

Whiskers and Tales: Crafting Animal Characters for Stories with Kathryn Rossati

Animal characters can be great fun to create, and often add unusual and unique perspectives to stories. But what things might you need to consider in order to make them come to life in a reader's mind? Here's a little step-by-step guide to what I do when I create my own animal characters – perhaps you'll enjoy this method as much as I do.

Step One: Observe

Sitting and watching animals can give us great insights into their natural behaviour, which is key to making our characters believable. For this, you can either observe your pets at home (if you have them) or head outside and watch your local wildlife.

There are many wonderful places to watch animals in their natural habitats. Some of my favourites are forests, coastal walks and wildflower meadows. I've even been known to sit quietly in a graveyard to watch the local crows and jackdaws bicker overhead!

Wherever you go, always be respectful of the wildlife around you. Never try to disturb the animals – not only will this upset them, but you'll also likely miss the intricacies of their behaviour and thus defeat the purpose of why you're observing. Take time to be still; who knows what you'll hear and see?

Step Two: Take Notes

How does the animal move? In quick, darting movements, or closer to smooth, slinking steps? How do their ears move? What are their eyes like? How do they get around? If you see them eating, what kind of food is it? How do they pick it up? If the animal is asleep, what position is it in? Does it snore, or twitch as if it's dreaming?

The above questions are just a few things to think about that might be useful to note down. These kinds of details can be used in your story when describing how your character does something.

For example, if your character is a squirrel, the way it might go up a set of steps would likely be very different to how a human does, so that action would need to be described differently, too. In fact, a squirrel might not go up steps at all – perhaps it would leap onto the handrail and dash along it instead!

Step Three: Add Personality

Like humans, every individual animal that you see will have its own personality, and so your characters are no exception. Have a think about the animals you observed earlier.

Did any in particular stick in your mind, or do anything that made you think about them in a certain way? And if so, why?

Perhaps you thought the way they walked gave the impression that they were cheeky, or proud, or maybe even shy? They might even have made a noise that sounded like a laugh, or moved their mouth in what looked like a smile. Maybe they were even watching you as keenly as you were them.

Using any of these things can help define your character's personality, and you can jumble them up in any combination you like. Add in a few specific interests or habits (you could have a swan obsessed with its own reflection, or a rabbit who only exits its burrow backwards because it feels any other way is unlucky) to make the character completely unique.

This is probably the most creative part of the process, so experimenting is key. Remember, this is *your* character, so there's no right or wrong way for them to be.

Overall, whatever you come up with, be sure to have fun!