

HOW KNOWLEDGE OF PERSONALITY TYPES CAN GIVE WRITERS AN EDGE

By Dr. Lin Stepp

Have you ever noticed when you finish a really great book that the characters seem to linger in your mind and live on in your thoughts? These characters have been developed so superbly by the author that they become real to you – they live and breathe and lift off the pages into a virtual reality. Each character has identifiable traits and clear individuality. Most writing guides and editors claim that a good book is always one in which the characters have strong, memorable, and likeable personalities. How do authors accomplish this magic? How can you create strong characters for your books that sing with individuality? I think one method that can be utilized is to study existing research on personality types and personality trait perspective. The more you know about personality types, the richer your characters can become as you develop and create them.

Personality, according to Myers, is “an individual’s characteristic pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting.” Dennis Coons added that personality involves all those unique and lasting traits that form a person’s psychological character. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Carl Jung and Gordon Allport were two of the earliest researchers to identify personality in terms of fundamental traits or characteristic patterns of behavior. These researchers, and others that followed, began to find ways in which to describe individual personalities by trait patterns – quite a task when, according to Odbert, there are almost 18,000 different words in the dictionary by which to describe people!!!

Today, there are a variety of personality inventory tests that can be taken to profile a person’s behavioral patterns. These are widely used in education, business, and counseling. One of the best known is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which was created by Isabel Briggs Myers and her mother, Kathleen Briggs, in the 1950s. In the late 1900s, David Keirsey modified the Myers-Briggs test so that it could be taken at home and self-scored. This resulted in a simpler inventory test, which can be found in the front of Keirsey’s book, *Please Understand Me II*, or at the accompanying website at www.personalitypage.com. In addition, there is a great accompanying book *Do What You Are* and website www.personalitytype.com by Paul D. Tieger and Barbara Barron-Tieger, which delves into analyzing how the personality types function in different work settings.

So ... what does all this mean to you as a writer? First, knowing about personality types can help you individually. You can take the Keirsey test yourself to identify your own individual personality profile type, learning more about your own strengths and weaknesses. This will help you as a writer. Remember Socrates old saying: “Know thyself”? And Shakespeare’s words: “This above all: to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day; Thou canst not then be false to any man”? Well, an extensive body of research has found that the better you understand yourself, the better your writing will become. The more confident you become in yourself, the more that confidence will flow through your writing. The more you know your strengths, the more you can capitalize on them. And the more you know your potential weaknesses, the more you can work to eradicate them. Or at least not allow them to sabotage your writing and your goals for success.

Once you determine your own four letter personality type – the real fun begins!!! The Keirsey and Teiger books have sections on what you might have been like as a child, what you are like as an adult, what your greatest weaknesses and best strengths are, what love-matches with other types are good or bad for you, how you parent your children, what careers are best for you and which are horrid, what environments and career fields you work best in, etcetera. It’s a great journey in self-discovery!! And the personality inventory has been proven to help individuals in self-understanding. Remember, the more you know about yourself, the more you can bring your best strengths and your talents into your writing.

Second Studying personality types will open up a whole new world of ideas for developing characters. Let’s say one of your main characters – let’s call him Ryan - is a supreme optimist, a risk-taker, a devil-may-care, life-of-the-party type. The Ryan you envision tends to lead a charmed life, lives well, laughs a lot, and shrugs off adversity. After you have studied personality types for a while, just knowing these beginning personality facts will let you know that Rafe is probably an Artisan type, according to Keirsey’s research. If you read the four profiles of Artisans – you will quickly see just which type seems to describe your fictitious Ryan the best. Then you can further develop your character from the personality trait tips and the personality descriptions you get from studying about that particular profile type. For example, suppose you decide Ryan is definitely a classic Artisan – the Performer. You read about Performers and find that they are playful, outgoing, and expressive – that they love the excitement of playing to an audience, that they are not comfortable being alone. You further

read that Performers are quick with wisecracks, always like to live in the fast lane, are usually up on the latest in fashion, and like to party. They tend to fall in love easily and impetuously and can sometimes appear fickle in their affections. They often don't think before they act or take life as seriously as they should. But they are optimistic and wonderful fun to be with. In fact, you read with a growing smile, a Performer would be the type of person to walk by a graveyard whistling. In your mind, you can almost see Ryan doing this in your book. You begin to envision scenes as you read on ... and Ryan begins to flesh out and come to life.

Studying personality types can be fun as well as helpful in crafting your novels. Personality trait books and websites are a goldmine of ideas for developing rich book characters. When you are plotting personalities for the main characters and secondary characters in your next book, pull out your personality inventory books or go exploring through some of the online sites on the subject. The personality descriptions you will find there can be an invaluable aid to your imagination and creativity. You can get great ideas for making your characters believable, likable, and entertaining from these sources. In addition, utilizing these research tools will keep your characters from getting stale, or too similar, as you write multiple books. It will also keep you from making characters that think and react too much like you would think or act – and not as they would.

Although the Myers-Briggs sixteen types are some of the best known personality types in the field, there are other books on personality typing that you might also enjoy exploring. Taylor Hartman wrote *The Color Code* in 1987, classifying individuals into four color codes – similar to the four elements of fire (Red), earth (Blue), water (White), and air (Yellow). The types are more limiting ... but the book still has wonderful character development ideas in it. I personally prefer research-based personality trait perspectives to the pseudo-sciences that have developed to explain personality, like astrology. Personality profiles, like the Myers-Briggs, are much richer and more detailed, and the personality groups are based on objective testing and scientific research versus the fuzzy concept of when someone happened to be born.

In summary, gaining knowledge on personality types can give you a creative, competitive edge as a writer. Taking a good personality inventory can help you learn more about yourself as a person and as a writer. And you will gain new confidence in seeing the personality traits you only vaguely sensed in yourself put into positive, affirming words. Using the detailed, personality profiles available in personality books and websites, like those of Keirsey's,

Teiger's, and Hartman's, can help you enrich the characters in your romance novels. With this new information you can gain from studying personality trait perspectives, you will find that your characters will begin to flesh out and come to life on the pages of your books. This is a piece of genuine magic you can capture and use to make your writing sing with pizzazz and to make your characters remembered long after your readers close the pages of your book.