

# **Character Archetypes: How to Use Them in Your Writing**



Writer's Digest

# WHAT ARE ARCHETYPES, AND WHY SHOULD WRITERS USE THEM?

By Victoria Lynn Schmidt

*“Archetype: Image, ideal, or pattern that has come to be considered a universal model. Archetypes are found in mythology, literature, and the arts, and are... largely unconscious image patterns that cross cultural boundaries.” —Encarta*

Why should you use archetypes when designing a story? In my experience, almost every writer comes face-to-face with what I call the “page thirty blahs.” You’re writing your novel or screenplay. You have a wonderful idea. You spend days outlining and writing the first thirty pages. Then suddenly something happens. You lose steam. The pages get harder and harder to write. The momentum you had going slows down. Writer’s block looms in the distance, and you lose excitement in the masterpiece you’re writing.

You think to yourself, “Maybe the premise wasn’t that good after all? Maybe I should work on a different story? This one just won’t move.”

Don’t give up on your story. The good news is that most of the time the problem isn’t with your story but with your characters. How can your story move forward if your driving force—character—is running on empty? If you think of your character in terms of the librarian stereotype, you only get a general idea of the character. It doesn’t tell you anything about her motivations, goals or fears. How can you make new, exciting discoveries about your character if she’s nothing but a stereotype or a blank page in your mind? You may have plot points, but did you think about how your character will react to the situations those plot points put her in? This reaction drives the story forward, not the plot points. A character doesn’t decide to go into a burning building because that’s what your plot point says he should do—he goes inside because it’s in his nature to do so.

Have you heard the story of “The Scorpion and the Frog”? A frog comes upon a scorpion and pleads for his life. The scorpion says he will not kill the frog if the frog takes him across the river. The frog asks, “How

do I know you won't kill me as I carry you?" The scorpion replies, "If I were to strike you, we would both surely die." Thinking it over, the frog agrees and halfway across the river the scorpion strikes the frog in the back. As they both start to drown, the frog asks, "Why did you strike me? Now we will both die." The scorpion replies with his last breath, "Because it is in my nature." What is in the nature of your character? Using archetypes can help you discover the answer to this question.

## **Luke Skywalker—Dorothy—Xena—Captain Ahab**

When you think of these characters, almost immediately, a very real sense of who they are jumps out at you. They are not bland one-dimensional characters but real people we can relate to. They invoke strong emotion in us; we want to be just like them or we want to be completely opposite. The stories they inhabit are not what make them memorable; what makes them memorable is the depth of their character, their three-dimensionality. Not every character has to be noble and perfect; Xena's dark side makes her complex, human, and interesting.

All of these characters embody a universal archetype, which helps them to inhabit a strong character arc. A character arc shows the changes a character goes through during a story. Every great protagonist learns and grows from her experiences within a story. Your character needs to emerge at the end of your story as a new person who has learned something from her journey.

The master archetypes discussed in this book are grouped into thirteen male and female supporting characters and thirty-two male and female heroes and villains. In addition to these profiles, you'll find information on the archetypal patterns for thirteen supporting characters.

Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) in *Star Wars* can be seen in the Male Messiah archetype, while Captain Ahab from *Moby-Dick* is seen in the King. Dorothy (Judy Garland) in *The Wizard of Oz* definitely embodies the Maiden archetype, while Xena (Lucy Lawless) in *Xena: Warrior Princess* fits the Amazon perfectly. Although these characters are much more than their archetypes, archetypes inspire the discoveries and details that make them interesting.

## **What Are Archetypes?**

To a psychologist, archetypes are mental fingerprints revealing the details of a patient's personality. To a writer, archetypes are the blueprints for building well-defined characters, be they heroes, villains, or supporting characters.

In Jungian psychology, there are seven master archetypes as seen

in the Greek goddesses and gods. This book looks at these archetypes from the perspective of the writer and adds one additional archetype of the Messiah, the powerful enlightened being who is not explored in Jungian thought. Movies such as *The Matrix* exemplify the popularity of this archetype in stories and films.

Archetypes are an invaluable tool often overlooked by writers. By their very nature, they force you to delve deeper into your characters, to see them as not just "Character 1" or "Librarian" but as a type of person who responds in very specific ways to the conflict within your story. All too often, writers create several characters who act exactly like the writer himself; archetypes help you to avoid this.

In using archetypes, the essence of your character is narrowed down so she jumps off the page at the reader instead of blending in with all the other characters. Each archetype has her own set of motivations, fears, and cares that move her as well as the plot forward.

Once an archetype blueprint is selected, family, culture, class and age shape how the character expresses that essence.

It's important to know every aspect of the character in detail in order to make decisions about what she would do in any given situation the plot throws her into.

## **Archetypes vs. Stereotypes**

Beware of books that present stereotypes as archetypes, which is exactly the opposite of what a writer should use to create exciting new characters. Stereotypes are oversimplified generalizations about people usually stemming from one person's prejudice. Archetypes aren't formed from one individual's view of people but from the entire human race's experience of people. Judgment and assumptions are absent.

Describing a character as a "typical librarian" asks you to join in the assumption that all librarians are quiet spinsters. This description limits the character's growth and range of possibilities. What are the hidden fears and secrets of this character? What motivates her? An archetype will help you answer these questions.

Stereotypes may be used to describe an archetype but a stereotype is only a shallow imitation, a small piece of the bigger picture you can use to create your characters.

## **Working With an Archetype**

### **EXPAND YOUR VISION OF YOUR MAIN CHARACTER**

Pick a character you want to write about. If you've written a story already,

then pick a character you would like to spice up in a rewrite. Before you select an archetype, figure out how you already envision this character.

Your hero stands invisible before you like a cartoon character waiting to be drawn. Close your eyes for a moment and imagine this character coming to life in front of you as you answer these questions:

**Face**—Is it full or narrow? Why? What can we learn about her history, age, occupation, and class from her face? Are her eyes perpetually sad looking or harsh?

**Skin**—How dark is it? Is it the soft skin of a pampered man or the rough skin of a blue-collar man?

**Hair**—Is it long, short, curly, or stringy? Most mothers cut their hair short due to lack of grooming time in the mornings with a baby around, unless they can afford a nanny.

**Age**—What is the best age to convey the struggle of this character? If your character is a divorced mother who has given up her livelihood to raise a family, then it would be much more dramatic for her to be starting over at forty years of age than at twenty. See chapters ten and twenty-four for information on a character's life stages.

**Body Type**—Is she a full-figured woman with the hips of a mother who bore five children? Is she lean and muscular like an accomplished athlete?

**Style**—Is he trendy or twenty years behind? Does he dress too old for his age?

**Your Impressions**—Do you like this character? Why? Find out why you want to spend the next year writing about this character. It will help you to persuade the reader to love him, too.

## WHICH ARCHETYPAL MODEL DOES THIS CHARACTER EMBODY THE MOST?

Now figure out the basic personality elements of this character. These questions will help you see the archetypal pattern emerge.

- Is she introverted or extroverted?
- Does he solve problems using instincts, logical thinking, or emotion?
- Does she want to change the world?
- Where does he live? Describe the bedroom. It's the most private and secretive room in the house.
- How does she feel about her appearance?
- How does he feel about family and children?
- What does she think about men and marriage?

- What are his hobbies?
- What type of friends does she have?
- What does he consider to be fun?
- How does she feel about her sexuality?
- Does he need to have control of his environment?
- What do other characters say about her when she leaves the room?
- Does he take life seriously or act like a kid most of the time?
- Where would she spend a Sunday afternoon? By herself in the bookstore? At a luncheon party with friends? Looking over files for work?

Now you have basic answers to help you see which archetype your character fits into most. As you review the archetypes in the following chapters, you'll begin to see which archetype seems "right"—it will be the archetype that matches your character's traits and will help you grow your character in new ways. Later you'll be able to see if you have character elements that don't "fit" the archetype. Consistency is what makes a character feel alive to a reader. For example, we expect a Father's Daughter to have some trouble in a room filled with children. If she were to embrace such a situation and be perfect at it, she wouldn't feel real at all.

Think of J.C. Wiatt (Diane Keaton), the Father's Daughter, in the movie *Baby Boom*. It took her a while just to figure out how to change a diaper. Also think of Detective John Kimble (Arnold Schwarzenegger), the Protector, in *Kindergarten Cop*. He has major headaches when he's with children. He treats them as if they were in military school, and it takes him a while to learn how to deal with them properly.

## HOW TO USE THE ARCHETYPES

Now that your hero stands drawn before you, she needs to have her personality colored in. Along with a character sketch and insight into archetypal psychology, the following chapters provide the tools to help you answer these questions for each master archetype: What does your character care about? What does she *fear*? What *motivates* her? How do other characters view her?

## What Does Your Character Care About?

In a general sense, all characters care about something. Traditionally, writers are asked the following questions to define a character—"If your character was stranded on a desert island, what are the three things he would want to have?" or "What would he miss the most if his house burned down?" Each archetype has a different set of values that dictates what these things are. In some cases, what the hero cares most about isn't a material object or person but a way of life. An Amazon woman would rather die than give up her independence, like the heroes in *Thelma & Louise* do. A King would abandon his children if they refused to obey his rules.

You want to know what this character cares about not only to tell us who she is but to create obstacles by placing the thing she cares about most in danger as she tries to reach her goal. While a character cares deeply about reaching her goal, she may care more about saving a friend's life and will let the goal slip out of her reach to save her friend. Think of Xena (the Amazon) from *Xena: Warrior Princess*. The plotline may take her to a village she has to save from an evil warlord, but suddenly Gabrielle, her trusted friend and soul mate, is kidnapped. Xena will drop everything to save her even if it means destroying the village.

Don't let archetypes dictate the plotline to you. Because a character cares deeply about getting married, like the Matriarch, it doesn't mean you're a slave to writing a plot that deals with marriage if you choose this archetype. Whatever plotline you place your character in, this desire will filter into the dialogue and subtext of your scenes and chapters.

## What Does Your Character Fear?

What would give her nightmares? If she heard a noise in the dead of night, how would she react? What would she envision is making the noise?

The best tests a character can come up against stem from fear. It's much more suspenseful to see a character who is deathly afraid of water jump into the ocean to save a loved one than it is to see an Olympic swimmer do the same thing.

The fears a character possesses come from the psychological aspect of their archetype mixed in with their past experience. For example, the Businessman prefers city life and civilization. Combine this with a fear of wild animals due to a camping accident as a child and you have a character terrified of the outdoors. Perhaps he confines himself to his home in the city and the four walls of his office. One day his boss asks him to

travel to a remote country area for an account he's working on. Since his job is what he cares most about, he is forced to face his fears.

Ask yourself what happened to this character at a young age to create this fear. You can then sprinkle this information to the reader along the way.

## What Motivates Your Character?

Linda Segar's book *Making a Good Script Great* outlines the seven character motivators that "explain what drives us, what we want and what's at stake if we don't get it."

They are:

- **Survival**—The basic need to live and survive.
- **Safety and Security**—Once basic needs are taken care of, we need to feel safe, secure, and protected.
- **Love and Belonging**—Once we have a home, we desire a sense of family or community or connection. Unconditional love and acceptance.
- **Esteem and Self-Respect**—Is earned love and respect for what you've done in your life, to be looked up to and to be recognized.
- **The Need to Know and Understand**—The search for knowledge. We have a natural curious desire to know how things work and how things fit together.
- **The Aesthetic**—The need for balance, a sense of order in life, a sense of being connected to something greater than ourselves. Can be spiritual.
- **Self-Actualization**—To express ourselves; to communicate who we are; to actualize our talents, skills, and abilities whether or not we are publicly recognized.

Each archetype resonates with one of these motivators in a special way. Archetypes themselves are very connected to these motivating forces—they drive characters to do the crazy things they do, as you'll see in the coming chapters.

## How Do Other Characters View Your Character?

How do your character's clothes and desires fit in with her archetype? How would we recognize this archetype on the street? For example, an Amazon woman would prefer to wear comfortable clothing, like sweatpants, while a Businessman would choose a plainly designed suit.



What do other characters say about him behind his back? How do they read his actions and opinions? Are they afraid of him? Are they jealous of her? Do they have an accurate view of him? Will this character allow others to get to know her or does she hide her true self?

## Nontraditional Uses

Be creative when using the archetypes. They are merely meant to be guides. For example, when I say the archetype known as the King—a man who loves to be in control, who's neat and organized, who leads others, gives advice, etc.—it would be easy to think of someone like Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini) from *The Sopranos* fitting in with this archetype, but Jerry Seinfeld from *Seinfeld* fits this archetype as well. Everyone comes over to his house and seeks his advice; he's always in control; he's neat and organized. His character is a comedic twist to this archetype.

Think of the Amazon archetype; Xena, Nikita (Peta Wilson) in *La Femme Nikita*, and Lieutenant Ellen L. Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in *Alien* all fit this archetype but so does Gracie Hart (Sandra Bullock) in *Miss Congeniality*. She's an Amazon woman who's forced into entering a beauty pageant yet knows nothing about hair, makeup, or style. Be creative with the archetypes.

## Which Archetype Should You Choose?

If you've developed your story already, consider how different it would be with each of the different archetypes in the lead role. Pick three archetypes and write a one-page outline of your story for each type. You may be surprised at all the new twists and plot points you come up with based on an archetype's fears and desires.

Remember to pick an archetype that has room to grow the most as a result of the obstacles he or she faces in your story. Put a King into a story where he loses control of everyone. Put a Father's Daughter into a story that takes her into the woods and the wilderness. Archetypal characters must learn something from the experiences you give them so they become more than just their archetype.

To begin, select an archetype that interests you and see if using his fears against him would be fun and challenging. It may even be comedic.

## Combining Archetypes: Is an Amazon Always an Amazon?

Essentially, we may have many archetypes within our personalities but

one is usually dominant. Within each archetype I ask, “What happened at an early age to cultivate this archetype in your character?” There is usually an event during the developmental years that causes us to adapt to survive, the way we adapt shows our dominant archetype.

When we are under any type of stress, this dominant archetype always takes over. A Nurturer can believe in independence and equality but that doesn’t make her an Amazon. Does she act to enforce these beliefs? Or are they just part of her backstory? In the major scenes is she nurturing or speaking out? Basically, we can all believe in saving the rain forest, but how many of us tie ourselves to a tree and fight for it like an Amazon would?

Likewise, an Amazon who raises children, lets say, doesn’t cower when faced by the villain at the end of the story because, at heart, she’s still an Amazon.

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Once you’ve drawn your character outline and colored in the foundations of his personality, you’re ready for the final step of plotting and outlining the character arc in the journey section of this book.

## Exercises

- If you haven’t done it already, pick out three archetypes and write a one-page outline of your story for each one. Pay attention to how each archetype can change the plot or add new twists to it.
- Write two pages, long hand, on why your character is the archetype you have chosen. If he’s The King, write something like this: He loves to have as much control as possible especially over his home life. When he goes to work, he frequently yells at the young computer-savvy kids in the office who make him feel stupid and inadequate for not knowing about the latest software.
- Let your character talk to you. Write one page in first person letting the character tell you how she feels about the goal you’re giving her.

## WANT MORE?

For more on specific character archetypes of antagonists, villains, supporting characters and more, check out [45 Master Characters](#) by Victoria Lynn Schmidt.