

25 THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT PROTAGONISTS

by Chuck Wendig

Ahh, the protagonist. The main guy. The top dog. The *mover-and-shaker* of your story. Feels like it's time to crack open the protagonist's ribcage and get a good long look at his still-beating heart.

Another list of 25, incoming. Check your six, and please enjoy.

1. PRIME MOVER

The protagonist is the prime mover of the story. He shapes the tale and is in turn reshaped himself. If you can remove the character from the story and the story still happens in the same way, then what you've written is not a protagonist so much as "some schmoe who wanders through events like an old person lost at the mall." Activity over passivity. The character should *act upon* the world, not merely *react to* the world. Put differently: the character is driving the car; the car is not driving the character.

2. YO YO YO IT'S MC PROTAG IN THE HOUSE

Generally, the "main character" and "protagonist" are the same — that isn't an automatic, however. A main character can be the narrator telling the story of a protagonist. But, unless you're a particularly talented writer, that's probably going to suck a bucket of bubbly hippo spit.

3. WUZZA WOOZA HERO BUZZA BOOZA QUEST?

Yes, blah blah blah, your protagonist is a "hero" going on a "quest." Strike this language from your vocabulary, at least at the outset. It's not that these terms are wildly inappropriate — given certain modes of genre-writing, they are the hats the protagonist will wear - but for now, let's pretend that a protagonist is more complicated and nuanced and *sophisticated* than the overly-simplistic "hero going on a quest" allows. Even characters existing in a fantasy realm or fighting, I dunno, *space bees in space*, should all be written as real people with real goals and real problems. Real people are not heroes. Real people do not go on quests. Let the audience call the protag a questing hero. You should dig deeper.

4. REPLACE THE 'K' WITH A 'V'

The old saying is that the protagonist should be *likable*. That we should want to go out and grab a soda with him and paint our nails and giggle. Put that out of your head. Forget *likable*. *Likable* is not a meaningful quality. The audience *says* that, but they don't *mean* it — otherwise, they wouldn't be interested in the likes of Tony Soprano. Or Lisbeth Salander. Instead of *likable*, aim for *livable*. Meaning, we need to find this character compelling enough to *live* with them for the duration of the tale. I don't want to get a soda with Lisbeth Salander any more than I want to get a soda with a Bengal tiger. But I'm happy to watch them do their thing.

5. THE WORST CRIME YOU CAN COMMIT. . .

...is create a boring protagonist. I'd rather *loathe* the protagonist than be bored by him. If your character has all the personality of chewed-up cardboard, I'm out, I'm done, I'm hitting the eject button. And don't try any of those excuses — "But the world is exciting! The plot is zing! Bang! Boom!" No, no, no. Don't even pretend that's an excuse. The *protagonist* is why we stick around. This is the problem with the Everyman protagonist, by the way — recognize instead that we're not all John Q. and that the Everyman is a false notion and embrace what makes each person interesting as opposed to what makes us all one slack-jawed superorganism.

6. COMBAT LANDING

I need to know who your protagonist is right out of the gate. Don't mess around. It's like a combat landing — drop hard and fast out of the atmosphere. From the first five pages of your book or five minutes of your script, I need to know why I care about your protagonist. Dally not, word-herder.

7. THE ABILITY TO ACT UPON THE WORLD

I want to read about a character who can *do* something. I don't want to read about some dude who has no marketable skills — “I'm really good at watching **Wheel of Fortune**” is not a compelling reason for me to stick around. I don't care if he's a ninja, a lawyer, a detective, a doctor, a boat captain, or Captain Doctor Detective Stormshadow, Esquire — I want to know he is *in some way* capable. Who wants to read about an incapable ninny? (Be advised, however: *capable* is not the same as *perfect*.)

8. STANDARD QUESTIONS MAY APPLY

The four cardinal questions: Who is she? What does she want? What conflicts and/or fears are standing in her way? And what is at stake (stakes as in, *what will be won or lost*) if she fails?

9. THE THREE BEATS OF DOCTOR PROTAGONIST

At the bare minimum, track the protagonist's character arc by plotting three beats — these beats indicate change (positive or negative) in that character. Werner goes from *self-destructive* → *loses everything* → *turns life around*. Roy-Anne goes from *cloistered farm-girl* → *dragged along on crazy adventure* → *world-wise but cynical*. Bobo the Hobo has an arc of *homeless otter whisperer* → *half-robot hobo-machine* → *destroys world in staticky burst of cybernetic rage*. ... okay, maybe not that last one. Point is, track the way the character changes for the better and/or the worse across the swath of the story.

10. CHANGE IS MORE INTERESTING THAN STASIS

Storytelling is the narrative accounting of how one thing becomes another. It is a fictional accounting of a *change of state*. The protagonist is the arbiter of this change and without change, we have a narrative structure that's basically just a straight line with a period at the end of it. In your story, either the world changes the protagonist or the protagonist changes the world. But something *must* change.

11. THE TWO FACES OF CHANGE

A protagonist either changes gradually over time as he encounters new events and other characters *or* he changes dramatically in response to a dramatic situation. The degree of change must match the degree of the events that urge that change — you can't have a protagonist whose girlfriend breaks up with him and next thing you know he's throwing babies into the shark tank at the local aquarium. “NOBODY LOVES ME AND NOW I HATE BABIES RAAAAR.” You must seek out believability by way of consistency — and, when consistency breaks, empathy. A protagonist who suffers trauma changes drastically because we expect and allow that change. We must accept it. To some degree we must even expect it.

12. ARE YOU AN INNIE OR AN OUTIE?

The protagonist tends to have an inner story and an outer story. The internal tracks the protagonist's emotional, mental, and spiritual state, where the external story tracks the character's actions and movements and corporeal health. The external story is obvious because, duh, it's external. The internal story is hidden on purpose — exposing it to the light makes it feel twee, cloying, artificial. This is how we are as humans: our physical lives are plainly seen but our inner existence is guarded, concealed, hush-hush. The two stories also don't need to go the same way: a character who karate-kicks all the villains to death reaches a positive outcome in his external story, but his internal story may be one of guilt and strife over the violence caused by his karate-wielding death-hands.

13. THE NECESSITY OF THAT ONE BUTT-KICKING MOMENT

We want to see the protagonist do something awesome. Sure, it can be some amazing karate kung-fu stuff, but it can just as easily be him telling off his villainous mother, or graduating high school when the odds were stacked against him, or saving a baby penguin from the slashing knife of a serial killer. A small version of that moment can come early (the Blake Snyder “Save the Cat” beat), but toward the final act of the story we need to see this again — crank the volume knob to Maximum Awesome.

14. THE D&D ALIGNMENT CHART IS NOT THE WORST THING IN THE WORLD

This is *overly* simplistic, but bear with me — the D&D alignment chart (Google it!) can help get you started in terms of determining the shape of your protagonist’s actions. Does the character lean more lawful, or more chaotic? Is she neutral, or does she take sides on either side of the moral spectrum? WILL SHE DO BATTLE WITH THE CATOBLEPAS, OR THE DREAD MIND FLAYERS? Okay, maybe not so much with the **Monster Manual** stuff, but I think you get the idea.

15. KNOW WHICH WAY THE CHARACTER WILL JUMP

Some authors will go deep into a protagonist’s history and chart every breakfast she had since she was but a snot-glazed toddler. Do that if you’d like, but in my experience it’s best to dig deeper into the choices the character might make. In other words: know what way the protag’ll jump in any given situation. Who she *was* should work backward from who she *is* — at least, for you, the writer. Knowing how she’ll behave and what choices she’ll make will inform the history necessary for the protag to have gotten to this point. By the way, “protag” is short-hand for “protagonist.” All the kids are using it. Just yesterday a 12-year-old was like, “Hey, what up, Protag!” Or maybe I have wrong. Maybe he was like, “Hey, what up, you weird old guy!” Same thing. To-*may*-to to-*mah*-to.

16. PAINTING WITH SHADOW: THE POWER OF THE ANTAGONIST

The antagonist opposes the protagonist not just once but throughout. In this way the antagonist helps define the protagonist in the same way you invoke a shape by coloring in everything but that shape. Note that the antagonist needn’t be another character — it traditionally is, yes, but any persistent conflict can be truly antagonistic. A looming house foreclosure, a cancer diagnosis, a tornado made of biting squirrels.

17. SIGN UP FOR THE PROTAGONIST CLUB

Yes, Virginia, you *can* have multiple protagonists. Multiple “main” characters just assumes that you have several characters pushing and pulling on the story. Any ensemble piece or story with strong multiple-POV characters could be said to have several protagonists. They should get equal time and have equal effect on the world lest they be demoted to the cast of supporting characters. AKA, “People who might get eaten by alligators or dispatched by Klingons somewhere in the story.”

18. TIME TO PRACTICE YOUR MOST INSIDIOUS LAUGH

I like Moo-hoo-*ha*-*HA*-*HA*-*HAHAHAHA* — start slow and quiet and then go loud and fast. Anyway. My point here is, you have to hurt your protagonist. You really do. You have to be willing to cut them to the marrow physically, emotionally, spiritually — you know the protag well enough to know what and where his most vulnerable ~~tickle-spots~~ pressure points are. This works because you’ve drawn a connection between the audience and the protagonist. The audience cares — or, at least, wants to remain compelled by the character’s journey. By messing with the protagonist, you’re messing with the audience. Which makes you sort of a jerk, so, way to go. Jeez.

19. FAKE-OUT, SUCKER

You can have a “false protagonist.” You set up one character as a protagonist, the audience buys into it, then you switch it. Often by killing that false protagonist and revealing the real one. It’s kind of a jerk move but we’ve already established that you’re a jerk. The key is to be an *effective* jerk. Or something.

20. THEME & CHARACTER: CAR CRASH, OR BRAIDS? YOU DECIDE!

The protagonist interacts with *theme* in one of two ways: intersection or interweaving. At an intersection, the protagonist crashes head-on into the theme in a perpendicular 20-car-pile-up. The protagonist is at odds with the theme and rails against it, eventually overcoming it, overturning it, or succumbing to it and proving it out. *Or*, the protagonist and theme are interwoven together, wherein each reflects the other.

21. THE DEFINITION OF “MARY-SUE”

You will find multiple definitions of a “Mary-Sue” (the male version is called “No Gnews is Good Gnews with Gary Gnu”) — what you need to know is that your protagonist should not be a pap, waffling, twee stand-in for your most perfect ideals. An unconflicted, untroubled, unrealistic icon of flawless goody-two-shoedness is a terrible protagonist no matter what you call her. So, don’t do that.

22. WE LOVE CHARACTERS FOR THEIR IMPERFECTIONS

We want characters who have flaws. Flaws are interesting. We like to watch flaws. Maybe we see them as representative of our own damaged goods? Maybe we just like to watch awful stuff. Anyway. Flaws offer a practical component: they make for the source of excellent conflict — and, in fact, represent a nearly-perfect internal self-generating conflict because the flaw forces the protagonist to act as his own antagonist. HOLY POOPFIRE! DID I BLOW YOUR MIND? Ahem. Sorry. Some protagonists are subject to a “fatal flaw,” which is a tragic-in-the-truest-sense weakness that forever threatens to undo all the good that the protagonist has done. My fatal flaw is writing POOPFIRE in all caps.

23. DISCOVER THE SADNESS

That sounds like a new Sarah McLachlan song, doesn’t it? Anyway. I’ve posited this before and I’ll posit it again: sadness lingers at the nucleus of every story. It may not be dominant or prominent but it’s there — and I think you can find the same thing inside the protagonist. Every protagonist should be wounded in some way; the wound may be a small but potent one or it may be the all-consuming spiritual equivalent of a sucking chest wound, but it should be present. In this wound grows sadness, and by digging for this grief struck little pearl and unearthing it you will expose a critical part of the protagonist’s makeup.

24. FIND YOURSELF IN THE PROTAGONIST

To discover what lies at the heart of your protagonist, you should endeavor to find some shared human experience, some *critical emotional core sample* that is a match betwixt the both of you. It can be anything, of course — “We’re both orphans! We both have anger issues!” — but it helps to channel a bit of yourself into the main character. If only so you create that sense of empathy needed to grasp the protagonist’s motives, fears, and goals.

25. THE SUPERGLUE OF SHARED STORY

And therein lies the secret. When we respond to a protagonist it’s because we see a bit of Our Story in Her Story. That’s the glue that affixes us to the character, that makes us want to cling to him or her like a cuddly little marmoset. The protagonist can be wildly different from us as long we can see in him some aspect of shared human experience, some piece of driftwood bobbing in the great big chaotic ocean that is that protagonist’s persona. (This is, I’d argue, why we respond to Luke Skywalker but not to Anakin — it’s easier to see ourselves in Luke than his father.) Don’t keep the protagonist at arm’s length by giving her traits and experiences understood by only a small subset of the audience. That’s not to say the protag cannot be a serial killer, alien, or star fighter pilot — it just means that some part of that character’s makeup must reach across the abyss between *story* and *audience* in order to create common ground.