

## Really get to know your characters

For me, hitting a snag in a book usually happens like this: I'm writing, everything's going great, I'm in the zone and the words are flowing. Then I move on to the next scene or chapter and I hit a wall. The writing slows to a trickle or stops dead in its tracks, and my characters refuse to cooperate. And the only thing force-feeding words into their mouths is going to get me is more bogged down.

Most often the problem is that I don't feel comfortable with the scene, and if I'm not comfortable, my characters aren't comfortable. All this discomfort boils down to one of two things—either I'm writing the wrong scene for the wrong time in the book, or the scene doesn't belong in the book. Period.

But what if I know it's the right scene at the right time and the words still aren't flowing? When I'm in the zone, it's like I'm eavesdropping on my characters and typing what they're saying as fast as I can. It's like a "runner's high" for writers. To get into the zone, I have to do two things: shut up and listen.

I'm a bit of a control freak and that control seeps onto the page or screen. Listening seems like such a simple thing, but it ain't easy to do. Writers on a deadline want to control the direction their book takes, the pace at which it is written, and the schedule that it should stick to. I'm on my fourth book and it's just now starting to sink through my thick skull that I really don't have much, if any, control over these things, and I never will. A book is a creative work, and creativity refuses to punch a time clock.

The only way I can get the words flowing again is to sit quietly and completely immerse myself in the scene. I've been with my characters a long time and I know them well. But just like family and friends, my characters will occasionally throw me a curve ball. Like real people, characters grow and change. I learn more about them with each book. Their personalities, physical mannerisms, and the way they talk and react in a given situation changes over time.

The key to good writing is to get to know your characters just as well as you know the real people in your life. I should probably say "flesh-and-blood" people, because as most writers will tell you, their characters are like real people to them.

You know what your husband/wife/significant other/best friend would say or do in any given situation because you know them that well. Though sometimes they will surprise you and do something completely different and unexpected. It's what keeps life interesting. And when the same thing happens with your characters, and you capture it in your book, it's what will keep your readers turning the pages.