

One-Page Insights: Creating Great Protagonists

Great characters stay with us long after we have put a book down or switched off the TV. Here are some tips for creating a memorable protagonist.

MUST HAVE

- A character arc: the protagonist must have changed somehow by the end of the story.
- Conscious goal(s) or desire(s): make it clear what they want to achieve.
- Unconscious desire(s) or need(s) that might conflict with the conscious goal: these are deeper emotional motivators.
- At least one personality strength—an admirable (ideally likable) quality.
- A personality flaw they are either aware or (more interestingly) unaware of, which proves an obstacle to achieving the conscious goal.
- Values and a moral code that gives them a distinctive world view and a strong voice.

SHOULD HAVE

- Complexity (for example, contradictory beliefs and behaviours).
- External conflict with another character (antagonist) who is against them achieving their conscious goal (but may also expose their unconscious desire/need) and/or conflict with another force that gets in their way (e.g., hostile environment, society's restrictions, malevolent creature).
- Internal conflict: gets in their own way, self-sabotage.
- A unique quirk/feature/habit with a *relevant* and *credible* backstory.

6 REASONS TO LOVE JIMMY MCGILL (*BETTER CALL SAUL*)

1. Easily summed up: “A talented lawyer who is a gifted conman at heart.”
2. He is three characters in one. These identities compete with each other constantly, which creates much of the tension and drama.
 - a. Jimmy McGill: a respectable lawyer who put himself through law school to prove he is worthy of his brother's affection.
 - b. Slippin' Jimmy: a convicted conman. This nickname is used by his brother to belittle him; a name Jimmy repeatedly tries (and fails) to escape.
 - c. Saul Goodman: lawyer to the downtrodden, a play on the phrase “S'all good, man.”
3. His overarching goal is to make his brother proud of him, but this conflicts with his irrepressible desire to beat the system.
4. He is very likable due to his sunniness/optimism, integrity (he has a fixed idea of right and wrong), ingenuity (he's a brilliant schemer and problem-solver), his love and respect for soulmate Kim Wexler, his independence (he won't conform), and sense of humour. There are times when he's downright heroic, but there are plenty of occasions when our sympathy for him is tested.
5. In his battles with antagonists (principally Charles, his sanctimonious brother, and Howard, the smarmy law partner), our sympathies swing from Jimmy to his adversaries and back again. We are always questioning Jimmy/Saul's motives and methods but, ultimately, want him to triumph because he is better than Charles and Howard.
6. His arc is unexpected. In the end, he achieves a redemption of sorts, but only by an act of extreme self-sacrifice and owning his Slippin' Jimmy identity.