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## **THE WRITERS TOOLBOX: THE NAMING OF NAMES**

*By Danielle Ackley-McPhail*

Have you realized how much a name can say about someone? Well, maybe not so much today, where the blending of culture and celebrity and downright boredom has led to some combinations that simply ignore things like tradition, religious/ethnic background, and even gender. But at one time you had a good chance of telling where a person was from, their sex, their occupation, and sometimes even roughly when they were born just by learning their name. Some places in the world you still can.

Our challenge as writers is to match that rich process. Parents on an average name one, two, or at most a bare handful of children in their lifetime. Authors populate worlds. Now, not every character needs a name with layers of meaning. Many won't even need a name at all, but when the name does count, how do you go about finding or creating one?

Good question! Let's talk...

## The Don'ts

First off, let's get some basics out of the way. There are a few things that you want to avoid when naming your characters. After all, you want them to complement your story, not detract from it.

**Don't Get Cute** – Unless there is a specific reason for it—if you are writing a children's story or pulp fiction—try to avoid names that sound like they are the butt of a bad joke, like Hope Bright or Candy Kane. Do it too often, or without a relevant reason, and you'll just make it harder for the reader to take your character—and your story—seriously.

**Don't Be Difficult** – Names have a structure we are familiar with. Even if it's in another language, we can generally recognize the pattern of a name. A well-constructed one is comfortable to say, as well as to hear (unless, of course, the voice is your mother's and she's using all three of yours at once).

Now this is mostly for those writing fantasy or science fiction, but if you are creating a name for an alien or non-human race, have mercy on your reader and try and mirror the above-mentioned pattern. For example, in the movie *The Fifth Element*, the perfect being had a name about thirty syllables long...for effect. It was quickly shortened to the more manageable and name-like Lelu.

**Don't Echo** – What do I mean by that? When you have a number of characters involved in a storyline, it is important that the reader be able to easily distinguish which character you are talking about at any given time. This need increases exponentially the more characters that are involved. So, even though in life it is quite common for people to at least partially share the same

name or similar sounding names, you absolutely do not want your characters to do so—unless, of course, there is a very good reason for it that is integral to the plot. Mike and Ike makes for a catchy name for a candy, but have such a duo in a story and you could easily leave your reader confused when things really get going. Less common, but also something you should watch out for is having a character and a race, city, or other story element with similar sounding names. Like using Vargas from Vegas—this could be a rather unfortunate combination.

**Don't Mirror Life** – Unless you are writing historic fiction or your story has a specific need to include or allude to a figure from recorded history or current events, be careful of using name combinations for characters that mirror those of notable people that actually exist or did exist at one time, if you aren't actually writing about that individual. Also be careful of mirroring the names of other distinct fictional characters. In extreme cases of either example, it could lead to accusations of libel or copyright violation, and possible legal action against you. (For the same reason, some in the industry often caution against using the name or representation of someone you know even with their permission, because it has been known to occasionally be poorly received. This, of course, is a personal choice you must make.)

### **The Do's**

Once you are ready to actually get down to the naming of names there are a lot of things to consider, questions to ask yourself as you establish your character, and steps you can take to ensure you have the right one. For our current purposes, let's assume you have already chosen your character's name.

**Do Confirm** – Sometimes a character's name will have some particular relevance—as with Harry Copperfield Blackstone Dresden, from Jim Butcher's *Dresden Files*, a wizard named after three of the world's greatest magicians—and sometimes it will just be a name, but in either case run a web search on it once you have chosen. I recommend you look for several things: Are there any negative associations with real-life individuals? Does the (first) name have a meaning that is unfortunate, inapplicable, or perhaps apropos? Has a similar or identical name ever been used for a character in someone else's book? (With every-day kind of names, this isn't really an issue, but if the book is of a similar type to what you are writing, or if there are parallels in the plot or character development, they could be used to substantiate an accusation of plagiarism, such as in the case with Disney's Simba and the story of Kimba the White Lion. The best you could hope for in such situations is to be accused of a lack of originality. At the worst you will be looking for a lawyer.)

**Do Be Consistent** – Make sure your character's name is both spelled and used consistently throughout. Settle on the different variations you might use for formal and informal encounters, any titles, ranks, or honorifics, and do not vary from what you have established. An exception to this would be if your character has a particular nemesis or bully that uses an incorrect or ill-preferred variant of the name to annoy said character, or a friend or family member that can't or won't use the more common variant, but does so without malice.

**Do Be Appropriate** – Make sure you select a name in keeping with the time, setting, and social position of the character, where applicable. Also make sure support characters have names that complement one another and work together to establish your environment. After all, having a character from a primitive tribe deep in the Brazilian rainforest named Charles isn't really

going to be plausible (Unless, of course, you build into the story some justification, but, as an example, you understand).

### **The How-To's**

Some people are good at picking names. Some agonize over it. I find if you have a method, it goes a lot simpler, and the joy is: you aren't limited to just one! On those occasions where the name doesn't just come to me I have plenty of tricks for picking one out. Here are a few of them.

**Morality Play Method** – It was standard in these medieval works to name character after the predominant trait they represented, such as Charity, Hope, Avarice, etc. That lacks a certain subtlety for modern works, except for the rare virtues that are accepted as names today. However, I still like the idea of this method, but with a twist. I write a lot of fantasy, usually mythology based: for those characters that I wish to use the MP method of naming, I go to the language associated with whatever myth cycle I am using. For example, my first novel, *Yesterday's Dreams*, is based on Irish mythology. I wanted to name my antagonist Evil so I looked up the word in my Irish-English dictionary. Several different words were listed so I chose to go with "Olcas" because it seemed the most like an actual name. By an ironic twist, when I was later doing research into the mythology I ran across a rather nasty fellow from the actual legends named Olcas and I was able to adapt my plot to that myth rather nicely.

**Defining Characteristics** – A variant of the above, only the name represents a notable physical trait, rather than just the more usual virtues. An example would be my character Kerwin. When he first appeared in the short story "At the Crossroads" he was introduced as the

Dubh Fae, Irish for the black fae. This had a dual purpose because he was dark in coloring and nature. When that story was expanded into my novel, *The Halfling's Court*, he needed a true name. It also turned out that he was an outcast among his own kind, shunned because of his dark, crude features. To that end he gained the name Kerwin, which means the little black one, in this case an insult to a grown fae.

**Historic/Cultural Relevance** – depending on what type of story you are writing it might be applicable (as in the aforementioned *Dresden* reference) to add layers of meaning to your work by borrowing all or part of a name from the history books or newspapers. This is a little different than what I describe above in the "Don'ts" section. Do so with care, I tend to use this more for naming vessels or instillations than people in my science fiction, and when I use it in my fantasy I'm more likely to borrow the name of an applicable mythological personage, than I am someone who actually lived. For example, I have a character that insisted on the nickname Scotch no matter how I tried to change it. I didn't discover the reason for the nickname until I'd written three more stories using the character...he was apparently Corporal Jack(son) Daniels, (thus the nickname Scotch) and it just hadn't come up on the page yet.

**Made-up Names** – for those who write fantasy or science fiction, at some point you are going to find yourself with a story where recognizable names just won't be applicable. You could just pick something obscure from another language, or you can make up something yourself either from whole-cloth or echoing an actual name. If you do, be sure to read it aloud to feel what it sounds like. Keep it simple and follow a recognizable pattern. If you start out with a complex name, be sure to establish a shorter version that will be easier on the reader when the action gets going (or yourself, should you be in a position to read your work aloud in front of an

audience.) When you must make up names for a group, try to establish a unifying syntax so the reader can believe the individuals came from the same culture. Or, conversely, distinctly different syntax if the characters are from separate environments. Try to avoid apostrophes or Latin-construct endings, these have become somewhat cliché.

### **For Your Toolbox**

To get you started on populating your worlds, here are some questions to consider in relation to the character and setting.

**What timeframe/setting are you writing in?** Very important, as in some cases this will determine if you use recognizable names or those that are made up or altered. Also, name usage changes over time, with old names falling out of favor and new ones being established. Lingual shift can even cause the spelling of established names to change, which you can use in your favor if writing a future piece.

**Are there established naming protocols for this timeframe?** Some cultures, classes, and religions are very specific on how a child is to be named. Research some of these traditions to give a more realistic feel to your work.

**What is the character's gender?** Some names are clearly gender specific, while others are gender neutral. Over time, some have even switched their orientation. In some cultures names are unisex, with a change in suffix identifying gender, such as Angelo versus Angela, or Ivanov versus Ivanova. Whatever pattern you establish, remain consistent.

**What is the character's social standing?** While in most modern cultures names are not restricted by social class, they can be an indicator, such as the stereotypical Buffy, Muffy and

Biff of the well-to-do set, as characterized in fiction and media, or Billy-Joe-Jim-Bob and Katie Sue, for more rural individuals. Now I don't usually recommend such stereotypes, but they can be useful to quickly and cleanly establish a type of character.

**What is the character's ethnic background?** Some names are specific to those of an ethnic group, or such groups have a variant of a common name, such as the Polish version of Agnes, which is Agnieszka. Be careful of using clearly identifiable cultural name when not writing in that particular cultural setting or of choosing names from different cultures for members of the same group and assuming the reader won't notice. All they need to do is recognize one of the names to make assumptions about the characters that could be completely wrong. Not really an issue if you are writing in modern-day America, but if you are writing in a fantasy world a recognizable name could prevent readers from immersing themselves in the created reality.

**Is there a cultural/religious tradition in the naming of children?** In centuries past, as in different societies today, children are named for relatives, saints, and other culturally determined conventions. This goes for surnames as well, where some children were identified by their personal name followed by their parent's name (Erikson) or occupation (Cooper).

### **The Summing Up**

There is no way I could cover all the possibilities or relevant issues here without writing a book...or at least a more extensive chapter in a book, so please understand this is just an overview. Basically, names should sound like names and they should fit your character and your story. With the advent of the internet it is relatively easy to find names from different cultures,

variants on common names, and the meanings of names, not to mention historical documents such as census reports that can tell you particular names popular in a given era or region. If you are unsure, look to what exists in the world for inspiration; there are countless examples all around you!

So, with no further ado, let us commence with the naming of names!