Developing Characters That Your Readers Will Love

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Contents

Preface

What separates flat, forgettable characters from the marvelous fictional creations who you remember *years* after you've closed the book? And more importantly, how can you make sure the characters *you* write fall on the right side of that fence?

In this book from bestselling ghostwriter Hannah Sandoval, find out the answers to these questions and learn to develop characters that your readers will fall in love with.

What you'll learn in this book

- What makes for a compelling protagonist and antagonist
- Methods for outlining and fleshing out your characters
- Letting your character lead your plot
- How to deploy character exposition and flashbacks
- What separates good characters from unforgettable ones.

About This Ebook

This book was typset with Reedsy Studio.

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1

The Importance of Character Development

Think for a moment about your favorite novel. Why do you love it? Does it have a riveting plot that keeps you breathless as you flip frantically through the pages? Does the theme truly speak to your soul and your circumstances?

Both plot and theme are vital elements that should never be neglected in writing, but ponder this, if you will: would the stakes of that plot have you biting your nails if you didn't care about the characters in it? Would the full impact of that theme be adequately conveyed if it was lived out by one-dimensional characters?

The short answer is no.

Characters must endear themselves to readers

If you want your novel to become someone's prized, well-worn copy, you must treat your characters as if they were loved ones. They must feel familiar and vibrant. They must sprout from the page, and endear themselves to your audience with their personalities, quirks, and ways of talking. Yes, even villains endear themselves to readers — the good ones at least — just in a different way. If your readers don't hate your villain, the stakes aren't as high. If they can't sympathize with your villain on any level, you have lost the humanization that makes the best villains great.

If you learn to build your characters with clay rather than merely drawing them on paper — giving them complexities, distinctive personalities, and strong motivations — your readers will deeply invest themselves in the plot. They can make predictions on what will happen because they feel they know what each character might do in a given situation and they will stick around to see if they're right. When you make readers love your hero or heroes, they want to make sure those characters come out alright in the end. You've hooked them, and isn't that every author's dream?

Your characters will guide your plot

Understanding your characters also helps you craft the book. Don't know where the plot should go next? If you've properly outlined your characters, as I am going to teach you to do in the lessons to come, you can consult all of that background information and those personality charts and ask yourself, what

would this character do next? What might make this character do this? This brainstorming tool can help you take the plot in exciting new directions, and as you grow more familiar with your characters' beliefs and motivations, your theme will grow a little clearer, too.

In these chapters, I'm going to give you the tools to shape your characters from the smallest details like eye color and food preference; to how they walk, talk, and interact with the other characters; to the ways in which their pasts dictate their futures.

If you understand your characters inside and out, the writing process becomes easier, and if you love them... well, chances are your readers will love them, too.

Recommended Resources

- Stephen King's *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (book)

2

What Makes a Great Character?

I have a theory that the best characters have three things in common: dimension, conflict, and empathy. Using three famous characters as examples, I will break down how authors use these three elements to great effect, and how you can, too.

1. Dimension

You've doubtless come across dull protagonists, and I'll bet serious money the reason you found them boring was that they were too simple, too perfect, or just flat. Protagonists who do no wrong provide no conflict or tension — with only a small set of similar attributes, they become boring and cartoonish. If you actually knew someone monotonous and one-dimensional, would you want to hang out with them?

Atticus Finch from Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is layered with internal paradoxes. He's quiet and somewhat timid — his daughter often laments that he is weak and ineffectual. Yet, we discover there is power in his soft, steady words. He stands

strong in the face of adversity. He turns out to be a dead shot with a pistol, too, which would seem to contradict his pacifist demeanor.

Atticus also has his flaws and failures. Under his sister's influence, he tells Scout she needs to start living up to her lineage and become a lady. Our principled man is not without his moments of weakness, and thus he feels far more real.

2. Conflict

A strong character must have some sort of internal conflict that drives the plot in some way. Conflict is the momentum that keeps a story going, and grappling with issues related to the plot within the character keeps readers hooked.

And who is more conflicted than Carrie White, the namesake of Stephen King's debut novel? As puberty hits, Carrie develops powerful telekinetic abilities. She also begins to grapple with her feelings for her abusive zealot of a mother. Carrie has no friends, and thus her mother is the center of her life — she truly loves her, but also fears and loathes her.

As Carrie struggles to control her powers, she also struggles to manage her feelings of anger and resentment. She is kind and sweet, and the core tension of the story comes from the reader wanting her to stand up for herself, but also fearing that she'll lose the innocence that defines much of who she is.

3. Empathy

Empathy is most powerful when attached to villains. If you want a great, complex villain that sticks in your readers' minds, you must make readers understand why your villains do the things they do. Creating a moment where the reader feels some empathy for the villain humanizes them, eliminating that cartoonish "Big Bad" feel.

Harry Potter's Voldemort is a vile half-being who kills for pleasure and power, but you can, on some level, understand where his hatred of muggles comes from. Neither he nor his mother felt any love from the muggle half of his family. Sure, it excuses nothing, but you at least understand his origins. You also come to understand that despite how big he walks and talks, at his core, there is an insecure, angry, hurt child who constantly needs to prove that he can succeed without a mother or father. He is not a caricature; he is a living, breathing threat.

If you have at least one of these elements attached to your main characters, you're in good shape. If you attach all three, you've got a character who leaps off the page and demands to be noticed.

Recommended Resources

- 12 Types of Characters Featured in Almost All Stories (blog)
- Liking vs. Caring About Characters (free video lesson with sign-up)
- Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (book)

3

Which comes first? The characters or the plot?

Before we start outlining your characters' backgrounds, personalities, and appearances, I want to address a common question. Which should you outline first: your characters or your plot?

Well, all writing is subjective and there is no 'best' method — which is a good thing. Not every writer's creative process is identical, so the order is all up to you and will be dictated by your muse. However, to get your wheels turning, here are the main pros and cons of developing character or plot outlines first.

'Plot First' Method

Pro: Select the perfect characters for the job

Plotting first is especially helpful if your novel takes place in a fantastical or futuristic world. Knowing the plot's setting and events gives you a better idea of what sorts of people inhabit that world, how they act, and their day-to-day experiences. As

you unravel your plot, you may realize exactly which type of character will fit best within it. If your plot requires someone highly skilled in combat or computer hacking, you have the basis for your protagonist.

Con: Character realism may suffer

Be careful not to let the needs of a complex plot force you to cram together an unrealistic hodge-podge of traits into your lead characters. You'll need to shape your character's background and motivations to suit the course of your plot, but not at the risk of creating a character whose complexities make no sense. On the flip side, if you fail to match character with plot, your readers may end up asking, "Now, why would the protagonist do that? That doesn't sound like them."

'Character First' Method

Pro: Character motivations and personalities naturally fuel the plot

As you outline a character's motivations, you'll uncover what situations would cause them the most conflict. You'll also learn how they react to situations and interact with each other. This can help you turn a general plot idea into a complex web of biting conflicts, high stakes, and exciting, realistic dialogue. If ever you get stuck along your plot trajectory, you can use character maps to fuel a new idea.

Con: Aspects of character may be difficult to pinpoint without a larger knowledge of plot

If your plot is just a vague idea like "noir mystery" or "post-apocalyptic," you may have trouble pinpointing the nature of your characters' backgrounds. You need, at least, a semi-developed idea of plot trajectory to fully understand your characters' lives and the traits they need to survive your plot.

Whichever method you select, don't let either aspect (character development or plot) overshadow the other. Spend time on both elements before you work on your first draft.

So now that we've addressed that pressing question, we can start outlining our characters in the next chapter.

Recommended Resources

- 8 Character Development Exercises to Help You Nail Your Character (blog)
- Character Motivation: How to Write Believable Characters (blog)

4

Outlining, Part I — Origins Matter

Let's start outlining!

I'll spread the process over three chapters, covering three essential aspects of character outlines. The first is character backgrounds. Where your character has been will dictate where they are going. Past experiences define who we are as people: our opinions, how we react to certain situations, our fears, etc.

Mapping out your major characters' childhoods and the landmark events in their lives before the opening of your story is a necessary exercise. Not all of that background will figure into your story, but every character should have an inciting incident and formative events that have led them to the "present" of your book, and those should be shown (or at least suggested) in the novel so that your readers understand who your characters are.

Outlining methods

Common outlining methods include the bubble brainstorming method, the Q&A method, and the stream of consciousness method.

The Bubble Method

You might write your character's name in a bubble and then draw some branches to other bubbles that contain that character's family members with a brief description of how your character feels about each one. You then create other branches to bubbles containing memories your character shares with each person.

The Q&A Method

You could start by writing a question about your character on one line and answering it below. This is great for writers who like to keep things super organized.

Stream of Consciousness

Keep vital questions in mind, but you jot down anything about the character's past, even full scenes, as they come to you in an unbroken stream of paragraphs.

No matter which method you use, having some questions to ask yourself to spark imagination is essential.

Questions to ask to develop a character's origins

Here are a few questions to help you get started:

- What is their family dynamic? (How many members, how do they interact, etc.)
- Was their childhood happy or troubled?
- Where did they grow up?
- Were they rich, poor, middle class?
- Who are their friends and how did they meet?
- Were there any traumas in their lives?
- What are some of their happiest memories? Worst memories?
- Why did they choose their career?
- How many romantic relationships have they had? Were they good or bad? Why did they end?
- What is one thing they would wish to change about the past?

Not every answer will make it into the book, but they will help you better understand your characters. For instance, if a character's older brother died due to gang violence but was venerated by his gang, that character might wish to follow in his sibling's footsteps. But if the character was impacted by the effect the death had on their mother, he might become a cop who tries to save youths from gangs.

Crafting character origins is all about connecting dots and threading together past and present to create characters with thick, healthy roots to support their growth throughout the story.

Recommended Resources

- How to Create a Character Profile (blog)
- What are the Seven Types of Conflict in Literature? (blog)

5

Outlining, Part II — Shaping a Character's Personality

Character origins dictate some aspects of a character's personality, but many elements are ingrained at birth. This lesson is about taking the time to fully develop a well-rounded character personality.

Personality dictates a character's relationship with readers, as well as with other characters in the story. Your protagonist doesn't have to be a goody-two-shoes — they just need a trait or two that endears them to the audience. Likewise, villains need traits that make the audience hate them. These personality traits will also dictate how they react in any plot situation. Stay true to those traits, or you'll leave readers puzzled.

Developing a Personality

Remember those backstory questions from yesterday? Here are a few more to help you mold your characters' personalities:

- What are their biggest fears?
- What are their interests, hobbies, and passions?
- What things and people do they like best? Dislike?
- What makes them angry?
- What makes them sad?
- What makes them happy?
- How do they cope under stress?
- Do they act differently around friends than around family?
- Are they introverts or extroverts?
- What do they want most? (In family, in friends, in a lover, in their career, in life in general.)

That last question is one of the most important. Understanding what your characters want out of life can create conflicts (for example, the character stepping on toes to reach a goal), dictate and explain actions, and determine how they interact with the other characters.

People are bundles of contradictions

It's important to select a complex, varied array of traits. People are complicated. If you want your characters to be realistic, avoid heroes who never cause harm, break no rules, and always have the right answer. Avoid villains who are always angry and aggressive, always make the wrong decisions, and always lose.

That doesn't mean your heroes and villains can't have a few stereotypical traits, not by any means. Those traits are common for a reason. Just don't make those their only traits, or you'll end up with a caricature.

Perhaps your villain is a sullen, merciless hitman who never speaks a kind word... except to his disabled daughter, whom he adores.

Of course, not all great villains have redeeming qualities like that. Umbridge from Harry Potter has none, but she still is a complex villain. Her passion for pink and cats and her habit of giggling contrast heavily with her violent, manipulative tendencies.

Maybe your hero is extremely loyal... to a fault, trusting too much and giving the wrong people too many second chances. Perhaps it's a weakness for one person in particular — like the great Sherlock Holmes has for Irene Adler, one of only two people to have outsmarted the renowned sleuth.

Draw from people you know, from yourself, and characters you love to create complex figures. As their personalities come through in their words and actions, your story will begin to resonate with readers.

Recommended Resources

- 8 Character Development Exercises to Help You Nail Your Character (blog)
- 150+ Useful Character Quirks (Plus a Few Clichés to Avoid) (blog)

6

Outlining, Part III — The Importance of Character Descriptions

Many beginner writers make the mistake of focusing on hair color, eye color, height, and race when describing their characters. While those elements help create a picture in readers' heads, they don't really make a character stick out.

Think about signature attributes

You want something that imprints in the readers' minds and helps to define the characters themselves.

Think Katniss Everdeen's braid, which aligns with her practical, self-sufficient nature. She can't have her hair in her face when she's hunting or fighting. Think Sherlock Holmes' pipe, which he puffs on furiously when he's puzzling over a particularly difficult case. Think the large, pale "vulture-eye" in Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," which serves as the catalyst for the entire story. The old man is never named, but you remember him clearly, don't you? That is the power of excellent character

description.

Behavior

As you might have picked up from the Sherlock Holmes example, a character description does not always have to deal in appearance. Gestures, habits, and tics are very much a part of character description and should showcase a new aspect of personality. If your readers become familiar with a character's gestures, they will know when they are angry, anxious, or happy without you spelling it out for them.

Symbolism

Symbolism is an element of character description that can be fun to play around with. You can use indirect suggestion through imagery to give readers a hidden clue or message.

Flannery O'Conner was a master of inserting symbolism in her character descriptions. In "Good Country People," those attuned to symbolism might have guessed the Bible salesman's true nature from the get-go. His signature suitcase of Bibles is so heavy that it tilts him to one side. He is literally a crooked salesman. Dropping symbolic Easter eggs like this is not only fun for you, but also for your more eagle-eyed readers.

Questions to ask to define a character's appearance

- Hair and eye color? (Basics, but classics.)
- Any "flaws"? Scars, crooked nose, etc. (Don't make all your heroes look like movie stars: that isn't very realistic.)

- What's their body type? Skinny, lanky, short, pudgy, etc.
- What are some of their physical habits? Do they twirl their hair, wring their hands, stand with hands on hips? (Think about people you know and observe those you don't to help you come up with ideas.)
- What gestures do they use when they are happy, sad, scared, angry, etc.?

Make your characters distinctive from each other. Of course, siblings will share some traits, and friends should have similarities that help them get along — just don't have a bland collection of nearly identical personalities.

Good descriptions allow your readers to picture your characters and make them last in readers' minds long after the book is closed.

Recommended Resources

- Body Language Cheat Sheet for Writers (infographic)
- Purple Prose (and How to Avoid It) (blog post)

7

How to Properly Use Flashbacks

Now you know how to flesh out a character's background, personality, and appearance. It's time to properly implement all of that information into your novel. You don't want to just plop it all into the story in block paragraphs. Your character's identity must be woven into the story to create the best reader experience.

A long, long time ago

Let's start with their background. A common way to highlight and introduce the most important elements of a character's background is through flashback. This is usually only reserved for your protagonist and antagonist — though often just the protagonist if the story is told from the hero's perspective. It's also only used for moments that truly impacted the character and relate somehow to the present storyline.

Secondary characters' backgrounds (or less important memories) can be told through dialogue, or one or two sentences of

exposition in the narrative rather than with a full flashback.

So what is a flashback? It's when you cut away from the main plot line and immerse the reader in a scene that took place in the past.

Flashbacks can be presented:

- As a dream.
- Through a character reminiscing in their head.
- As its own chapter, with a date or some sort of prefacing line to indicate that we're in the past.
- In the middle of a chapter narrative, and written as if it is happening in the present. In this case, the memory is often in italics to differentiate it from the "present" of the main storyline.

Any of these methods can be effective. The key is selecting the right memories for a flashback.

What is their defining moment?

Go through your character outline and find the answers to lesson 4's origin questions. What moment had the largest impact on who your character became?

Did your heroine's rocky relationship with her mother make her run away at seventeen, forcing her to grow up faster than she should have? That would make a great flashback that would help the readers understand why she's a hard worker to a fault, and empathize more with her.

Did your hero have a near-death experience that resulted in a terrible fear of heights? That's a great flashback option, too, especially if the plot will later force him into a precarious situation involving extreme heights. That's another way flashbacks are helpful: if you set up a character trait through a flashback that makes the readers feel like they also experienced that moment, then any related stakes that occur later will be raised even higher for readers.

Get creative with your flashback method if you want. You don't have to stick to the dream sequence or have your character reminisce while driving. In Harry Potter, for instance, J.K. Rowling uses the 'pensieve,' a magical device that allows wizards to actually watch memories play out like an interactive film.

No matter how you do it, the key is making your readers feel like they're living in that flashback scene and ensuring the flashback teaches them something new and vital about the plot or the character.

Recommended Resources

- How to Use Flashbacks (video)

8

How to Write (And Not Write) Character Exposition

Exposition is a useful writing tool, but it is commonly overused, and that is when it turns ugly.

As a literary device, exposition is meant to introduce background information and convey necessary plot points quickly. Exposition can be found throughout literature and is commonly found in the first few chapters to get readers up to speed.

If your main character is speeding to her grandfather's house, crying, you might insert something like, "Her grandfather was the only person she could talk to about her mother's wild mood swings, and this time, a phone call was not enough. She needed to go see him, get away from the ugly words spoken between her and her mother." You've explained why she's going to her grandfather, revealed a little about her mother's personality and her own background, and you've set up a conflict. You've oriented the reader with exposition.

Warning: Exposition Overload

The problem appears when you cram too much in. If you write, "Her mother had thrown a vase at her head and screamed that she regretted ever having a daughter," you've ruined the potential for a great flashback scene later in the story. Those ugly words would have been far more powerful in scene form, especially after we'd gotten to know the protagonist better.

Revealing characters in a scene

When inserting the elements of your character personality outline into the story, remember the old adage, "Show don't tell." Giving some background info is necessary, but don't cram in lackluster sentences like, "Georgia always got angry when her little sister stole her clothes." Instead, show that angry part of her personality in scene with a mix of narrative and dialogue:

> *Georgia stomped across the hall, huffing through her nose, and kicked open Lila's door.*
>
> *"Where is my red skirt? Any idea?" she said, one eyebrow raised to dangerous heights.*
>
> *Lila stammered.*
>
> *"If I find a single stain on it, you're dead," said Georgia, throwing open Lila's closet and rummaging through the clothes.*

> *Lila crossed her arms and skulked on the bed. "I didn't do anything to it. Geez, it's not a big deal," she mumbled.*

We get a taste for Georgia's short fuse. We see her mannerisms: if she huffs through her nose again in a later scene, we will know she's upset. We also get the sense that Lila is a bit afraid of Georgia without having to come out and say it, thanks to her gestures. But her final line shows she isn't totally going to roll over for her big sister.

The best way for readers to identify with and understand your characters' personalities is to live alongside them in a scene. In that short exchange, you get a sense of each sister's personality and their relationship — as there's far more information than can (or should) be expressed in single line of exposition.

Exposition has its place; you just need to learn when and when not to use it while implementing your characters' personalities.

Recommended Resources

- How to Write Dialogue: 10 Simple Rules (blog post)
- Exposition in Literature: The Ultimate Guide (blog post)

9

How to Paint a Character Portrait

When describing physical character traits to a reader, take care not to do so unrealistically or in boring, fact-like chunks. Let's break that down and discuss what I mean by that.

Eye color rarely matters

Something I see beginner writers do often is immediately focus on hair and eye color. Often they have the protagonist make observations about another character's appearance. If they already know each other, it isn't very realistic for one of them to pause and take in the other's features. Another unrealistic method (that I regularly committed as a beginner) is having the protagonist observe a love interest's eye color from across the room. I don't know about you, but someone has to be pretty close for me to take note of their irises.

Don't stop to describe your character

If you're using a third person omniscient narrator, inserting physical features when a character is first introduced is more natural. However, you don't want to just rattle off features like a bullet point list. One of my favorite ways to insert physical traits is by interspersing them within action sequences and by comparing one character to another. For instance, if you wanted to introduce two brothers, you might write something like this:

> *Caleb shoved Gregory playfully in his scrawny shoulder, nearly knocking the younger boy off balance. "Nice shot, bro! Didn't think you had it in you."*
>
> *Gregory smiled halfheartedly and rubbed a shaking hand back and forth through his bushy red hair. "Th-thanks."*
>
> *"Come on, let's go see the damage," said Caleb, blonde hair bouncing on his forehead as he took off toward the tree line. His lean, strong legs were much longer than Gregory's, and he reached the spot first.*
>
> *The two boys bent over the dead squirrel. Gregory's already pale face whitened, and his blue eyes turned glossy with tears as he looked at what his pellet gun had done. "I killed him..." he said.*

You now know a good deal about what both boys look like. You may not know everything right now, but as the story progresses,

I could insert more details. You also know something about Gregory's personality through his gestures. You know he feels guilty about killing the squirrel — not because the narrator told you, but because of the nervous rubbing at his hair and then the tears in his eyes when he looks at the squirrel. That is posturing.

Remember all those gestures you wrote down when outlining your character's appearance? Bring them out and keep them consistent. Gregory can reach for his hair each time he's upset or nervous.

Small reminders help

Another good rule of thumb is to insert little reminders about a character's appearance throughout the story. Do it frequently in the beginning (once a chapter) to establish that picture, and then you can taper off the reminders as you go. Making sure that your readers can remember what each character looks like helps them lose themselves in the story even further.

In the final chapter, we'll tackle one of the hardest things to do: making your readers fall in love with your characters.

Recommended Resources

- Character Descriptions: How to Write Them (blog post)

10

How to Make Readers Fall for Your Characters

It's time to wrap things up for our character development, but before I go, I want to leave you with some inspiration and encouragement.

One of the best ways to inspire yourself is to observe and dissect the work of great authors. If you understand the method to their madness, you can work to emulate it. So, let's break down some famous beloved characters and see if we can learn a few more tips.

Scout Finch

The widely beloved protagonist of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Scout's charm bubbles up from her wild personality. She is rowdy and unruly, and frequently gets into fights with boys at school (and wins). But instead of coming off as a brat, she is the heart of the story. Why? Her rowdy streak actually spawns from her refusal to take flak from anybody.

Tip #1: A personality trait can have layers. Ask why your character behaves a certain way.

We resist her aunt's pleas for her to become "a proper lady" because we know that means she would have to give up that headstrong, independent nature. Scout is also endearing because the story is told from her perspective. We see her learn and grow, and we see her wrestle with the horrible implications of the unfair trial of Tom Robinson. We care for that little spitfire, so her pain and confusion hits us harder.

Tip #2: Ask yourself if making your readers view the story solely from one character's perspective might allow them to experience the story on a more personal level.

Dr. John Watson

What makes Dr. Watson the perfect partner for Sherlock Holmes? He is older, at least in the original story, and as a result, he is calmer. His military background gives him discipline (and other skills that frequently come in handy), and he's very intelligent, as evidenced by his ability to keep up with Holmes.

Tip #3: Don't make your lead characters too similar, but make sure their talents balance and complement each other.

Watson is the perfect sounding board for Holmes, he's incredibly loyal, and in some adaptions, he is the only thing keeping Holmes' eccentricities from destroying him.

One of the biggest factors as to why he is so beloved is that, though smart and skilled, he is an everyman when compared to Holmes. Holmes is almost inhuman in his deductive power: he is always right, always ahead, and Watson has to scurry along behind him. Watson asks the questions we're all dying to know, and is always just as amazed as we are when the truth comes out. We identify with him, and so we love him.

> *Tip #4: If you have a superhuman lead, balance them with a character with whom readers can identify.*

It's all about writing characters who feel alive. Only then can readers come to love or hate them. Remember that people are complex — not every hero needs to be a prince/princess, not every villain has to be rotten to the core, and if you put a bit of yourself and a bit of something you admire or hate into every character, you will breathe life into your paper-and-ink darlings. You will make your readers love them as much as you do.

I hope you've enjoyed this book. I'm a ghostwriter who specializes in fantasy, mystery and YA. If you want to learn first-hand how to turn your characters and ideas into a novel, drop me a request on my Reedsy profile!

Happy writing!

How to Write a Novel

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If you have any questions, you can reach Tom at Tom.Bromley@reedsy.com We'd love to hear from you!

About the Author

Hannah Sandoval is a freelance ghostwriter and copy editor who has worked on over two dozen manuscripts, and a published author herself. Her guilty pleasures are Rocky Road ice cream and crime TV shows. If you would like to connect with her to discuss assistance with your manuscript or character outlines, check out her Reedsy profile.

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