



*Hey, what's your
name again?*

*“Hey, what’s
your name
again?”*

**Welcome to our guided discussion about
*NAMING CHARACTERS***

...and other related elements in our stories.

- **Like most things in life, our topic presents us with more shades of gray than stark blacks, or whites.**
- **September 9, 2023 by John Britto**

Objectives For Today:

- Each Participant Should Recognize:
- We each have favorite names and name biases for a variety of reasons and...
- to be successful, we should consider *all other relevant issues* associated with assigning character names



Imagine
for a
moment...

- **That you're watching a horse race and all the horses are the same color, all the jockeys are dressed in the same shirts.**
- **How can you tell which horse is yours?**




Which is WHY...

- We need to make every effort to have EACH of the horses in our stories STAND OUT
- And, yes, it takes MORE than a NAME for a horse to win
- But once you cash-in your ticket and collect the winnings, THAT NAME sticks in your memory

But First, an Exercise:

- Please have ready a piece of paper and a pencil/pen:
- You will be asked to write **FOUR** specific **NAMES**
- The names can be from personal life or a story
- **NO EMBELISHMENTS—names ONLY**





Please write one
name for the
following four
characters

1. Your favorite *FIRST* name (for a man OR woman)

2. Your favorite *LAST* name

3. Your favorite *NICKNAME*

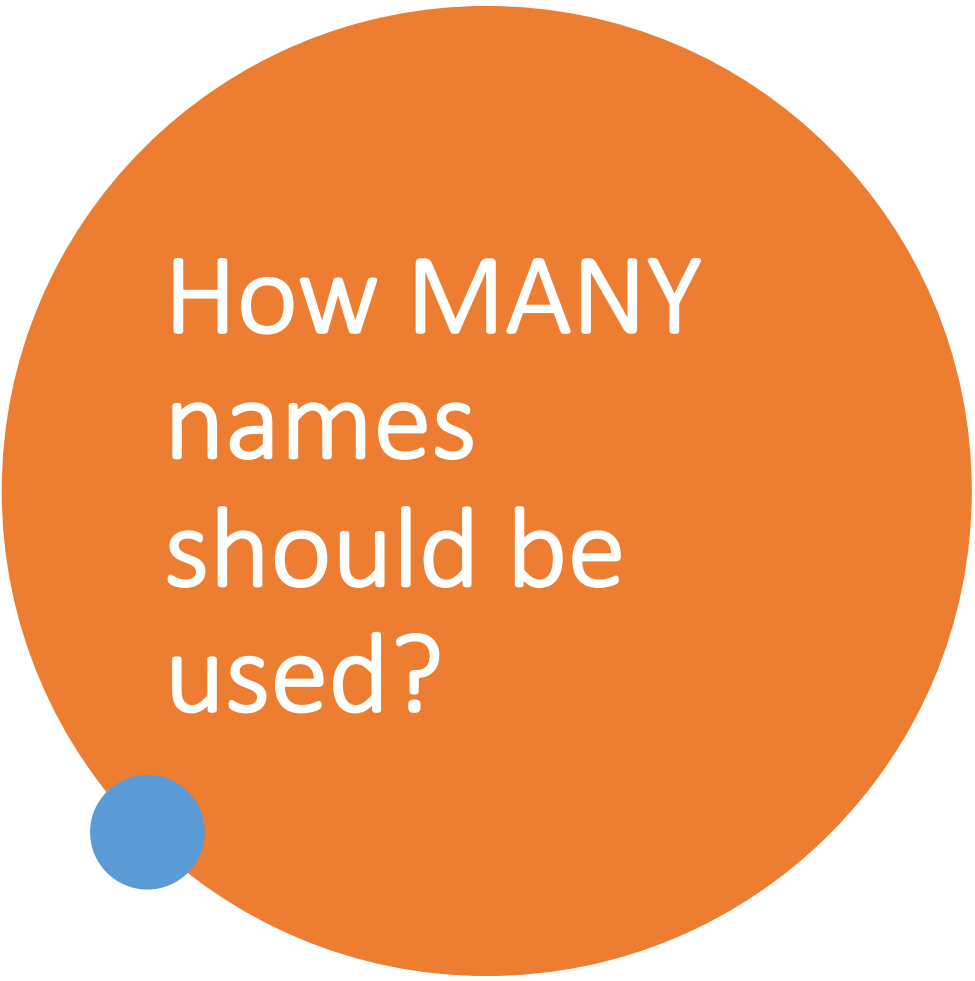
4. Your favorite *VILLIAN* name





Approachin g The Naming Process

- Writers have been known to select names based on:
- Sentimental reasons (family, friends, loved ones)
- A desire to plant a hidden meaning (a veiled clue) or
- Because they love the way a name sounds when spoken



How MANY
names
should be
used?

- As many as necessary to tell your story—and no more.
- *“Murder on The Orient Express”* has seventeen primary characters—including twelve killers and ONE detective—with an interesting name
- *“War and Peace”* uses 559 names

As an Aside...

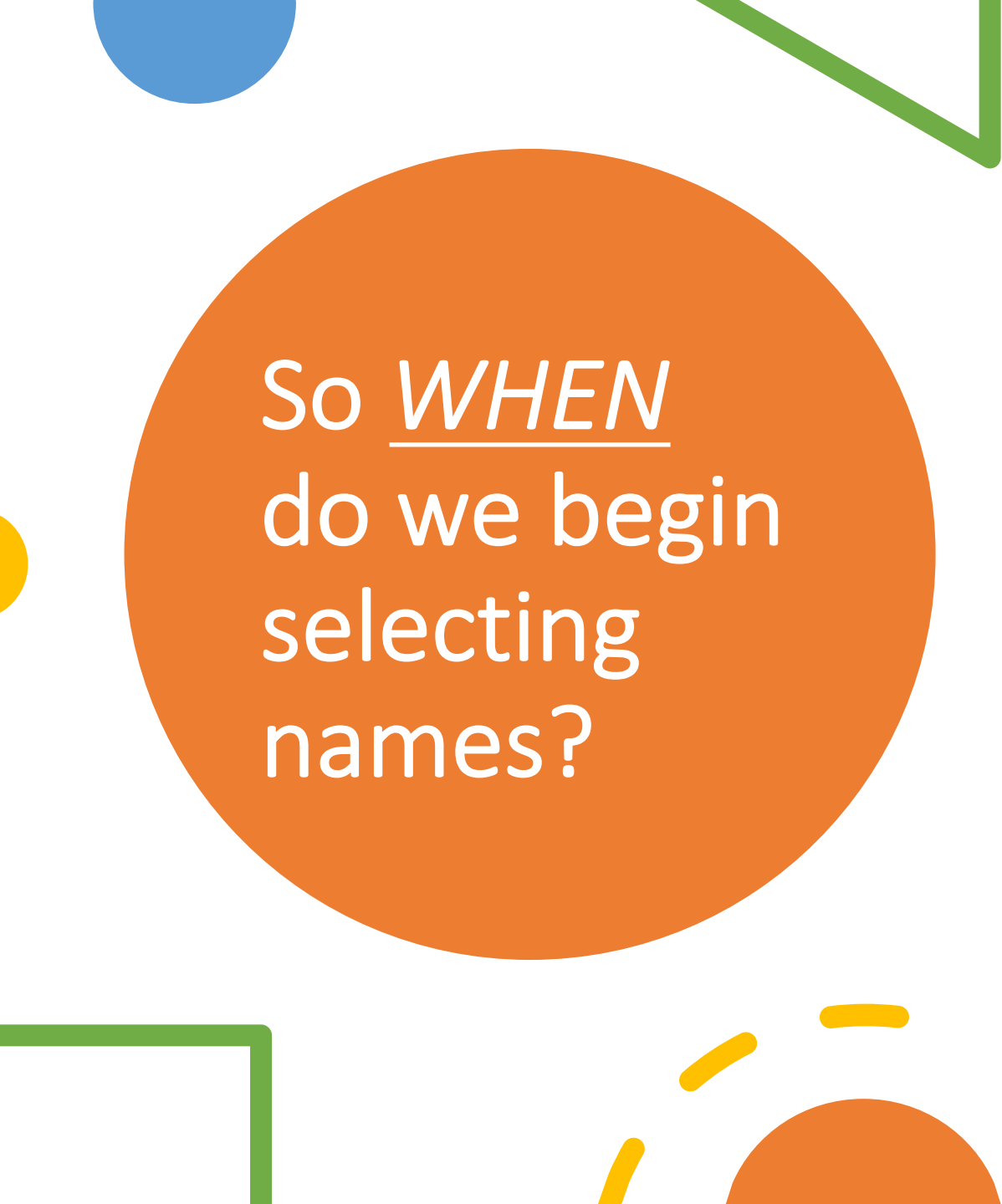
- **Not EVERY character requires a name**
- **Not every character requires a detailed description**

BUT ALL characters must add to/advance the story

- **In fact, there are many books and movies without named a protagonist**
- **(Nameless characters prevent readers from attaching the identity of another person, ethnic group or social background)**

The Nameless and Faceless

- The unassuming are NOT unimportant
- The bespectacled librarian, the overworked nurse, the Amazon delivery person, the friendly barista, ALL contribute
- Just because they don't have a NAME doesn't mean they don't have an IDENTITY
- Consider assigning a distinctive "feature"



So WHEN
do we begin
selecting
names?

- Each writer has **THEIR** system (or **NONE** at all)
- Some **KEEP** a journal of interesting names...“possibilities”
- Others jot names down as they create the **BIG PICTURE** for the project
- Some use “place markers” as they write and return later

One Approach

- For me, I like to begin with the **CONCEPT**, the **SPARK**, or a **NOTION**
- Often it arrives over time...or it announces itself like a slap in the face
- The idea progresses into genre, location, era, and a possible ending
- I generate a protagonist, antagonist, and plots/subplots
- Then comes the agony of mental gymnastics

Next: *The Mind Map*

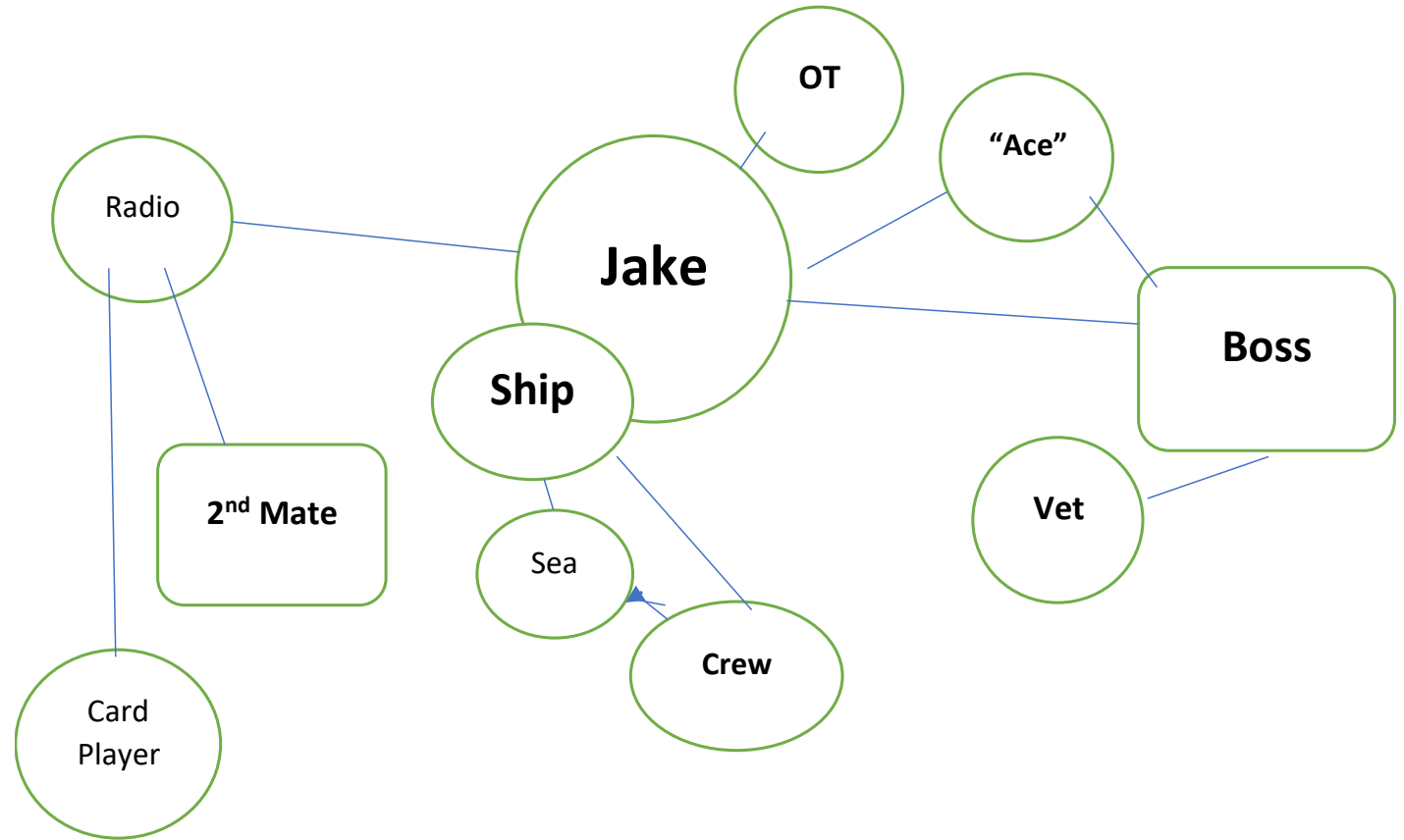
- I create a “mind map” (the protagonist is in the center of the page)
- I place the antagonist in a circle far to the left of the protagonist
- I usually do NOT assign names to either at this point
- I continue to place all characters (positive/negative) in circles
- The size of their circles indicates their relative importance



Finishing The Mind Map

- I always place the “supporters” to the right and the “detractors” to the left of the page
- As I create the “story people,” their backstories, their relationships in my story world, I’m generating possible names
- These “people” are connected by lines to represent their relationships

Mind Map Example



Next Step in Naming

- I create a spread sheet with space between each letter
- If I have ANY of the names established, I enter them on the sheet
- They're listed by FIRST name (then LAST name)
- Making sure they are different in all respects

Primary Considerations

- 1. Genre (Including subgenre and niche as appropriate)
 - Goal: Fulfill expectations of target audience for genre
 - Whether it's Fantasy, Sci-Fi, YA, Western, Romance, etc. our characters represent a specific population for the “story world” we create

Next Consideration

- 2. Era: (Past or Present) Throughout history, names fall out of favor, new names become popular
 - Be sure to generate names appropriate to the era of your story
 - If you have a character that is elderly, make sure you select a name that was popular from THAT era , NOT present-day choices

Diversity Considerations

- 3. Ethnicity, Cultural Ties, Family History and Heritage:
 - The FIRST RULE is to embrace all sensitivity considerations
 - Show respect; don't denigrate any aspect of the people in your story
 - Do NOT arbitrarily assign western behaviors or views to all characters



Geography

- 4. Location (Country, State, City, Region, Planet):
 - Unless you're writing *Fantasy* or *Sci-Fi* where you create an entire universe that doesn't exist, you must be accurate with naming the locations
 - Even with *Fantasy* and *Sci-Fi*, you must still apply a similar logic and be consistent with generating names i.e. ruling classes, tribal affiliations, social groups, etc.



Supplemental Sensitivities

- 5. We are creating a “whole person” in our written works
 - Even though NOT all of that information appears on the page, we must KNOW everything we can about our “story people” to allow our readers to understand/empathize with them
 - Always consider: Age, gender, ableness, non-traditional interests, educational attainment, travel experiences, social inadequacies, physical appearance, scars/disfiguration, etc.

Additional Guidelines to Consider

- 1. Avoid names that begin with the same letter. Blair, Betty, Bob, Brad, Bobby, Bud, Billy, et al.
- 2. Avoid names that CAN be male and female. Andy, Pat, Kelly, Les, Robin, Charlie, Blake, Jordan—
- unless there is a special twist or critical reason for such a name you're trying to achieve

And More:

- 3. Take Care With: Names that can be used for a FIRST or LAST name. Grant, Tyler, Harper, Chase, Carter, Hudson, Madison.
- 4. Don't: Use names that rhyme in the same story. Perry/Gary, Daisy/Maise, Lilly/Milly, Bernice/Denice, Andy/Randy, Kenny/Lenny.
- 5. Avoid: To the extent possible, excessive use of long names. Bartholomew, Constantine, Sebastiana, Philomenia—unless there's a special twist or critical reason for that selection.

And More:

- 6. Avoid: Making the majority of the names too short or the same length. Tom, Sue, Jim, Bob, Mia, Art—Mo, Al, Jo, Ty, Bo, Ev
- Mix: The length, sound, origin, and ethnicity (if/where possible)
- Avoid: Having a character explain the origins of their name--IF possible, **UNLESS** it's critical to the story

And More

- 7. Be Mindful: Of alliteration in name assignment.

- Alice Adams, Mary Martin, Cal Collins, Neal Nelson, Percy Perez

- 8. Avoid: What some may call boring, unimaginative names:

Jim Powell, Sue Jones, Amy Milner, Mary Wilson, Jose Garcia, Pete Wilson, James Miller

Consider:

- Where/If appropriate, the use of nicknames (or just letters) for naming a character. Ace, Cookie, Shorty, Tiny, Coach, Boss, Sarge—OT, JP, AJ
- Also, the use of terms of endearment to substitute for a name (sweetheart, honey, darling, handsome, and many others).
- NOTE: There are generational, regional, ethnic, and international preferences for using and applying these terms
 - And if/where appropriate, street slang terms may be helpful

Don't Be Cute:

- **10. Unless you're writing comedy—I. M. Boring, Ree Bound, Pearl Neckless, Dee Frost, Lily Padd, Sandy Beach, Phillip Flopp**
- **11. Don't Repeat: Any name—and don't forget to ADD each name you generate to your alphabetical master list (as you assign them)**
 - **Then double check its suitability against the information contained herein and with guidelines obtained elsewhere**

Careful Using Names Ending in S

- 12. This may cause errors in punctuation. Suppose your character is *Regis Jones*. Whatever he possesses is Regis's. When two or more of his family members appear in a scene, they're the Joneses.
- Their house is the Joneses'—you'll punish yourself, the editor, and the reader who will always be second guessing your writing.

Do NOT Use Real People

- **NOTE:** I am NOT an attorney. Here are three scenarios:
 - 1. Say you use your brother's name and some of his identifiable features in a story. In the story he robs a bank and shoots three people, including two children—he's a monster. Even though it's fiction, how will this make him feel? How about the rest of the family?
 - It's going to be awkward come Thanksgiving Day.

Scenario #2:

- You use a REAL living persons name. The story (*in your view*) does NOT disparage them in anyway whatsoever. But you've used enough personal information that she is easily identifiable.
- This is potentially legally hazardous for you.

Scenario #3:

- While it's true the dead can't sue, the legal counsel representing their estate **MAY** sue—even if you win, it's a costly process. Is it worth it?
- But if a person is **ALIVE** and a **PUBLIC FIGURE**, they're fair game—within limits.
- If they can prove “malice”—not that you were trying to hurt them, but you wrote something with the knowledge it was false or with reckless disregard, you **CAN** be sued.

Consider a Disclaimer

- “This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, locales, events, and incidents are the product of the author’s imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or locations, is entirely coincidental and not intended by the author.”

Name Generator Sites:

- *Google* has endless resources for writers, including assistance with locating interesting names. Just type in *Random Name Generator* and you'll be richly rewarded. There is a category for ANY genre imaginable.

Behindthename.com

Nameberry.com

Namegeneratorforfun.com

SeventhSanctum.com


Thestoryshack.com

Writerswrite.com

Summary

- We would do well to keep in mind that our creative “story worlds” offer our readers an escape from an existence that isn’t always pleasant.
- They may be seeking an illusion, perhaps romance, or laughter. Some may crave adventure or hunger to help solve a mystery.
- For others, a chance to make a new friend—a friend living in an exotic place, enjoying an exhilarating life, and granted an extraordinary name.

Remember

- **Assigning impactful names is an elusive art. There are subtle nuances that require our full attention.**
 - **Our dear readers deserve to be kept engaged at all times—excited to turn the page, eager to follow our characters.**
 - **Creating artful names for a cast of characters can be compared to adding complex music to compelling lyrics—it completes the piece.**
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And yet...

- ...most readers won't be able to articulate WHY they find the protagonist named "such-and-such" so captivating.
- ...most readers will go to work and discuss our "story people" with their colleagues. Our characters become their friends.





Finally

- In a very real sense, those haunting emotions that become aroused by our characters' persona (*including the name we have carefully, thoughtfully selected*) are very much like the mysteries of music that touch our soul: It is quite simply, an invisible art.





Now, let's
listen to
YOUR
NAMES:

- 1. Favorite *FIRST* name:
 - 2. Favorite *LAST* name:
 - 3. Favorite *NICKNAME*:
 - 4. Favorite *VILLAIN* name:
- 
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Thank you

