

Character Analysis

By Vanessa Hart

- + The useful short cut of finding a reference
- + Tips to holding the voice and the character arc throughout

An excerpt from "Audiobooks A – Z" by Vanessa Hart

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I come from a professional stage background which led me into voicing commercials which led me into voicing audiobooks. So that is the foundation from which I work and teach. If you are not an actor this WILL be difficult at first. But, just like anything else, the more you work it the better you will get and soon it will be second nature to you.

When you are doing your first few books I highly recommend over preparing. There is not really such a thing as over preparing but as you get better and better it will become less laborious and more instinctual.

I will be referencing the Guideposts from Michael Shurtleff's "Audition". If you have no acting background I highly recommend that you buy this book and also Uta Hagen's "Respect for Acting". This will assist you in learning how to act and also be a source of constant reference for you when making your choices.

Take your Character Sheets and put red dots – or whatever works for you – next to your main characters. Now, take those characters – one by one – and work the Guideposts.

For example: in *Liar, Liar* (see Character Sheet) there is a character named Rocco. You can see that he is the main characters brother, my reference for him is Russell Crowe and I've decided that his voice is frontal, low key and choppy.

These few notes are all I need now to get me to where I want and need to be. However, when I began (for at least the first 6 books) I did a complete acting breakdown on the main characters.

Simply put – you note who Rocco has significant interactions with and apply the Guideposts. With Rocco (to start) it's his sister Cat. So I would ask myself:

1. What's his relationship with her? He loves her and is protective of her.
2. What is he fighting for? To keep Cat safe and promote her business.
3. What happened just before the scene starts? This will give me Rocco's state of mind – did he just come from a challenging day at work? Or is he sitting having a beer with other Chicago cops? Both of these things happen in the book and his attitude is completely different in dealing with Cat depending on what just happened. Sometimes the book will give you these answers and sometimes you simply make them up.
4. Where is the humor in the scene?
5. If all of the above is true – what's the opposite of that? For instance, imagine a scene where a woman is being proposed to by someone she loves and wants to marry. If all that is true – it is also true that she's nervous about changing her life, he snores, questions about fidelity may be running through her head. Look for the opposites – they enrich your performance.
6. What's new? What does the listener discover about the character that wasn't known before?
7. These are about the NEED to open your mouth. Why does the character need to speak? Why does the character seem to change? Think of it this way. We need to be right. We need to get our point across. We need to change the other persons mind. This is why we talk, debate, fight and love. If logic doesn't work we turn to humor, then to debate, and then to arguing, then to making love . . . we keep changing our tactic until we win. This IS drama.
8. Choose BIG! Small stakes are boring and literature is about life changing moments.

9. What happens?
10. Where does the scene take place? This dove tails with #3. If you know what just happened, you'll know where it happened. Think about the difference in delivery between a conversation over coffee in the kitchen, hanging out with your best friend at your favorite bar and post-coital conversations when you're nude in bed. Pretty major differences wouldn't you say?
11. This is back to #7 – yet another way to get what we want and need.
12. What do you know, as the narrator, that the listener does not?

Do this with all the main characters and the rest will flow like water. As you have more and more experience these choices will come more and more naturally to you. I do not break down my manuscript in this way any longer but I go right back to them if I find myself stuck. The most common way I get stuck is that I find myself not liking a character. This is ALWAYS a bad choice. The Guideposts help me understand him or her better. This lets me empathize rather than judge. You must find the good in the villain or the villain is boring because he has no conflict. The Guideposts also get me back to where I need to be.

After you've completed this process – pick a reference for the character.

In this case, I chose Russell Crowe for Rocco. Why? Because I could see him as a Chicago cop who adores his younger sister and worries about her. He's protective and gruff but loving and devoted. It brings an immediate picture to mind. I can "see" him. I can see how he moves and dresses. I can "hear" him. I can hear his rhythms and interesting speech patterns. And I can hear him growl.

In my mind (the only one that really matters) he is Rocco and he's clear as a bell.

I do this for all recurring characters. It makes my work so much easier and therefore clearer and more consistent.

This may not work for you. But it's been a lifesaver for me.

And lastly, I make Vocal Quality notes.

Here for Rocco I've written "frontal, low key and choppy". This means something to me. Find your own shorthand.

All of this prep WILL help you hold the character's voice. The Chapter notes will keep you on target with regards to this characters arc. And if all else fails . . . you've had the forethought to have the engineer/director (or yourself) lay in reference markers

for the characters. Truthfully I have never completed an audiobook without having to refer to these at least once.

A note – if you are going in for a short story and will be completing your work in one day, I suggest you put your various character voices on a mobile device and take it into the booth with you. The director will not mind if you need to hear that “Southern Italian” voice you came up with. Think of it as your safety net.

Happy Narrating!

The captain, Cat + Rocco talk about blast/
Cat tells Jack that Dorothy blew up / Cat meets
Eric, her guard, Cleo pay a surprise visit/
Cat goes to Tino for help w/ Jack /
Cat sneaks into Eddie's house / special
Agent Larry Harding calls Cat / old, Spanish
maid

Chapter Fourteen

"Well, you've obviously pissed somebody off." The captain was glaring at me across the table at Mickey's with six of Chicago's finest standing behind him. The moment Dorothy blew, the boys in blue had taken over the scene. Blockading the street. Keeping passersby and the curious behind yellow tape. Calling in the evidence teams and ambulance. It's an amazing thing to see how fast a cop can sober up. But I've lived with cops all my life. They drink hard. They click into cop-gear harder.

Every one of them was looking at me with a direct, hard gaze. I could tell they didn't like it that Rocco's charming-if-annoying sister had just had an attempted hit made on her. But they were fuming, too. Their new rookie had almost bitten it. That doesn't sit well with cops. They're proprietorial. If anybody was going to get a chance to mess with the rookie first, it would be them.

"Think, DeLuca," the captain said. "We've already been through the first two years of men who want you dead. Since you've started the agency, there's got to be one or two that really stand out."

"What can I say?" I said, batting my eyes. "I have this power."

"This isn't the time, Cat. Cut it out!" Rocco was on his last nerve, big brother that he was. I'd lost mine with Dorothy but I wasn't going to let them see that.

"Listen. I've already told you. You can have a copy of my cases. All the info is in there, including follow up reports on some crazy cheater-behaviors after the case was closed. But if you'd just listen to me, and I'm speaking as a trained detective here..."

Excerpt from Michael Shurtleff's "Audition"

The 12 Guideposts

- 1. Relationship**
- 2. What are you fighting for? Conflict.**
- 3. The Moment Before**
- 4. Humor**
- 5. Opposites**
- 6. Discoveries**
- 7. Communication and Competition**
- 8. Importance**
- 9. Find the events**
- 10. Place**
- 11. Game Playing and Role Playing**
- 12. Mystery and Secret**