

How to Edit Your Book Using Character-Driven Details

Roan Parrish | handout | RWA2020

Character-driven detail: a detail that reveals something about a character.

How do you find them? They are a combination of what's happening at the moment in your book + a character trait + what your character would notice/think about in that moment.

Exercise #1: Finding Character-Driven Details:

A character is approaching the Halloween party where they're about to meet up with a friend they haven't seen since high school, fifteen years ago.

1. Pick one of the character traits below.

A character who touches things as they walk past them	A character who is an expert at telling when someone is lying	A character with a very suspicious worldview, who always assumes the worst
A character who always speculates about what other people are thinking	A character who is extremely self-conscious about their recently-erupted pimple	A musician character who is attuned to what things sound like
A character who isn't able to walk very far without stopping to rest	A character who is used to people being very kind to them	A character who has lost their memory and so doesn't know much about themselves

2. Write down 3 detail sentences about the Halloween party scene that will REVEAL THE TRAIT of the character you chose. *Example: "In every mask, no matter how gruesome, Dora saw a smile."* (Can you tell which trait that one reveals? Yep, it's a character who is used to people being very kind to them.)

3. Turn to the person next to you. [Or, ya know, do it over chat with a friend!] Exchange detail sentences. See if you can guess which of the character traits each other chose from the detail sentences

4. Now try it again with a different character trait.

Exercise #2: Editing Your WIP with Character-Driven Detail

1. Pick a character from your current work in progress.

2. Write down three of their most defining character traits in the style of the examples above.

A.

B.

C.

3. Now pick a scene from your work in progress. For each of those character traits, write down three character-driven details that you could include in that scene in order to deepen the sense that the reader is seeing it through your character's eyes. [Note: it doesn't matter if you're writing in first or third.]

1. A1. B1. C1.

2. A2. B2. C2.

3. A3. B3. C3.

4. Now, write down one thing that we consider *typical* but that isn't true of your character. *Examples: an artist who doesn't care about color; an entomologist who is terrified of spiders, etc.*

5. Based on #4, write down a detail that you should *not* include. *Examples: an artist who doesn't care about color would NOT describe a scene using color words.*

6. Edit your scene by incorporating the nine in some of the character-driven details you just came up with (and excluding the one you negated in #5, if you find you used it).

You should now have a scene that is more immersive for your reader and more revelatory of character. You might also see sentences or paragraphs you can cut from the scene now that you've done this editing work with character-driven detail.

Now, if it made that scene better, imagine doing it with another, and another, and another. Imagine emphasizing the resonances of theme throughout the whole manuscript. Or creating themes that are in tension with one another across alternating points of view, adding to the friction between your characters.

You can do all of it without telling, without info-dumping, without being heavy handed. You can do all of it through character-driven details.

I'm happy to answer any questions you might have—hit me up on twitter:
twitter.com/RoanParrish

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