

An NPC you can actually play

Ten questions that turn a name behind a counter into somebody you can run the moment the players start talking to them.

Not every NPC needs a date of birth, a full family history and three paragraphs of physical description.

Most of them need much less: a good first impression, a concrete goal, a way of reacting, and one thing that stops them being just another person standing behind a counter.

This document helps you build an NPC you can play straight away. If the character turns out to matter, you can always add the rest later.

1 Who are they at first glance?

Do not write a biography yet.

One sentence should be enough for you to remember a week later who you are dealing with.

A former soldier running an inn, because he promised his wife he was finished with the war.

A young priest who trusts people more than she trusts her own temple.

A merchant who treats every conversation as a negotiation, even when he is asking about the weather.

NPC:

2 What do they want right now?

Do not ask about their life's dream yet.

What do they want in the scene where the players will meet them?

Maybe to close the inn early. To sell a faulty product. To get rid of the guards. To find a daughter. To hide the fact that they do not know something. To persuade the party to leave them alone.

The goal immediately tells you how to run the conversation.

They want:

3 What do they not want?

Sometimes this question is even more useful.

What are they trying to avoid? A conversation about one particular person? A scandal? A fight? A debt coming to light? Going back to a place that frightens them?

They will do anything to avoid:

4 How do they behave around people?

Do not write down "polite", "nervous" or "suspicious" if you can turn it into something playable.

Instead of "nervous":

When he lies, he starts tidying whatever is lying in front of him.

Instead of "arrogant":

He never answers straight away. First he corrects the other person on some irrelevant detail.

Instead of "kind":

She remembers what somebody drank last time and puts the cup down before they get a chance to ask.

After a minute of conversation, the players notice that:

5 How do they react when they lose control?

This one is very useful when you are improvising.

When the conversation goes badly, the players threaten them, violence starts or somebody uncovers the secret, what does this person do?

They might shut down, start shouting, try to buy the party off, run, lie even harder, look for a stronger ally, give in immediately or attack first.

Under pressure:

6 What do they know?

Write down only the information that can matter during the encounter.

You do not need everything this person knows about the world.

They know that:

7 What do they not know, even though the players may assume they do?

This simple field does a lot of work. Without it, every NPC quietly turns into a walking encyclopedia.

An innkeeper may know who rode through the village and still have no idea what the local cult is actually planning. A guard may remember a suspect's face without knowing why the man was being followed.

They do not know:

8 What do they not want to say?

It does not have to be a great secret.

They may be ashamed of a debt. They know somebody they should not know. They saw something and do not want to be dragged into it. They lied to their wife. They sold information. They are afraid the players will take the truth the wrong way.

A secret works best when it shapes behaviour before it is ever revealed.

They are hiding:

9 Who or what are they connected to?

An NPC starts to feel real in the world when they are not standing on their own.

Pick at least one: a person, a place, an organisation, an object, an event, a debt or a promise.

Connected to:

The relationship:

10 What could make them important?

You do not have to plan this, but it helps to know where the character could grow if the players suddenly take an interest.

They may know somebody important. They have access to a place. Their problem is part of a larger conflict. They carry an object whose meaning they do not yet understand. They once belonged to an organisation that will come back later.

If the players take a closer interest:

The three-minute NPC

If you need a character in three minutes, fill in only this:

Name:

Who they are:

What they want now:

What the players notice immediately:

What they know:

What they are hiding:

Then stop there.

If this NPC appears once, you do not need anything else.

Example

Konrad Veller

Field	Konrad
Who they are	The keeper of a roadside inn, a man of the road who now values quiet and a full common room above everything else.
What they want now	To feed some soaked travellers, close the door against the night and have no trouble at all.

Field	Konrad
What they do not want	To talk about the old fire. He does not understand himself why the subject irritates him so much.
What players notice	He treats strangers like people he has known for years. He remembers who drinks what, and gets lost the moment anyone asks about his own past.
Under pressure	First he tries to defuse the conflict with a joke. If that fails, he stands between people before anyone can draw a weapon.
What they know	The road, the local traders and most of the gossip in the area. Some of his information is strangely out of date.
What they do not know	That the inn he runs burned down many years ago.
What they hide	Nothing knowingly. He simply does not remember parts of his own life.
Connected to	The White Stag, Elise Veller, a silver medallion.
If it goes further	The gaps in his memory can become one of the first threads leading to the real story of the inn.

An NPC does not have to be likeable to be interesting

A common mistake is assuming that important characters need a fascinating past, a strange mannerism and a great secret.

They do not.

Sometimes all you need is a person who wants something and has a good reason not to give the players what they want.

The guard does not refuse the party entry out of spite. Two days ago somebody claiming to be a prince's envoy killed her colleague.

The merchant will not sell the medicine because he already promised it to families in a nearby village.

The priest refuses to help because he is afraid that if he bends the rules for one person, fifty more will be at the temple door tomorrow.

That is enough to make the conversation something more than a Persuasion check.

An NPC should not be waiting for the players

If you want a character to feel alive, ask yourself one question:

What does this person do if the party never turns up?

Konrad closes the inn and goes to bed. The merchant travels on. The priest holds the service. The thief sells the goods to somebody else. The antagonist takes the next step in their plan.

You do not need a timetable. It is enough to know that the NPC has a direction of their own.

When should you expand an NPC?

Only when there is a reason.

The players come back to them a third time. They start to trust them. They take them along. They get into a conflict with their family. They uncover the secret.

Suddenly the person you created for a single conversation is part of the campaign.

That is when you add the past, further relationships, objects and details. Not earlier, and not because the sheet has empty fields.

The best NPC is not the one the GM wrote the most about. It is the one you can play again after the first conversation so that the players know immediately who they are talking to.