

9 Ways To Develop Your Erotic Character

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*Summary: For good quality adult writing, developing characters beyond types is absolutely vital. Experienced readers are not satisfied with types and demand the qualities that make *all* fiction great; they do not want to compromise, even for sex stories.*

How important is character to erotic writing? The sex story genre is hardly known for its deep characters or intricate plots. Even in "literary" erotica, the focus is still usually on the sex and atmosphere, not the story.

In my experience as a reader and editor, most erotic writers still rely on general types for their characters. To build readers' excitement, they focus on scenarios with built-in tension. The characters are created to serve the scenarios and exploit the possibilities for arousal.

For example, a writer might start with this: "What if a priest lusted after one of his untouchable students in his religion class?" The situation spawns a number of possible conflicts, such as:

- Priests are supposed to be celibate, but this priest is tempted by the succulent flesh of his young student.
- The student is underage, and the priest is a teacher; he's supposed to protect and guide his student.
- In their religion, no one is supposed to have sex before lifelong commitment.

Most writers would race through character introductions and setup so that they could get to "the good stuff." They'd probably design the plot to include a satisfying number of sex scenes, and they might plan to include a plot twist or antagonist. They'd definitely exploit the fear of discovery to make the sex scenes hotter.

Hey, that sounds pretty decent, doesn't it? You may be wondering what's wrong with it, because it seems like it could shape up to be fast-paced, full of sexual tension, and stuffed with high-stakes adult scenes. But consider this question: what makes an erotic story, or *any* story, truly exciting?

The priest / student scenario would be exciting to some people -- readers who were particularly invested in that setup, or newcomers to reading adult fiction. When you're just starting out, everything is exciting, even cliches, because you can't know what's overused if you've only read a few stories. But new erotic readers grow up quickly. They become part of an experienced, demanding audience that wants more.

What experienced readers want.

For experienced adult fiction readers, the sex acts and situations won't appeal on their own. Scenarios like "priest vs. lust" or "teacher vs. underage student" no longer produce arousal just by existing. Even incest and same-sex attraction isn't automatically exciting. At first, people are excited about reading *any* explicit material. They are fresh and receptive like a boy looking at his first Victoria's Secret catalog. These initiated readers go in search of more and more exotic stuff, but the novelty of each new twist or kink eventually wears off. Many of them grow bored with the genre because it's just not giving them what they want.

A mature sex fiction reader wants what *any* reader wants... what makes *any* story worth reading... They want to care about the characters and "play along" with the story in their minds. Including the sex scenes.

People don't want to "read" a story at all. They want to *experience* it; they want to feel along with the characters and react to the story events on the characters' behalf. Readers use the writer's words to construct a story in the theater of their minds. To do this successfully, readers need to emotionally invest in the characters, so that the reward, "the

story experience," is greater. The greater this reader-character bond is, the more satisfying the story experience will be.

As proof of the audience's desire, look at the popularity of erotic fanfiction. Whether or not you read it, the *millions of visitors* flooding these websites can't be ignored. These readers want to have adult story experiences with characters they know and love. For some readers, no original story can come close to the seven-volume bond they have with the witches and wizards of Hogwarts, or the seasons and seasons of Star Trek.

An erotic story without a strong bond is like a one night stand. It's nice while it lasts, but ultimately empty and unsatisfying. The reader won't have any desire to revisit the story because it won't have any reread value.

An adult story *with* a strong bond, though, is like a rewarding relationship. It is complete and satisfying, but takes real work to form. That work is done in the area of character development.

Readers want to align with a unique, extraordinary character, one they would like to get to know, that they can sympathize with, that has depth, history, individuality, *personality*. If the reader doesn't want to bond with your character, they won't care about what happens in your story. Even the most descriptive, taboo, or imaginative sex scenes will get yawns.

If you develop "real characters," though, your reader will align with them and have a heightened story experience, especially when they read your explicit scenes.

There are many, many methods of creating characters, and there's a decent chance that you're already skilled at making up fake people. These exercises are designed to help you find out information about your characters that you already know, deep in your mind, but it just hasn't surfaced yet.

Use them as an easy place to start and see what you turn up; even just a quick, half-assed job will do you a lot of good.

9 quick character-building exercises.

1) The 5 Senses

Imagine meeting your character for the first time, and reach out with all five senses. For example, if your character is an "emo boy," he might...

- Smell like expensive hair care products.
- Taste like expensive hair care products! (Or toothpaste, cigarettes, red licorice, Diet Mountain Dew, Carmex lip junk, whatever you can come up with.)
- Have a quiet voice with a city accent. He'd also probably be constantly plugged into his iPod so you'd be able to hear faint strains of Dashboard Confessional or A Change Of Pace coming from his headphones.
- Wear tight jeans, a small white t-shirt, a black hoodie, a faded belt, and have a spiky black asymmetrical hairdo.
- Feel bony, lanky, and radiate heat through his clothes. Or maybe his hands are always cold. His hair would definitely be stiff with product, but also heavy and glossy from hair dye. He'd probably have a smooth face with very little stubble.

You are bound to fall into stereotypes when you do this. Question them - sometimes they're valid, sometimes they're not. For this example, I presented a typical emo kid outfit. I had to ask myself, "Am I just being lazy? Should I think about this a little more?" I decided to stick with the outfit because the emo image is so important to being emo. But for the purposes of this exercise, let's think about what could be changed to make it fresh.

What if he had blond curly hair or only wore sandals, even in the dead of winter? What if he refused to have any tattoos or piercings? What if he was black, Native American, or had a beard? Any of these would help me develop this character because I'd have to explore the reasons for the deviations. Just spend 30 seconds on each sense and see what happens. It always helps me.

Why this works:

Using a unique sensory profile of your character makes readers feel like your character is "real." Readers respond to real characters. This exercise is fantastic preparation for writing your sex scenes, too. Instead of leaning on worn-out phrases like "strong muscled body" and "large warm hands," you get to construct fresh phrases that only belong to your story world. This immerses your reader in your sex scenes, which is exactly what you want. Your scenes will be more arousing because of their sensory freshness and originality.

2) News Headline

Choose any major news story and think of how your character would react to it. Even if your character is jaded or apathetic, it takes an act of discipline to ignore such things as Hurricane Katrina, 9-11, presidential elections, and celebrity deaths. Everyone is constantly exposed to news, even if they don't read the paper.

Whenever I do this exercise, I often don't know the answer. That tells me that I have more work to do on my character. I like to use three different kinds of news stories to get a more complete picture.

Why is this important for a character in an erotic story? Usually it isn't directly relevant to your story, but it will give you some ideas. For example, let's say that the character is a 35 year old executive woman who lost her husband and only child in a fire a few years ago. She would immediately think of them when she saw a news story about the devastating California Wildfires.

She would probably feel sad, lonely, and isolated, which might make her seek company in the local drinking establishment. After all, what's she got to lose? She's already lost everything that mattered to her. When she takes a good-looking stranger home to her solitary apartment, her responses might be uninhibited and reckless. Or maybe the man she meets would remind her of her dead husband.

Or, let's say this same woman is a political figure, and her family is intact. She sees a headline: Mayor Johnson Caught With Homosexual In Public Bathroom. Guilt and dread make her intestines knot up because she, too, is having an affair. Even worse, it's with her cute, female assistant. Their scenes together will have emotional intensity due to not wanting to get caught - not only by her husband, but by the press. Everyone's under moral scrutiny these days. If word gets out, it could mean the end of both their careers.

Why this works:

You will learn so much about your character's attitudes and values, and that helps you predict your character's actions. This will save you from those mid-story blocks when nothing you write seems to ring clear.

3) Pocket Dictionary or Thesaurus

This exercise is useful when you're just starting to develop your character. I use a pocket thesaurus and just flip to 5 to 10 random words. Whatever I get, I try to connect it to the character in some way. A pocket dictionary or thesaurus is best because it contains only the most common and helpful words, words you can connect with. Using the emo boy (let's call him Ryan) as an example, here's what I found:

- **Harm.** I thought of *self-harm* at first, as in "He's a cutter!" I don't like that; it's laughable and far too obvious. But maybe he's the one who causes harm. Maybe he has an explosive temper and gets into fights. For an erotic character, someone like that would probably be sexually intense in some way; both sex and fighting point to a passionate character.
- **Count.** This could mean math, but it's quite a juvenile word. He could be so bad at math that he still needs to count things on his fingers. But count could also mean something related to music. He could be an aspiring emo musician, or possibly even a famous and already-established musician. That would work, because musicians are often passionate and volatile... and sexy.
- **Skilled.** All right, he's a skilled musician, not a garage-band wannabe. What about a skilled lover? It seems too easy to assume that because there's an assumption that all good musicians are good lovers, too. Maybe he's still a virgin and waiting for "the one." That would probably lead to a romantic story and sex scenes with high emotional stakes.
- **Heritage.** Where did this character come from? What are his roots? Is he following in his musician father's footsteps? Maybe his father never made it as a musician, so he's made it his life goal to get famous. Or maybe he was supposed to become a doctor like his specialist surgeon father, but it turned out that his artistic inclinations were too strong. He left home with \$20 and a guitar as soon as he was old enough, throwing away his easy ticket to a bright future. People's heritage has a lot to do with their attitudes on life, and it extends to sex as well. If he had a strict religious upbringing and was taught that sex before marriage was wrong, it would be a big deal for him to lose his virginity before marriage. If I was writing a romantic story, he could wait for "the one." Either choice would raise the emotional stakes.
- **Supplicant.** He could get into major trouble and have to return home to ask his parents for help. Or he could run into an incredible guitar teacher and have to beg to become a student. He could turn out to suck and have to humble himself enough to learn. If he is a proud or arrogant person, he would probably have a hard time making a humble request in any situation. Maybe he feels the need to submit to a lover and become a supplicant sexually. If he's not a naturally humble person, what would drive him to do that? There's a lot of erotic potential when you consider all these traits together.

When you do this technique, something strange often happens: you will see patterns and common threads in the random words you choose. Sometimes, you may get words that just feel wrong. Trust your instincts; you know more about your character than you can articulate.

Why this works:

This technique is great for generating new characters, but it can also help you get unstuck with an existing character. You will be able to hold up each word and ask, "Does this fit?" Do this 10 - 15 times, and you will learn a lot about what matters to your character. Once you know that, you can create scenes and conflicts that will raise the emotional stakes as the story develops.

4) Significant Childhood Event

Almost everyone has significant events from their past that changed their lives and still influence their personality today. General areas are:

- Traumas, such as accidents or losses

- Past loves, especially first loves
- Advice from important mentors, relatives, or teachers
- Recognition, winning, or awards
- Cool or interesting jobs and life experiences
- Near death experiences
- Hardship, illness, or poverty

An example from my own life is when some of my friends started playing classical violin. I thought it was so cool, and I'd always been jealous of the rich kids who got piano lessons, so I also took it up. I stuck with it because I liked it and going to college with an almost full ride performing arts scholarship.

I ended up changing my major after deciding I didn't want to be a professional musician, but the discipline of studying classical violin has been essential in shaping my own character. When I have to do something hard, I pump myself up by thinking, "Hey, I played violin well enough to get into a good school for free. What I'm doing is easy compared to classical music."

Next, let's look at the woman character I created. She's in a high-profile political job, having an affair with her female assistant. She is supposedly straight, at least married, so she would have to either be a secret lesbian or have an open mind.

As it happens, she had a teacher she admired in 5th grade, Miss Cartright. The young politician-to-be went to her teacher's house one day to sell Girl Scout cookies, and discovered that Miss Cartright lived with a female lover. But because she admired her teacher so much, she didn't react with disgust, but thoughtfulness and acceptance. In fact, she was intrigued. This left her open to the possibility of sleeping with another woman.

As for Ryan, the musician, he once snuck into the hospital to watch his father work. He was horrified at what he saw! Blood spraying everywhere, equipment going haywire, convulsing bodies on the table. He remembers his father at home, weeping in the dark on the days he lost a patient. Ryan resolved that he would never, ever become a doctor, no matter how much his father tried to pressure him into it.

I admit that this exercise can be tough. Often, the pasts you make up will seem contrived and too perfect: "This can't be good, I'm just making this up!" This technique definitely takes some practice, but it is well worth it. If you need help, look at your own life for examples.

Why this works:

Characters need pasts to be fully formed. A character with no memories or thoughts of the past seems hollow and depthless, but a little memory will help form a strong reader-character bond. You don't need to go overboard and create elaborate flashback scenes just for the purpose of proving your character has a past.

Knowing which significant events shaped your character will also help you out of mid-story blocks because you'll have an established pattern to work from. "If he was traumatized by cats in the past, then he'll totally panic when he first sees the leopard-woman..."

5) Stereotype, but...

This is a useful technique for starting a character. Let's say I'm writing a story with a young female vampire, but I don't have any more ideas. She will, of course, seduce hapless victims or drain them dry, leaving a trail of broken hearts and bodies. The stereotype of female vampire in my mind is:

- Long dark hair and pale, beautiful face
- Tragic or dramatic story of how she "got turned"
- Focuses on survival but longs for death
- Red full lips and sharp white teeth
- Tall, curvaceous and seductive
- Low voice, possibly with a mysterious foreign accent
- Mesmerizing eyes of an unusual color, such as silver, amethyst, or topaz
- Wears figure-hugging feminine clothing in rich dark colors

There are no surprises, everything is as it should be. If I were to write a story using this character, though, I would most certainly get bored. I would end up writing an unimaginative story full of cliches and uninspired dialogue.

The "stereotype, but" formula helps turn a stock character into a fresh one. I want to twist the stereotype character into something fresh, so I take one of the traits from the list above and stand it on its head.

- She looks like a beautiful, tall woman, but she's really a cross-dresser.
- She got turned in her senior year of high school, and her fondest desire is to play soccer with her team again.
- She works as a night security guard. After all, a vampire's gotta earn a living!
- She's homely and it's really hard for her to seduce victims.
- She smokes like a chimney and has a 200 year old smoker lady's voice.
- She talks a mile a minute with a bubbly, high voice.
- She has a horrible sense of fashion or she's a total prep.
- She's a fantastic pastry chef.

You probably get the idea. Stereotypes are useful because it's human nature to generalize. Starting with stereotypes is natural; however, you shouldn't end with them. This technique will help you develop your character beyond the starting stereotype and keep her fresh and interesting.

Why it works:

When you use stereotypical characters, experienced readers don't invest themselves. "Oh look, another tragic vampire. Yeah, yeah..." The reader won't bond with your character; she feels like she's read this before, so your story will leave her cold. Everyone who reads a lot of fiction has experienced this.

By including a fresh twist on an old stereotype, your character becomes unpredictable, and your reader will pay attention. "This is different, this might be worth reading more." You will need more than this twist to have a fully-formed character, but it's a great place to start.

6) Fight

What would make your character get in a physical fight? Not just an argument, but a knock-down, drag-out exchange of blows? If you find out what spurs your character to violence, you know a lot about her.

And how would she fight? Would she be a complete sissy, or would she have secret ninja skills? Would she decide to go for it and swing for all she was worth, or would she try to dodge and stall until she found a way to run away?

Let's take the woman in Washington. She doesn't seem likely to solve problems with her fists. She's in a public job and she probably wants to avoid any news attention because reporters might discover her affair. Plus, she's a

woman and probably was told to "be a lady" and "girls don't fight." But everyone has their boiling point. What could be hers?

- She could have a sister who knows how to push her buttons. Sisters fight more than brothers, and they fight dirty.
- She could have an irrational "hot button" like someone stealing her parking spot or stealing the last donut in the office's kitchenette.
- She could hate her boss and beat her pillow up at night, pretending it's "that bitch."
- She could fight on behalf of someone else, probably her child. Mothers will do anything to protect or avenge their young.
- Someone could betray her. Someone could discover her secret and expose her affair. She'd find out who it is and claw their face off to get even for destroying her life.

For some characters, fighting will be a deep stretch. Physical violence is somewhat rare in civilized societies and it may not be realistic for your character. You'll have to dig deep to get to a plausible answer; in the example above, it took me 20 minutes to come up with those. Only the last one has an aura of potential to me, and it uncovered some dramatic possibilities.

Why it works:

If you do this exercise successfully and get some decent material, you've given your imagination a workout. It helps you understand your character's deep emotional make-up and gives you some good starting points if you need a really high-stakes scene.

7) Restaurant

Imagine your character walking into each of these places:

- A sketchy Chinese joint
- A fancy bistro or haute cuisine restaurant
- A family eatery

Now answer these questions:

- What would they order?
- Why are they there?
- Which one would they feel most at home in?
- Would they worry about the price?
- How would they tip?
- Do they have any allergies or would they ask for substitutions?
- How are their table manners?
- Would they eat there alone?

Let's walk through this with the Ryan character. He goes to the Golden Phoenix, which has the Grade B health inspection certificate in the dark coated window. The air is humid and smells like peanut oil, and the sounds of clanging, scraping, and refrigerator hum is the only music. He walks up to the little window where you order. The chef looks up, face shiny with sweat and grease, and shouts, "Numba two?"

Ryan nods and sits at one of the card tables in the seating section. The metal folding chair creaks when he leans back and stretches his legs out as far as he can. As his order is prepared, he stares at the only other customers, two

Asian students. Then, he stares into space. "Oda up!" shouts the chef, and the boy digs a \$10 out of his wallet and exchanges it for the white bag of food. Without a word, he leaves the shop door jingling on his way out.

Later that week, Ryan dresses in a more formal version of his usual attire. Now he is wearing a pale gray button-down shirt with a black tie, black pants, and a black leather jacket, and he is seated at a table at Quattro, a trendy new bistro. He is sitting up straight as a board, and he watches the door. His leg shakes under the table, making the dishes vibrate.

He balls his hands up into fists when a conservatively-dressed woman comes in and speaks to the host. As she comes toward him, he relaxes his hands and ducks his head to make his black hair hang down over his face. She puts her mini tape recorder between them on the dove-gray tablecloth. "Hello, Ryan. I ordered some appetizers for us while we get to know each other," she says with a little smile. He doesn't smile back but reaches for his thin-walled water glass and takes a big gulp, ice and all.

Why it works:

Getting your character out and about will make him seem more real to you. If *you* think your characters are real, you'll write them better, and your reader will bond with them better. Also, if you write little scenes like the above examples, you will get practice writing your characters in a story setting, not just making character profiles.

8) If you only do one exercise from this list, do this one: Sexuality.

In erotic stories, characters have sex. That's obvious. But your character's inherent sexuality is separate from what he does in his actual sex scenes. Sexuality is part of *personality*, and it starts in the mind. Sexuality is expressed in thoughts, feelings, and reactions - not necessarily by having sex. A character can have well-developed sexuality but do nothing physical in a story, just as how a virgin who hasn't even had her first kiss can have a raunchy imagination.

To write uniquely arousing sex scenes that originate from your character, you need to work through his sexuality. Here's a partial list of things to consider:

- His secret fantasies, especially if they make him ashamed, embarrassed, or uncomfortable
- Specific things that he thinks turn him on
- Any kinks or fetishes and how he got them
- How he reacts at the sight of a "perfect 10," what he says to himself when one walks by
- Detailed profile of what he thinks is a "perfect 10"
- How he presents the sexual side of himself to his peers
- What he likes to do in bed, his style
- His attitudes about sex
- How his upbringing contributed to his sexuality or attitudes about sex
- Any physical sensations he especially likes

Let's call our vampire woman Elisa. She has been a vampire for about 80 years, and she looks perfect: tall, beautiful, strong, curvaceous, a waist-length fall of smooth auburn hair, light brown mesmerizing eyes. In short - too perfect for a reader to bond with. Now, let's start thinking about her unique sexuality to see if she becomes a little more "human":

- Secret fantasy she doesn't want to admit: to have sex with another vampire. Vampires, in my story world, don't usually desire their own kind.

- What she thinks is sexy: short hair, mental intensity, fearlessness, changeability, physical agility, glasses, zip sweaters
- Unusual kinks: I don't know this yet. When I discover more about the character, I will probably figure this out.
- How she reacts to a "perfect 10": She sees him in a bar and can't help but keep looking at him. She knows she shouldn't draw attention to herself, but she wants to do something. She imagines buying him a drink, sitting down next to him and starting a conversation, lying when he asks personal questions...
- Her "perfect 10": He has sandy brown hair mixed with silver, and all of him is damp from the evening rain. He must be in his mid-40s, but he is wearing a youthful navy blue zip sweater over his white collared shirt. He looks fairly tall with a healthy square build. His glasses sit next to his beer bottle, and he doesn't watch the TVs in each corner of the bar. Instead, he makes conversation with the bartender, someone he clearly knows, and some of the other patrons. When he smiles, his face crinkles with laugh lines. And when someone hands the bartender the bathroom key, he leaps up to snag it.

I won't do the rest of the list because it will probably get longer than you want to read. The point here is that I have started making Elisa into a unique sexual being, not just a stock sexy vampire character. Doing this exercise alone has given me ideas for her lust interest, her past, interesting sex scene ideas, and potential story facets, such as how she gets to meet another vampire if her lust interest is human.

You will probably think of your own list of sexuality points when you work through my starting list. I would love to hear back from you about the whole paper, but especially about this exercise. Please email graymattox@gmail.com with your comments and suggestions.

Why this works:

If you're writing erotic stories, your characters must be sexual beings from the very first page. If you don't consider your character's sexuality as you write your story, you'll find it hard to transition into sex scenes. "Hey, it seems like my characters are just jumping into bed for no reason." Every transition you write will seem like bad porn or just abrupt and unnatural.

If you are writing for other readers, erotic stories are only arousing when your reader finds them arousing. And since the reader is temporarily "acting along" with your character, that means your character has to find the story events arousing. The only way you'll know if he's turned on by fishnets or if he thinks they look hopeless is by working through his unique sexuality. Your character's attitude and reaction to the story action is what makes each scene exciting.

9) List Of Favorite Things

Make a list of favorite things for your character. Write down whatever comes to mind and keep going until you get to 50 things. Here are the first favorites I thought of:

- Favorite color, food, band, song
- Favorite day of the week, and why
- Favorite animal
- Favorite cocktail
- Favorite local haunt
- Favorite board game
- Favorite TV show, kind of movie, books
- Favorite kind of weather

- Favorite holiday

This exercise isn't very deep; instead, it gives you a way to churn out a lot of surface-level ideas. You won't know what to do with most of them, but you will find a few that catch your interest. Take those ideas and see where they lead you on the road to character development. An easy way to start doing this is asking "why." Let's say a character's favorite board game is Monopoly. No, a passion for it. Whenever there's a game on, she wants to get in. Here are a few reasons how this might have happened:

- Through this game, she got a taste of what it was like to make money. Now, she has mostly given up her dreams of being a high-powered executive, but Monopoly still gives her hope that those dreams are still alive. She could even practice her business and negotiation skills at the game board in the hopes that she'll one day get to use them for real.
- Her favorite uncle taught her to cheat at Monopoly, and she always wins. She developed a fever for winning any kind of game, even if she has to cheat!
- She once had a childhood friend, a neighbor, and they played Monopoly on rainy days. They were so close that they practically lived at each other's houses, but he moved away. Now, she plays Monopoly because it's the only connection she has left to her best friend in the past.

As for how these could influence the erotic story development, these all point to personality traits that should apply to erotic situations.

- Her Monopoly addiction points to a persistent character. If her lust interest is out of her league, she could still keep after him and not totally give up. She could rehearse on other people, just like she practices business.
- She obviously plays to win, and that will go for getting her erotic interest as well!
- She forms deep attachments and is loyal. This would make a good setup for a story where they reunite as adults and find that the sparks fly...

Your examples might feel a little contrived. Remember that characters are always more consistent than real people; in real life, a liking for Monopoly isn't usually a deep clue into someone's personality. In a story, though, nothing is accidental. You put that information in your story for a reason. The information must have some kind of significance; otherwise, your reader will get mad at the unintentional red herring.

Why this works:

Generating a mass of ideas without inspiration is often a chore. This technique will help you by starting with something easy and somewhat silly. Because you know that this isn't supposed to be a serious deep exercise, your brain will (hopefully) relax and lead you to new ideas for developing your character.

Whether you are a fanfiction author or write original stories, these techniques will help you tell the best erotic story you can. Just do them and see if they work for you, even if it's just a quick hack job. They should only take you a couple hours for a run through.

If you liked it, I would love to hear from you. I'm only online 2 or 3 days a week, but I will respond to everyone who emails me: info@adelejournal.com