

## “Dipping a Character in Paint”

### Four Notebook Entries to Get a Writer Started

The best fiction centers around realistic, multi-dimensional characters (traditionally called **round** or **dynamic characters**). Most writers rely upon their own knowledge and observations of people to create real characters for their fiction. These four types of notebook entries can provide writers the raw materials to build a character.

**Entry 1:** Who is the most peculiar, colorful, or unique person you know? Describe this person in detail without using a name; try to capture all the little things the person does, says, believes that makes him or her different. Also tell how the person looks, what he or she wears, and even how others think about the person.

**Entry 2:** What are your “idiosyncrasies”? Idiosyncrasies are little mannerisms (things we do unconsciously) that make us the way we are.

X puts his fingers together like a spider doing push-ups on a mirror; Y hums softly while walking around the room and runs her fingers through her hair whenever X says something stupid.

What are some of your idiosyncrasies? Be specific; take time to reflect upon yourself.

\*DECODE: What is the “ID” in psychology? It is part of the unconscious mind that is “instinct”; it pushes us toward doing what we want for fun and pleasure. EGO is the reasonable, thinking part of a person that reacts to the outside world. SUPEREGO mediates between the ID and the EGO; it is part unconscious and part conscious.

**Entry #3:** Take 10 minutes to observe someone outside this classroom. Then, in your writer’s notebook, write down every detail you can about this person. Draw a portrait of the person in words. How does this person look? What are his or her idiosyncrasies? (If you don’t see any very clearly, *predict* what they might be.) What is the person’s history? If you don’t know anything about the person, then create a history. What does the person smell like? Can you come up with a simile or metaphor about this person?

**Entry #4:** Extended entry . . . Take time to use the observation entries you have already done: the class discussions and books we have done in class; and your own observations to create a character. Remember, you can draw on your previous entries to create this character. Provide this “person” with a . . .

- Name
- Physical description
- List of objects that tell about him or her
- List of idiosyncrasies he or she exhibits when certain things happen (when he or she is sad, scared, challenged, etc.)
- History: where has this person been; what things have happened that really make this person who he or she is

### Tips for developing a character from Phillip Hensher

**Ask yourself:** ‘What’s in that rickshaw-puller’s pocket?’:

In response to a young man who was writing a piece of fiction about a rickshaw-puller, but having a hard time fleshing out this character and conveying the man’s “socioeconomic context,” Mr. Hensher had this to say: “I think you need to start not from the socio-economic context, which is going to lead into a generic figure, but from an idea of specific and surprising. What could be the most surprising thing that a rickshaw-puller might plausibly rest his feelings and ambitions in?”

The dread of fiction is writing about the generic, the standard, the thing that has nothing to distinguish the individual. There’s always something surprising about the individual human being. It might just be what they keep in their pocket, it might be the picture that they pasted on the place that they happen to be living at the moment, it might be something quite unexpected.

If you’re going to be the sort of person who says, ‘There is nothing that a rickshaw-puller could own that could possibly be interesting then maybe you’re not the sort of person who should be writing a novel about a rickshaw-puller.’”