

Character Arcs: 7 Steps for a Character's Growth Journey (925 words)

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Figuring out a character's arc is, for me, the key that unlocks the plot of the whole book I'm about to write.

In my opinion, plot is the obstacle course through which your protagonist grows. Of course, your protagonist doesn't always need to end up a good person, or even a changed person. But ideally, your protagonist has learned something about their world that changes everything.

So what are the important steps of a character's growth?

Well, that'll look different for every book, of course, so this is by no means a rubric for beats you *must* hit. Maybe your character's development is smoother or slower or bumpier. Your mileage may vary on these character beats I talk about below, but at the very least, I hope it helps get you to a starting place for plotting your character's growth!

1. Character Introduced

Use action to help us get to know your character. They rescue a cat from a burning building—they're reckless but deeply compassionate. They steal candy for a baby just for fun—they're thoughtless, ambitious, and selfish.

To get to know your character, I wrote some [interview questions](#). Maybe that'll help you figure out their starting point and their fatal flaw they must overcome!

After you've written this part, I want you to go to **Step 7**. I've found it's much easier to know the starting and ending points of your character's development. That way you know the ultimate direction of your character's arc, and you can steer the plot in the direction of that end point.

2. Character's Worldview Challenged

Something, some event, or some person, the catalyst, has come and crashed down on your character's perception of themselves or the world. Dorothy steps into Oz and realizes her world is much bigger than she thought. Your character is bitten by a radioactive Chihuahua and realizes that they live in a world where they have superpowers. Your character loses their best friend because, they're told, they've been a selfish jerk for all their friendship. OH NO.

3. Character Pursues Change

In light of this new world that your character finds themselves in, what changes do they make? What do they decide to change about themselves? Do they resolve to use their powers? To be a selfless person?

Whatever it is, have it be active. Your character going around and talking about how they will use their superpowers isn't as effective as it would be when we *see* them trying and failing to use their powers.

4. Character Doubts and Regresses

Your character is just hitting their stride in their new world when BOOM. A failure. They're doubting themselves. They're doubting their new philosophy.

They're no good at being a superhero. Their attempt to be selfless has horrifically backfired.

At this point, your character wallows in their failure, and maybe even starts to fall into previous patterns of behavior.

5. The Old Ways Aren't Cutting It

HOWEVER! Reverting to how they were before will show them, and the audience, that they've grown out of their old ways.

Your superhero character is bored and unsettled with a normal, unhelpful life.

Your selfish character feels *even worse* being selfish because now they're aware of their behavior.

6. Re-commitment to New Ways

Now that your character is aware of their own need for change, they're going to recommit to it with all they got.

They say, okay, I'll join the Super Squad, even if I didn't think I'd be a good superhero before. And they do it!

They say, okay, I'll do something sacrificial, because I've learned that I'm not satisfied with being selfish. What, then, do they choose to do? This is the crux of "show don't tell"—what is something that your character can do to really *show* the audience (and the other characters) that they're changing?

7. Character's Ending Point—Proof of Change (or lack thereof)

Compare this point to Step One. Would your character at the beginning recognize themselves now? What do they look like? How do they see the world? Have they recognized or even overcome their fatal flaw?

I like the ending image to be a twist on or a mirror of the opening image, especially if it displays your character's growth. If your book opens with your character on the outside of a party, hating themselves, it'll show SUCH a transformation if it ends with them in the middle of a party, proud of themselves.

Or maybe the opposite—maybe they start on a throne, proud of themselves, totally happy with what they have... and end up in some dungeon with nothing, but content with where they've come.

Having the starting and ending images be night-and-day really helps display the drastic change your character has gone through. Or, even more tragically, maybe they *haven't* changed. Maybe the ending image is eerily similar to the opening image. Maybe everyone around your character has changed—but they haven't grown at all. How sad! But equally intriguing.

RESOURCES

From here, you can figure out the events of the plot that help these character-growth moments come to be. [This post](#) on Amanda Foody's blog helped me a lot with this, as well as Lisa Cron's book [STORY GENIUS](#), which I highly recommend you check out. It really underlines the idea I touch on here—that your book is pushed forward by the lessons your character will learn along the way.

Good luck, and have fun putting your character through their new obstacle course!!