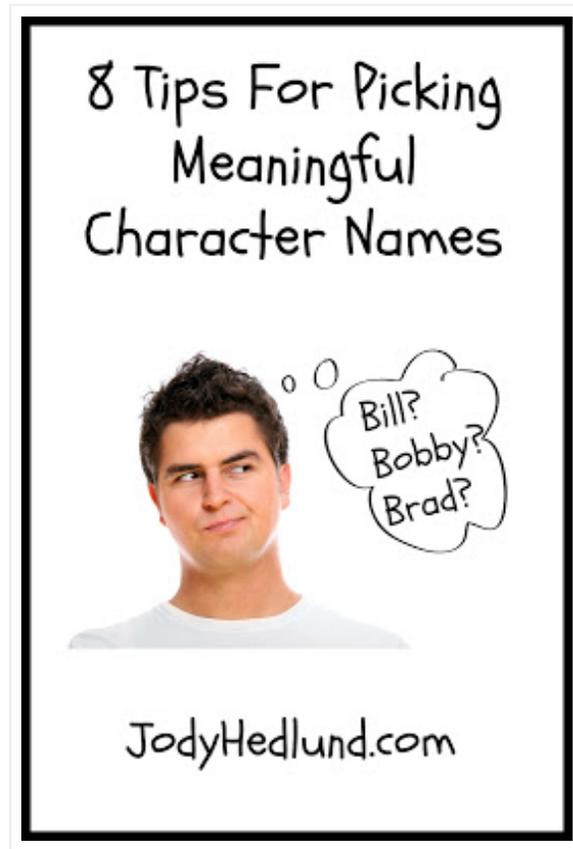


# Author, Jody Hedlund

## 8 Tips For Picking Meaningful Character Names



*By Jody Hedlund, @JodyHedlund*

How important are character names? Does it really matter what we choose? Or how we go about deciding?

Should we draw names out of hat? Or should we wait until exact names are revealed to us in a dream?

I'm slightly hesitant to give advice on how to pick character names. I can't tell you how to name your characters anymore than I can tell you how to name your real-life children. I truly believe the naming process will be unique for each of us.

But . . . I do think there are some general principles we can employ when deciding on character names. Here are eight things I keep in mind when naming my characters:

### 1. Develop our character before finalizing the name.

I get to know as much about my character as possible before finalizing the name. As I develop the character's personality, ethnicity, quirks, life-experiences, etc., I'm able to narrow down names that might match that person. For example, in *The Doctor's Lady*, my heroine is a well-educated, pious lady from a wealthy family. I chose the name Priscilla because it has a more refined and elegant ring than a name like Mary or Betty.

## 2. Find names that match our setting and fit with the plot.

Once my character is starting to come to life, I also evaluate how that character fits within the plot and setting. In *Unending Devotion*, which is set in the lumber communities of central Michigan, I sorted through rural names, as well as logging era names. And I tried to think which ones would fit within the tone of the plot.

## 3. Use time-period appropriate names.

This is especially critical for historical writers. I generally pull up the list of the most popular names for the year or decade in which my character was born. I also look at lists of names in biographies and research books for the particular time period of my book. In the 1600's, 29% of men were named John (that's about 1 out of 3 men!) and 15% of women were named Elizabeth. Thus, in *The Preacher's Bride* I felt almost obligated to name my main characters John and Elizabeth. Not really! But you get my point.

## 4. Use symbolism if possible.

While we can't always attach symbolism to names, we can look for ways to give special meaning to some of the names we choose. In my WIP, I looked at the meaning of hero names before choosing one. Whether the reader ever realizes it or not, part of my hero's character arc is about him learning to live up to his name—which means “strong as a wolf.”

## 5. Avoid picking names that readers will have a difficult time saying.

I get annoyed when I read character names I can't pronounce—oddly-spelled or too-long names. This is even more frustrating when the name belongs to the main character and I have to read the “weird” name ten times per page. I suggest avoiding names (as fun and nice as they might be) that might trip up our readers. We should also limit the number of foreign names for the same reason.

## 6. Avoid having names that start with the same letter or sound.

I keep a running list of every character that crops up in my book—a sheet I can easily scan. I do my best to start each name with a different letter. I don't want to have a John, Joseph, and Jacob all in the same book. Or a Polly and Molly. When names are too similar, we have to make our readers work harder to remember our characters. And our job as writers is to make the reading experience as smooth and pleasant as possible.

## 7. Remember, unique doesn't always mean better.

Sometimes when names are too unique they can distract a reader from the story. I like unique last names, especially when they're real (like Goodenough or Covenant). But often those kinds of names have a ring of disbelief. When I get too carried away, my editors send me back to the drawing board for a simpler name. I've noticed that middle grade and YA books can push the limits. For example, I'm reading *The Water Horse* by Dick King-Smith with my kids. The grouchy, complaining grandfather is aptly named Grumble.

## 8. Make sure our minor character names don't overshadow our main characters.

It's fun to find especially dark and sinister names for our antagonists. In *The Doctor's Lady*, one of the antagonists is named the Black Squire. He's rough trapper that wears a black eye patch. In *Rebellious Heart*, the bad guy is Lieutenant Wolfe. Yes, he's predatory like a wolf. He's hunting for smugglers and enjoys it just a tad too much. As we have fun shaping our minor characters, we have to make sure their names and personalities don't become more vibrant and alive than the main characters.

**What about YOU? What annoys you most about character names? Do you have any advice or method for how to come up with the perfect name?**



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20 comments:



**Southpaw HR Sinclair** November 17, 2015 8:56 AM

"Avoid picking names that readers will have a difficult time saying"- I wish more writers would adopt that tip!

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**Taurean Watkins** November 17, 2015 1:48 PM

On the other hand, sometimes we just can't avoid using "foreign" names.

(I put "Foreign" in quotes because what's foreign for the American/British vernacular isn't to those from the background you're writing about)

Plus, if we want to embrace more ethnic diversity we can't be afraid of using non-Anglo or (U.K./American/Australian) English names in every circumstance.

That's different to my mind from using less than common names just because, or simply to stand out, without putting thought behind the name for reasons beyond pronounceability, even it's not symbolic in context to the story.

Plus, some names are so tied to other characters that no matter how easily pronounceable they are, it can give readers the wrong impression of our characters if you used them, especially your character's first name.

Since I primarily write middle grade fiction, one key example is Paddington Bear, Any other character with that name will give readers familiar with this kidlit icon seriously literary whiplash.

But if you name your character's pet "Paddington" you might get a pass, or tweak it something like "Barkington."

To be continued...



**Taurean Watkins** November 17, 2015 1:51 PM

Also, since I watch a lot of anime\* (**\*Animation from Japan**) I know the name thing is a big issue, or sound like they're spelled, but the more mainstream some series become, the less this is an issue, especially, when they don't it can be a problem.

Some people mispronounce Luffy from One Piece "Luff-ee" (**Rhymes with "Muffy"**) when it's supposed to be "Lou-Fee." Another common pronunciation issue is with Naruto where (**esp. non-fans or in mainstream media**) pronounce it "Nah-Roo-Toh" when those who watch the show know it's "Nar-Roux-Toe."

Another way around this issue is pairing a non-Anglo name with common surname. Think Michelle Kwan, Margret Cho, Bruce Lee, Pat Morita and Kristi Yamaguchi.

If the names in question are either become mainstream via well-known personalities (**Ming-Lee, Ching, Shen, Ryo and Lee as a first name**), Though I caution using these names as they are so common in terms of easy pronounceable to most anglo readers.

My own name (**which isn't particularly non-western**) has multiple pronunciations, so I also made my nickname "Taury" to lessen that issue once I'm more well-known as an author.

(BTW, I prefer my own name pronounced "Tar-Re-En." (**The "U" is silent**))

To be continued...



**The Plan** November 20, 2015 7:59 PM

Yeah, I don't care what language it's from, it's wicked annoying to not be able to pronounce a characters name. May not be avoidable but if it is I'd avoid it.



**Taurean Watkins** November 27, 2015 4:43 AM

I get the pronounceability issue, trust me, my own name has multiple pronunciations, and it's not even foreign in terms of American names, but again, cultural difference play a part as I said above.

But I still feel we shouldn't feel ashamed using names that aren't Anglo/American.

I think readers can oversensitive on this issue, and again, that's not putting away the pronunciation issue, but to put it in context.

We'll just have to agree to disagree here.

Since I watch a lot of anime and read manga, the Japanese and Chinese names (beyond Lee and Mei-Ling) don't personally throw me as much.

An occasional name will trip me up at times, but it's getting easier for me to get how to pronounce the ones I'm less familiar with because I better get the cadence of the Japanese language, I'm in no way fluent, I just know more than the average American.

That said, Korean names can test my vernacular understanding, so I do "Get it."

But we can't name all our characters "Joe" or "Lisa", taking the challenges of historical fiction out off the table as there are special considerations there.

Again, what's easily pronounceable to us in America can be a struggle to those coming from other countries, whether or not they have an accent.

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## Reply



**Taurean Watkins** November 17, 2015 2:05 PM

That said, Facebook now lets you to audibly give the preferred pronunciation of your name, especially if it has various pronunciation, all of which are valid, but not how you prefer it pronounced, so I'm glad Facebook rolled out this pronunciation feature.

Though I hope a future update will let the pronunciation be more easily visible on your page front and center, since not everyone views your detailed bio.

I hope Twitter will adopt this feature in the future since that's my primary social network tied with YouTube.

Another potential issue can be names that are unisex but more commonly associated with one gender over another. Popular female names like "Jan, Kimberly, Kelly and Sasha can also be names for males. "Sasha" is an especially common male name in the middle east, albeit more rare in the U.S. whee it's more commonly a female name.

By contrast, common male names such as "Avery, Jamie, Casey, Jackie and Brook" can also be used by females.

Plus, some names were associated with being male at a certain point in time, but now are mostly used by females. Believe it or not, the name "Beverly" was once a common male name, though it was used by females, too.

Now it's almost exclusively a female first name, though like some first names, Beverly can be a surname, which again is uncommon.

Another way is to pair a common first name with a unusual surname. Kidlit does this a lot, such as Judy Moody, Gooney Bird Greene, and Allie Finkle.

For the boys we've got: Frank Zipper, Hugo Cabret, Huckleberry Finn, Skippyjon Jones and .

Even authors have used their unique surnames to their advantage. Think Francine Prose, Sarah Bird,

For the boys we've got: Frank Zipper, Hugo Cabret, Huckleberry Finn, Skippyjon Jones and Dewey Bob.

Even authors have used their unique surnames to their advantage. Think Francine Prose, Sarah Bird, and Joyce Carol Oates.

Male examples include, Nicholas Sparks, Carlos Ruiz Zafón, and Stephen Chbosky, and Tom Lichtenheld.

That's my take on this, and I hope it helps how another side to the naming issue, and I do get and respect Southpaw HR Sinclair's side of it.

That's my take on this, and I hope it helps how another side to the naming issue. Yet I do get and respect [Southpaw HR Sinclair's side of it](#).

[Reply](#)



**Taurean Watkins** November 17, 2015 2:22 PM

Correction: "Frank Zipper" should be "Hank Zipper." Sorry about that.

[Reply](#)



**Terri Wangard** November 17, 2015 2:35 PM

For my WWII story releasing in January, I used my family tree for German names. I also read tombstones for time appropriate names.

[Reply](#)



**Nancee** November 17, 2015 5:08 PM

Your article regarding names for fictional characters is so important, Jody. With as much reading as I do I have found that names play an extremely important role in a novel. Names can make or break a book. When a name is not fitting to a character or time period, or is a very unusual name, with questionable pronunciation options it turns me off. A well-written novel should contain names that really fit the characters in all aspects. As you also stated, minor character names shouldn't overshadow the names of the main characters. One author I know uses names of friends or influencers as her character names, and although flattering to the person whose name is utilized, most times those names are not reflective of a time period, locale, personality, or origin. Thanks for sharing your perspectives. Your careful consideration regarding choosing character names is well stated.

[Reply](#)



**Weird Workaholic** November 18, 2015 12:04 AM

I read a book once where there were many characters, and what made it confusing was that some of them had the same first name (but different last names). I've also noticed that in many of the chick lit books I've read, the main characters have unusual first names. I like "classic" names better.

[Reply](#)



**Laurel Garver** November 18, 2015 12:14 PM

I wish more writers used period-appropriate names. I see this not only in historical fiction but contemporary. A Gen-X heroine is unlikely to be named Emma, for example--that name is popular for the younger set. The Social Security name database has lists of the top 500 names per year back to the 1880s, making it super easy to check generational-appropriateness of

names for a number of generations

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### Replies



**The Plan** November 20, 2015 8:04 PM

I generally don't agree with this thought. A friend younger than me--I'm 40--just named her child Emma. I get your point but seriously names are trends that you can set. For contemporary stories just make it sound good. I could not care any less. When I do care is when it's a sci-fi novel and characters have space names. Why name your kid Pluto Cyrex. How is anyone's last name Cyrex?

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[Reply](#)



**The Plan** November 20, 2015 7:56 PM

As a reader, symbolism bugs me to death. Can't stand it. And sometimes don't you hear the characters name before you're writing. That's me. New character is Arthur Lowe. Didn't even know what he looked like but it just worked for me. Could be wrong, of course. I'm not exactly pushing content right now. Last comment. Why can't minor character names outshine the main one? Who cares? There is no way to know if it outshined it anyway. Who comes up with this stuff. Good article by the way. Really fun.

[Reply](#)



**Mica Scotti Kole** November 22, 2015 8:05 PM

I agree that your character names need to be simple, at least to read. I've seen so many names that, while gorgeous, clearly come from the writer's girlhood dreams of what they would name their firstborn... and they are tiring and distracting to get past.

Recently, I also read a book where two characters were names "Alexandra" and "Alexa" and it was so frustrating. The author is a friend of mine and insisted they "fit." So another important thing to think about is to make sure you, as a writer, are open to changing names, and not totally set in your ways.

[Reply](#)



**Karen and Gerard** November 23, 2015 7:06 PM

I agree completely about using names that are easy to pronounce. I am enjoying the Sarah J. Maas Throne of Glass series except for the names. At least J. K. Rowling gives the correct pronunciation for Hermione in the 4th book of the series.

[Reply](#)

**Pamela M. Covington** November 25, 2015 11:46 PM

Thanks for this post. I revised the names in my WIP several times for several of the reasons mentioned above. The main one was making sure that each one was different enough, without being complicated, to easily discern which character is which. I also avoided having them all begin with the same letter or using ones that could prove too difficult to pronounce. It's good to know I am on the right track!

[Reply](#)



**-sharyn** November 27, 2015 2:13 PM

Too many names starting with the same letter drives me crazy. Especially when I get them confused and have to go back and re-read sections.

Also, I have actually not purchased books because I couldn't pronounce a character's name, and it was too annoying to spend 300+ pages stumbling over it.

[Reply](#)

**Adrian Tannock** December 30, 2015 10:53 AM

Excellent list: especially tip 7. I sometimes find myself creating fanciful, farfetched names that - a few days later - have me cringing. I sometimes have to reign myself in and keep things simple. Thanks for a great list! :-)

[Reply](#)



**Dayle Trice** January 18, 2016 9:29 PM

Very helpful tips. Picking character names is a bit challenge.

[Reply](#)



**Medieval Girl** February 27, 2016 5:05 AM

Oh my, avoiding characters with names hard to pronounce, or similar names would be hard with a book set in the Anglo-Saxon age, or involving the Saxon royal family.

All except one of Alfred the Great's children had names beginning in 'Ethel' - as did his four brothers- and Anglo-Saxon names are complicated by definition. Try Etheltryth or Beorhnoth for size.

I suppose one would have to simplify them, or opt for modern, Anglicized versions.

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