversary could be a rival, a vengeful enemy, or a corrupt system that opposes the anti-hero's goals. The adversary should be a worthy opponent, someone who can match the anti-hero's intellect, skills, and determination. The conflict between the anti-hero and the adversary should be intense and dynamic, with each side gaining and losing ground over the course of the story. This will bring out both the anti-heroes flaws but also their strengths.

Another way to create obstacles is to give the anti-hero an intense internal struggle they have to find their way out of. For example, in the show *In the Dark*, Murphy's innate curiosity for the truth is often at odds with how to get that truth. She struggles with knowing that she shouldn't do a certain thing, but internally struggles between giving into that impulse in the name of truth or leaving it alone. She often chooses to give in which create consequences and adverse situations she has to then find a way out of.

One unique aspect of anti-heroes is that because they are so flawed and morally ambiguous, they often create their own pressure or conflicts that enhance the storyline.

## **Incorporating Character Flaws and Moral Ambiguity**

One of the most important elements to creating a well rounded anti-hero is to focus on their character flaws and moral ambiguity. As we've discussed previously, these flaws are often what leads a character down the wrong path or creates major conflicts with in the story.

A character's flaws and moral ambiguity are also what makes them compelling and interesting to read about or watch. Oftentimes, anti-heroes are thought of like a 4-car pile up -- both horrifying and addicting to see -- you don't necessarily want to see what happens, but you also feel compelled to keep watching.

The overcoming of obstacles is often one reason people love to root for anti-heroes. We know they have issues but following their story to see if they can grow and overcome those obstacles is a compelling reason to keep with their story. As an example, Jessica Jones struggles with her addiction to alcohol. Sometimes putting it above solving a client's case. We watch as she routinely indulges in her addiction and faces the fallout from it, yet we keep watching to see if she can beat the addiction.

Morally ambiguous characters also allow us, the audience, to consider what personal choices we would or wouldn't make if we were in the same predicament.

One important aspect to consider when writing anti-heroes is showing the consequences of the character's actions, both for themselves and for others around them. This helps to create a sense of realism and morality in the story, and prevents the character from becoming a glorified criminal or villain. Anti-Heroes are not actually the "bad guy" in the story, rather an extremely broken person who is trying to navigate their situations with the best tools they have (which usually aren't that great).

Overall, crafting an anti-hero storyline requires a careful balance of character development, relatability, and unpredictability. By incorporating unique motivations, significant challenges, and moral ambiguity, you can create a compelling and thought-provoking narrative that resonates with audiences and leaves a lasting impact.

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## **Writing Exercises**

### Exercise #1:

1. Make a list of traits or behaviors that your anti-hero has that would be relatable to readers.
2. Make another list, this time with any unpredictable traits or behaviors your anti-hero might possess.

### Exercise #2:

1. Brainstorm a list of obstacles, challenges, internal struggles or conflicts that your character would have to face as it directly relates to one of their traits.

Example: Jessica Jones goes after one of the villains in the show, but is captured with no way out. The only people who can help she refuses because of her inability to accept help from others.

### Exercise #3:

1. Consider what realistic "flaws" you may want your character to embody. This may or may not be related to the first set of exercises you did with labeling "bad" or "negative" traits. You want to brainstorm flaws that you can take through an entire story with your character and explore it in depth. You may even consider what *you*, the writer, struggles with on a day to day basis to inform the flaws your anti-hero may possess.
2. Consider areas where your character falls into morally ambiguous territory. If you're working on a specific story idea, you could even find ways to incorporate their moral ambiguity toward the outcome or conclusion you're looking for.

Example: Beth Dutton has zero qualms about sleeping with a man to get what she wants or to achieve a desirable outcome. Her beliefs around sexuality and monogamy are morally grey.