



Building a Character Wall

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For any great novelist, defining your cast of intriguing characters is the key to the success of your story. So how do you maintain the *image* of your characters—both their physical attributes and their personality? It's easy! Build a *Character Wall*...paper by paper.

A *Character Wall* is simply a character **profile** wall. It displays letter-sized pieces of paper featuring photos and key points on the cast of characters in your novel or story. It enables the writer to visualize his or her characters more fully, to give each cast member a face and to bring them to *life*. It ensures that the basic facts of each character's existence are easily accessible. And it keeps the author consistent with those facts.

There is nothing worse than reading a novel and having the handsome hero's hair color change from sandy brown to black, midway through the story. Or visualizing a ragged z-shaped scar running down the left side of his face in Chapter 2, only to see it miraculously change into a c-shaped scar running across his lower lip in Chapter 15. Of course, we hope that the editor catches these inconsistencies, but in essence, the author would be better off to have an easy and accurate reference. The *Character Wall* is exactly that!

Let's look at the key elements of building a *Character Wall*:

- You will need a wall—any large blank space near your computer where you can tape up a letter-sized pieces of paper for each **key** character in your novel.
- Label each paper with one character's name.
- Find photos of actors who you think physically resemble your characters, and add a small photo to each paper.
- Label the papers with each character's key attributes: profession, age/birthday, marital status/children, best friends and personality traits.
- Label each character's physical attributes: height/weight, color of hair/eyes, scars/tattoos, speech impediments/physical disabilities, speech/tone.

On the *Character Wall*, keep the main character(s) in the center. As you add the major secondary characters, try to position them in order of their relationship to the main character. Only add a character if they are important to the story or if you need background information or need to create a history, etc. Minor characters like the pharmacy clerk or the gas attendant won't be necessary unless they are truly part of the story. Consider them extras or background actors, unless they speak more than three times. Sometimes it is helpful to add a strip of paper leading from one major character to another, to help clarify their relationship to each other. Be sure to make notes on the strip.

Some authors have a difficult time naming their characters. Use the White Pages of your telephone book if you run out of ideas for unique names. Figure out whether each character has a nickname or shortened version of their name and note that on their paper. Pick names that fit each character and their specific role or personality. If your lead character is a tough, butch-like cop, don't name her Isabella Maria Fiori. This name would be more suited to the dead swimsuit model that your cop finds in the Presidential Suite of the Fairmont Royale.

Choosing the photos of the actors to play the roles in your novel isn't always easy either. Most often writers already have a clear picture in their head as to what the character looks like. If you can draw, then go ahead and create your character. If not, then go online and search the celebrity sites. Pretend you are a casting agent. Whom would you cast in the role of the mad scientist in your conspiracy theory novel or the dimwitted secretary in your murder mystery? One of the easiest ways to find your actor is to simply watch television. If you are looking for a face to play your *private eye*, then check out some of the detective shows. If you need a child, watch a good family show—if nothing else but to find that face. Find the face that inspires you, that makes you believe “Yes, she *is* Del Hawthorne!”

As a Canadian author, I have written three novels using the *Character Wall* method, and I recommend this useful tool to all fiction writers. I selected Charlize Theron and Johnny Depp as the *Character Wall* models for my most recent novel, *The River*, a nail-biting techno-thriller that is scheduled for release in late September 2005. In fact, if I have my way, Theron and Depp will become the actual actors in the movie version of my novel. My advice: “Put your *Character Wall* papers into a binder after the novel is finished, for easy reference and sequel info.”

During your novel's progression, there will be many tidbits of information that you can add to each character's profile—secrets from their past, important dates and more. Don't forget to list any bad habits your character might have. If she is a compulsive hand washer, make a note. If he's a nose picker, the note on his paper will act as a reminder and keep you consistent. As each character develops, continue to add any new information to each sheet. Plots change and characters mutate. They grow, they learn things, they react. List anything important to the story.

The advantages of building a *Character Wall*:

- Not only will a *Character Wall* help to keep your characters organized and in your face, you will start to really *see* them. And once an author can see her characters, there is a better chance that the reader will visualize them also.
- Choosing an actor to represent these characters will give them a voice, a stance, a personality, and *life*. No novel can survive without characters with depth, heart, soul and spirit.
- For anyone writing a novel that might spawn a sequel or could become a series, the wall will act as a condensed information booth. Papers can be compiled into a folder or binder, and stored for future reference.

- And last but not least, you will have at your fingertips an entire casting list for the movie version of your novel—once Steven Spielberg gets a hold of it and reads it!

A *Character Wall* is an invaluable tool that will assist you in staying focused and on track. It will keep you true to the personalities and physical attributes of your novel's cast of characters. And like Rome, it won't be 'built in a day', but will evolve over the duration of the creation of your novel. If you build it, you will see your characters, hear them and breathe with them. So build that *Character Wall*—paper by paper—and watch your characters *come alive*.

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*Cheryl Kaye Tardif, a Canadian mystery author, is the author of three published novels: [Whale Song](#), an emotional mystery; **Divine Intervention**, a scorching psychic suspense; and her newest release, **The River**, a terrifying techno-thriller. www.cheryltardif.com*