

Secondary Characters

A secondary character is bound to one main character's orbit, whether that main character is a protagonist or an antagonist, and their job is to create real friction the reader feels, not to move the plot along quietly and agreeably.

The Core Problem

Novice writers often start with the assumption that a story has exactly one main character, a hero, surrounded by a supporting cast that exists mainly to help. That assumption gets reinforced everywhere, from how movies get discussed to how quick story summaries get told, and it quietly narrows what a manuscript can do before a writer even sits down to draft it.

Core Principle

A secondary character exists to be an agent of change, and the way they do that job, on either side of the story's struggle, is by creating friction the reader actually feels and experiences.

The Orbit

A secondary character is best understood through three things at once:

- how much time they spend on the page,
- what job they're actually doing in the story, and
- who they're tied to.

That third piece is the one novice writers miss most often. A secondary character isn't just present in the story generally, they're bound to one specific main character's orbit, and their own arc typically resolves through that one relationship rather than through the plot's overall outcome.

One term needs pinning down before going further. Main character here does not mean only the hero. It means any character whose own arc the story is genuinely structured around, and that includes the antagonist as often as the protagonist, and sometimes more than one of each in a story built around several tracked threads. A secondary character can orbit a protagonist just as easily as they can orbit an antagonist, and the mechanics that follow work exactly the same way in both cases.

Both Sides of the Struggle

This is where the term antagonist earns a second look. A full antagonist, the kind covered in a separate Power Tool, usually counts as a main character in their own right, because the entire external conflict of the book runs through them. But a story can also contain smaller antagonists, a rival, a hostile boss, a difficult in-law, someone who opposes one specific main character without carrying the whole book's conflict on their shoulders. That person is a secondary character too, sitting in exactly the same orbital slot as a protagonist's group, just pointed against a main character instead of standing behind one. Don't relegate the antagonist secondary characters to the role of henchmen.

Everything from here forward applies equally to both. A protagonists' group and secondary antagonist are built the same

way, tested the same way, and fail in mirrored ways. The only difference is which direction they're pointed.

Technical Mechanics

The Deletion Test.

For any secondary character, ask what specifically breaks if they were removed entirely, whoever they're orbiting. Which plot turn stops happening. Which piece of theme goes unspoken. Which shift in that main character's thinking never occurs. If nothing specific comes to mind, the character hasn't earned their place yet.

The Swap Test.

Ask which of a secondary character's traits would survive if their story job changed. A loyal friend's warmth, a rival's short temper, a lieutenant's nervous habit, if any of these would still be there no matter what job the character was doing in the story, that trait was never built to fit their purpose, it's just habit or flavor sitting on top of a character who hasn't been designed yet.

Independent Agency and Unintended Consequences.

A secondary character needs enough independence to succeed or fail on their own terms, not just to carry out whatever the main character asks. When that independence is present, their mistakes become one of the main character's steadiest sources of complication. A sidekick who talks their way past a guard with a convenient lie may succeed in the moment, but that lie can plant a rumor the protagonist has to untangle three chapters later. A lieutenant who eliminates a witness the antagonist specifically wanted left alive forces a change of plan the antagonist never asked for and didn't see coming. In both cases, the main character's plan changes because of a secondary character's

own choice, not because the plot needed a complication and reached for one. This is the friction named in the Core Principle made concrete, something a writer can actually design rather than just feel toward.

Genre Applications

- **Mystery and Crime.** Secondary characters conventionally double as either clue carriers or red herrings, and readers expect a little too much convenience or a little too much suspicion built into them, since that ambiguity is part of the genre's fair puzzle.
- **Romance.** The best friend or confidant exists largely to receive the protagonist's internal thoughts out loud, one of the genre's most fixed conventions, and a fully developed secondary couple running its own subplot romance is close to expected in a lot of subgenres.
- **Epic Fantasy.** Scale and series length blur the line between secondary and main more than any other genre, since a companion who's clearly secondary in book one can accumulate enough weight by a later book that readers start treating them as a main character in their own right.
- **Horror.** An expendable secondary cast exists mainly so their deaths can raise the stakes, and making one of them too fully developed can work against the story, since a reader who grows attached to someone clearly marked for sacrifice starts feeling manipulated rather than moved.

- **Thriller and Espionage.** Secondary characters conventionally slot into information roles, the handler, the source, the specialist, mostly there to move plot information along without the main character stopping to research it themselves.
- **Literary Fiction.** A secondary character is expected to resist easy summary, complicating rather than clarifying, often functioning to reveal something about a main character's blind spots through how that main character treats or misreads them.
- **YA.** Secondary characters conventionally organize around identity formation, the friend group, the confidant who represents a path not taken, the sibling who shows what the protagonist is trying not to become.

Common Failures

- **Story Furniture.** A secondary character who always agrees is simply carrying a main character's water rather than doing any real work of their own.
- **Opposition Without a Reason.** The mirror image on the antagonist's side, a secondary antagonist who opposes a main character with no personal logic behind it, present only to be pushed against.
- **The Flattened Two-Hander.** A manuscript structured as if only the protagonist and a single antagonist have any real interior life, with every other character on either side reduced to furniture. What's missing in this pattern isn't just a shortage

of developed characters, it's a shortage of friction anywhere in the book except the one central clash.

Diagnostic Questions

1. If this character were removed entirely, what specific plot turn, theme, or shift in a main character's thinking would stop happening?
2. Which of this character's traits would survive if their story job changed? If several would, they haven't been built to fit their purpose yet.
3. Is this character bound to a protagonist's orbit, an antagonist's orbit, or is their placement unclear? A secondary character with no clear orbit usually isn't earning their page time.
4. Does this character have room to succeed or fail on their own terms, independent of what the main character asked them to do?
5. Has one of this character's own choices ever forced a main character to change or adjust a plan? If not, they may be furniture rather than an active presence.
6. Does the manuscript as a whole have real friction anywhere besides the one central clash between a protagonist and an antagonist?

Practical Application

Exercise One. The Deletion Test.

Choose a secondary character from your work in progress. Write out, in a few sentences, exactly what would be lost from the plot, the theme, or a main character's arc if that character were removed completely. If the answer is vague, decide right now what specific job this character needs to be doing instead.

Exercise Two. The Swap Test.

Take the same character and imagine handing their exact story job to a completely different personality. List every trait of theirs that would still make sense in that swapped version. Anything on that list is decoration, not design, and is worth reconsidering or cutting.

Exercise Three. The Unintended Consequence.

Pick a secondary character on either side of your story's struggle, a sidekick or a secondary antagonist. Design one small, independent decision they make that goes wrong, or works but creates a new problem, and trace exactly how the relevant main character has to notice it, adapt to it, or clean it up.

Integration with Other Power Tools

- **Chorus Characters.** A useful contrast, a chorus character never touches the tracked cast at all, while a secondary character is specifically defined by which main character's orbit they're bound to.
- **Antagonist as Protagonist.** A full antagonist earns the same depth of rationalization covered in that tool. A secondary

antagonist can carry a lighter, more scoped version of that same internal logic without needing the full treatment.