

Avoiding the Character Cliché

By

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The very best way to avoid character clichés is to simply not have the nemesis in your young adult book be a beautiful, fashionably-dressed cheerleader. If you give that a miss, you will be ahead of many, many books out there, and probably thousands of manuscripts being submitted to agents and editors right now. This has to be the single most overused character cliché I have come across in all my reading of middle grade and young adult fiction (I read about 100 books per year).

Most often writers put great effort into their main characters, and maybe a few others close to the story, but minor characters and antagonists often fall into the cliché category. Of course, there are many other character clichés besides the cheerleaders. If you read enough, you can identify them yourself. The real question is: *what to do about it?*

Agent and writer, Donald Maass, has a whole workbook filled with exercises designed to help you strengthen your manuscript. One of the things he stresses is to go beyond your first, or even your second or third idea.

For example, let's say the mother of your character needs to have some sort of professional job. One where she works a lot, dresses in designer clothes and can usually be found talking on her cell phone. What's the first vocation you think of? *Lawyer? Talent Agent?* Quickly, make a list of ten careers that meet the above parameters.

Here's my list from when I tried this for my WIP:

1. Lawyer
2. Talent Agent
3. Clothes designer
4. Architect
5. Real estate agent
6. Some sort of CEO
7. Professor
8. Art director
9. Museum curator or gallery owner
10. Paralegal who thinks she indispensable

So which is the most interesting? Donald Maass says that it's probably number ten, and after I did this exercise, I ended up changing the mother's character from a full-fledged lawyer to a law school dropout who settles for being a paralegal. This changed everything from the plot to how my MC interacts with her mother. You have no idea what direction you might go in if you push yourself beyond your first choice.

Another way that it's easy to fall into creating clichéd characters is when we make up a character that stands for everything our main character despises. It's a really easy way to show who your character is, but it also can be very lazy.

Let's say the antagonist colors her hair and has a tan, and your MC refers to her as a "Bottle blonde" and "Fake n' bake". True, it shows that your MC disdains those things. But is this the best use of your antagonist?

What if instead, she had everything your main character actually wants? I'm not talking about "the boy" here. I mean admirable things like good grades, or lots of real friends who really like her. Doesn't this make her more interesting? Admiring someone who makes your life Hell is much more conflicting than simply disliking the person because they stand for everything you hate.

The other thing I suggest is studying minor characters as you read. You will find that many of them are either clichés or flat. Some writers who create fascinating minor characters are Jerry Spinelli, Meg Cabot, and Susan Juby.

I recently participated in a writing workshop taught by the author Susan Juby (*Alice, I Think, Another Kind of Cowboy, Getting the Girl*) and she told us that the character of Alice was inspired by a minor character that she read about in someone else's novel. I love that idea because I often find myself thinking, "Wow! I wish I knew more about the best friend!" or "the long lost cousin."

While I don't know if I'll ever write about another author's character, I do know that my new goal is to create such interesting ones that Susan Juby wants to write a whole novel about one of mine! Drop the clichés and trust your characters. They might surprise you.