1. What is the main character's gift?

Gifts can be the thing that allow the characters to survive. As readers, our interest is piqued and we begin to wonder how the gift will be employed to help the character survive. The character may not know or recognize the gift but the writer should know it.

2. What is the character's flaw?

It is helpful if the flaw is the negative extreme of the gift. (For example if the gift is logical, maybe the flaw is unfeeling.) Flaws are important because readers need the character to get into trouble to move the story along.

Don't worry that a flawed (read: human) character will be unsympathetic. Flaws will actually make them more sympathetic because we will be able to identify with them. Of course, a really negative character will be hard to identify with. That's why their gift is so important.

3. What does the character want?

This is important because it gives us something to care about and vicariously fight for through the protagonist, especially if we sympathize with them. This can even help us identify with an unsympathetic character because basic wants humanize people and help us feel connected to them. For example, if a father desperately want to take care of his family, we can understand his motivation for doing illegal and immoral things to get money.

Wants can change over the course of the story, of course. They should change, to keep the story interesting. Make sure to start with a strong want from the very first page! It might not be the main "want" of the story but we need something to attach to and route for.

Think of want as something tangible and active, rather than deeper and more emotional. For example, finding a romantic partner, having a child, saving a house from foreclosure, overcoming an illness, rescuing a loved one, escaping a violent regime are all wants we can identify with and that have the potential to be built into an active storyline. The more active the main character is, the better.

4. What does the character need?

Unlike the want, which the character is very aware of, the need is the thing that they are unaware of, the thing that is necessary for them to achieve in order to grow and reach the culmination of their arc (something we will address next time). The need is important because it teaches the reader about the qualities that are essential to surviving in the world, but only if the character almost doesn't survive.

Survival may not be literal — it can translate to: the things one needs to be happy or succeed at a certain quest. It can also translate to: the qualities one needs to be a better person, such as self-love, courage, kindness, the ability to face the truth, etc.

If you are writing an anti-hero, they may not ever find what they need. However, we, as the reader may come to understand, through the character's actions, the importance of the qualities or traits that he or she never achieves.

5. What is the character arc?

To define the arc, think of the state of mind that the character is in at the beginning of the book and their state of mind at the end. Often it is from a "negative" state to a "positive" state (i.e. fearful to brave, isolated to connected, selfish to loving) unless you are writing a tragedy. Think of your book as a series of scenes of conflict between the main character and the antagonists that push the main character toward the culmination of their arc.

Think of arc as flaw to need (from above).

6. What is the inciting incident?

Every story begins with an inciting incident that sets the main character or characters on the journey that will occupy them throughout the narrative. This incident will disturb the status quo and upset the balance within the main character's world. It typically occurs within the first 25% of the book.

7. Who is the antagonist?

Some people argue that the story problem or the protagonist's inner struggle is the antagonist but others believe we must embody opposition in an actual physical foe. A strong, dimensional antagonist adds tension, conflict and most importantly forces the protagonist to change.

Ask yourself, How does my antagonist interfere with what my protagonist character wants? How does my antagonist force my protagonist to achieve what they need? This is important because it provides obstacles to the character goal, raises the stakes and gives the reader the dopamine rush as they wonder, what will happen next?

8. How does setting help define or contrast with the story problem?

This is important because it gives a specific context to the story. The reader can apply the story to their own world more easily if the world of the story feels real, plausible and specific. A clear setting helps the reader navigate their own world more clearly. Even though a story is set in the past, its story problem can be relatable to today's audiences because parallels must be drawn.

9. What style of writing will you use to tell the story?

How is the character reflected in the style and through the POV? How is the story problem reflected? Comparisons to other books (or movies/TV) can be helpful here. How are these books similar to your own?

10. What is the dark night of the soul?

The dark night of the soul is a moment, usually at the end of the second act of your novel if you're writing in a three-act structure (~75% in), where all seems lost and your protagonist must confront what Eckhart Tolle calls "a collapse of perceived meaning."

11. What is the climax?

A climax is a dramatic turning point in a narrative—a pivotal moment at the peak of the story arc that pits the protagonist against an opposing force in order to resolve the main conflict once and for all. The climax is one of the most important literary devices in plot structure; it's the moment when the story arc bends and begins its descent. (Typically around 90%.)

12. What is the theme?

Can you state it as a cause/effect sentence? If…then… Can you state the theme in terms of character arc? For example: If we're vulnerable, we open ourselves to love.

BONUS Q: What is your main character's *wound*? (Often this wound created or contributed to their gift/flaw)