

100 tips for any non-functioning Call of Cthulhu Keeper

(by [/u/hepatitisbees](#))

As an insanely experienced Keeper who knows everything (my players hate me) I'm doing all of you the favor of writing a comprehensive, completely inarguable guide for any new, medium, or advanced Keeper. Just remember that everything I say in this post is completely right, uncontroversial and not up for argument (please feel free to argue, criticize or tell me I am wrong as hell – you can ask my girlfriend, I love being belittled).

Prepare to get educated (steered completely wrong)!

(**Note:** CoC stands for Call of Cthulhu.)

Part 1 – Testing the Waters

Before you PLAY Call of Cthulhu, find out if you LIKE Call of Cthulhu.

1. Read *The Color Out of Space*. It's crazy short, inexplicably scary, and doesn't mess around with things like plot when it comes to getting its spook on.
2. Read *The Whisperer in the Darkness*. A bit longer but heavy on the Lovecraft Lore. Learn some names from it – you'll see them again.
3. Read *The Call of Cthulhu*. Another longer one. Do I need to explain this one? Come on, it's the same name as the game you're playing.
4. Analyze them. Did you like them? Why or why not? If they really do NOTHING for you, you might not have the best time playing Call of Cthulhu. If you weren't terrified but you liked the concepts at least, that's normal. Lovecraft is good, but the writing is a bit archaic – deliberately so, even for the time period. Don't think that you have to LOVE LOVEcraft (ha) in order to love Call of Cthulhu – in CoC, YOU are the Lovecraft.
5. Read some other horror. You know what, just take all these points and mash them into one when you edit the article – you're just padding at this point. 50 tips are more than enough, for God's sakes.
6. Read about Role Playing Games, if you don't know what they are. They're pretty straight forward. [This](#) article shows the benefits of an RPG and how one plays.
7. Take a look at the Quick Start Rules. They are [here](#).

Note A lot of people are going to say "play other roleplaying games first." I get the sentiment but I actually disagree entirely with this. CoC is probably the least bloated Role Playing game you can play that doesn't come in a box, use an app or play with a Jenga Tower (I'm looking at you, Dread, my sweet baby). You can take everything you learn from just the Quick Start Rules and play CoC until the cows come home and begin speaking Eldritch.

Part 2 – Getting Started

Once you decide you LIKE Call of Cthulhu, you need to BUY Call of Cthulhu. Or pirate. Please don't do that; this isn't Call of Duty – these guys actually need your money.

1. Get the Keeper's Handbook. You can find it [here](#). Sorry about the price, I don't control it. It's totally worth it, though – the book is beautiful, heavy and packed with info.

2. Think about if you want the Investigator's Handbook. If you're just starting out, you probably don't. I've been playing for years and I still don't have it, because creating a new "class" in this game is INSANELY easy and I've never bumped into a situation where it felt needed. That being said, if you like to collect this stuff or you want the extra mechanics, then go for it. [Link](#).
3. Look at the Keeper's Screen. Then move on. Don't complicate things – not yet. It's cool, but you can find the rules in other ways. (I'm not confident about this – buy the Keeper Screen if you want, honestly. It's [here](#)).
4. Read Chapter 1 of the Keeper's Handbook.
5. Skim Chapter 2.
6. Leave Chapter 3 for reference – or when you need it. Just read over it really quickly, once. (I would recommend reading the "Creating Harvey Walters" section for backstory tips).
7. Skip Chapter 4. Do you really need an explanation of what Spot Hidden means?
8. Read Chapter 5. ALL OF IT. Remember that shit.
9. Read Chapter 6. Get the combat system down to a science. Nothing breaks immersion better than having to check rules.
10. Read Chapter 7. Read it well, once time and keep it for reference. Don't underestimate the power of a good chase in CoC.
11. READ THE SHIT OUT OF CHAPTER 8. You thought you had to read the shit out of Chapter 5? Treat Chapter 8 like your Bible. Take notes (Do you take notes out of a Bible? Whatever, take notes). Make sure you learn the sanity mechanics like the back of your hand, because if you're playing CoC right, your investigators will pour sanity out of their poor little mindholes.
12. Read Chapter 8. Did I mention that already? Whatever, read it.
13. Skim Chapter 9 until you're ready to give your players spells. The magic system in this game can get a little dicey, and there are a lot of small rules that can trip you up. Luckily, it'll be a while before you have to worry about it – half the time players can't remember they can cast spells, and the other half of the time it will make them go batty anyway.
14. Read Chapter 10. It's important.
15. Grab a couple names out of Chapter 11 – the rules in this chapter are mostly redundant. I've maybe used them once since I started playing.
16. Chapter 12 is your spell list. Don't bother reading it through.
17. Chapter 13? Magic items? In MY Call of Cthulhu? Only if they make your players go insane. Skim it once in a while to get some neat ideas, but don't think you have to memorize every device in there.
18. Chapter 14 is your monster manual. Skim it, read it over once or twice to get an idea but don't bother going crazy over it. It's unlikely you'll need the stat blocks, and if you're doing well as a Keeper, players won't have a chance to say "Oh shit, that's a Mi-Go!" CoC is all about the UNKNOWN, and your representation of monsters should reflect. That being said, it's good to know a few of these guys.
19. Don't bother reading Chapter 15 unless you want to run one of these scenarios. I wouldn't recommend it – I'll tell you (yeah, that's right, I'll TELL you) which one to run later on.
20. Chapter 16 is great – especially the Combat Flowcharts, Sanity Quick Rules and weapon/ object tables. IF you have a way to the digital PDF, I'd recommend printing out some of these appendixes.

21. Read The Haunting Scenario. Like 3 times over. It's in the [Quick-Start Rules](#). It's agreed upon by many to be the most simple and consistent, albeit the most generic, CoC starting adventure. You can't go super RIGHT with it, but you can't go wrong either.
22. Run the Haunting for your friends.

Good job! At this point, you're now a Keeper. You're probably not a good one, and that's fine – This first section wasn't here to get you to be a CoC badass, just to get you up and running to the point where you can functionally run a scenario without blowing your players away with how goddamn BAD you are.

Part 3 – Setting the Mood

Before you begin creating your own scenarios, let's focus on making your prewritten ones more interesting. Best way to do that? Make the room pretty. And some other stuff. Let's talk about that. We'll get up the ante with each point – Move as far forward as you're willing to go.

1. Control your voice. Whisper, yell, create poetry. You're 75% of what the players hear, so be worth hearing.
2. Act your NPCs – especially if they're crazy. Don't be afraid to scream at players if the situation demands it.
3. Play music. I like [this playlist](#). But use whatever spooks your goat. Just play some music.
4. Print out your handouts. Investigator finds a letter? Print that shit. City Hall Blueprints? Print that shit. Creepy cult symbols? Draw them if you can or just pull them offline.
5. Alter your handouts. Paper dipped in coffee/ tea and left out to dry looks old and extra spooky. Pour some corn syrup droplets or water mixed with food dye on top of it to make it look bloody.
6. Hand out secret notes to players. Make them make secret rolls. In general, just keep secrets. A paranoid player is an attentive player.
7. Make props. If your player finds an artifact/tome, just take an old book and do some alterations.
8. Use your smart home to change the mood with voice commands. Dimming the lights is one thing, telling Yog-Sothoth to dim the lights FOR you is ANOTHER THING ENTIRELY.
9. Play in a haunted house.
10. Demand blood sacrifices.
11. If your players die in the game, they die in real life. Call of Cthulhu is a horror game, do you think we're fucking around?
12. Try and summon an Old God to destroy the universe as we know it. Get your players to stop you – good, wholesome roleplaying fun.
13. Dim the lights.

Good job! Now you're a halfway decent Keeper if you've followed some of these instructions. If you've followed all of them, you might have some dead players. Should I be worried?

Part 4 – “Caring” for Your Characters

Backstories in Call of Cthulhu are important. They drive the game, even more so than Dungeons & Dragons! A character without a backstory is no character, and a player with no character might as well go home. If your player characters have no backstories, fix that first – then make them regret the day they decided to have families (in game only, please).

1. [Knife Theory](#). REQUIRED. FUCKING. READING. This post by [/u/jimbaby](#) is the single most useful thing I’ve ever read as a GM. I’d recommend around 7 knives, as he says.
2. [This](#) helps, too. Ask questions to build backstory.
3. Get on your players’ asses to make sure their backstories are filled. This may require repeated nagging. Whatever. You’re the Keeper, they’ll find a way to deal.
4. Remember their backstories. If you’re not going to remember them, why should they bother making them?
5. Use their backstories. If a character has a friend they haven’t seen in a long time, move their asses to wherever the party happens to be and make them a viable contact. If a character lost his mother, have him visit her gravestone for ties to his previous life and to regain sanity.
6. Corrupt their backstories. Also raise that bitch’s mom from the dead as a dripping, mucousy, pus filled zombie that tries to tear her own son’s face off. Say goodbye to that player’s sanity.
7. Acknowledge your characters’ skills, even if they’re obscure and infuriating. If a player uses occult, put it into a puzzle. If you have a character with high accounting, give him some ledgers to pore over. God forbid you have a player who decide to put 99 in Knitting – I don’t know, set a scenario in a nursing home or something. You can only go so far, dude.
8. Don’t be afraid to just destroy somebody. Granted, don’t put investigators in deliberately unwinnable situations just to be an asshole, but again, this isn’t D&D. There is nothing in the CoC rulebook that says a character won’t get instakilled if he gets hit by a train or decides to boil the Necronomicon into a porridge and consume. Fuck `em up. Failed rolls have dire consequences.

Good job again! You’re getting better, slowly. You keep all this advice and any prewritten scenario you run will go smooth as butter. Can you feel it now, Mr. Krabs? That’s what success feels like.

Part 5 – Caring for your players

No quotations, here. Don’t hurt your players, no matter what you read in Part 3. This requires the occasional bit of sternness, but we’ll get to that.

1. Give players a chance to succeed, always. This doesn’t mean win every scenario, but it does mean a silver lining on occasion. No, a schoolteacher, a hobo and 2 accountants can’t kill an entire small town’s worth of cultists. They can barely kill a Deep One. They can, however, save a life, hunt down information, get out of dodge, stop a ritual, and maybe stave off defeat for another few hundred years. CoC is bleak, but its bleakness only means something if you allow for the occasional high. If you don’t give players a chance to rest, to work at something, to succeed, then it sucks all the fun out of watching your favorite investigator claw his eyes out with a rock hammer.

2. Don't let players get sidelined. This gets harder the more people you have. Don't let one or even two people steal the show.
3. Make sure they don't WANT to get sidelined, though. The player's character may be quiet, or they themselves may be. Just because someone isn't talking doesn't mean they're not having fun. This isn't a contradiction, it's a fine line. Good luck with that.
4. Give each player a chance to shine. Find out what they like, and use it. If someone wants some action, throw a little Pulp Cthulhu in there. It is fine to give a player the spotlight for a few minutes if they're about to do something really important.
5. Ask for settings. Do this out of game, not on the same day usually. See if there's a type of place a player wants to visit – small towns, big cities, Antarctica, trains are all fair game. So is a portal to the Dreamlands where all objects render in 6 dimensions and make you lose your shit the moment you see them.
6. Draw attention. If a player is having trouble paying attention, check in with them and ask them why. Don't call them out – at first. You might have to after repeated attempts to reach out.
7. Don't get distracted. Table talk is done beforehand and after, not during the game.
8. Watch for cellphones. These are the fucking worst – I'm not even going to say anything else.
9. Most importantly, make sure everyone there is having fun, INCLUDING YOU. It is your job as the Keeper to run the game, manage the game, and control it. You're like God for a few hours, except no one is arguing if you exist.

Good job, you're getting better, blah blah blah. You know the drill.

Part 6 – Keeping Organized

Good. Fucking. Luck.

1. Write EVERYTHING down. Keep session notes of literally everything. Even if you don't have it organized at least write it, you're more likely to remember that way.
2. Organize your notes by scenario. Many people will say otherwise on this – keep folders for NPCs, Locations, artifacts, etc. However unlike D&D, CoC is a bit more "Monster of the Week" with some overarching themes. If you have an NPC that appears in multiple scenarios (which won't be as likely as in a lot of other RPGs), just put them in both folders.
3. Don't be afraid to use tech. Tech isn't evil just because it didn't exist in the 1920s. Typing is faster than hand writing. It is easier to alter and move notes on a computer than in a physical folder. It isn't MANDATORY to use tech for organization, but I can promise you it will help a lot.
4. Use OneNote. For God's sakes, use OneNote. It's like it was tailor made for RPGs. If you ask me, I will send you my notes folder for OneNote so you can see how I organize it; generally, I just do one section per scenario, one for Living PCs, and one for Dead PCs, as well as a section for reference pages. You don't have to do that, but PLEASE USE IT. If you use it for a month and don't like it, I'll take pictures of myself eating kale (gross).
5. Take a half hour after each session to update, write out and reorganize. It'll be worth it. I don't know what else to tell you. Take the time to organize, it'll make a world of difference.

At this point, you should have notes, handouts, and a good sense of how to play CoC. Think you're smart enough to create a scenario of your own? Let's find out.

Part 7 – Now, Let's All Agree to Never be Creative Again

Call of Cthulhu is hard to write scenarios for, or so people will tell you. They're right. They're also wrong. Let's talk about it. While weaving a web of intricate clues can be taxing on the old noggin, 90% of plot holes in this game can be stitched up neatly with "Elder Gods, tho" and any attempt a character makes to poke holes in your story is very likely to kill them, anyway. Let's look at some tips for writing out a scenario.

1. Start with a location and a history. Pick a place, a setting, and a time period. Easy enough. Let's say... 1920's New Orleans. EZ.
2. Next, pick a conspiracy. Don't look at what the players are investigating, look at what happens at that location without them. 1920's New Orleans... Deep Ones are kidnapping women to bring to their underground palace in the sea. Still EZ.
3. Now, think of how they find this out. Coming from that, build your story OUT until there are clues that players can find. How are Deep Ones kidnapping women? They are in league with City Hall. Okay, but how does City Hall kidnap women? They take them through the sewers during Mardi Gras, when everyone is wearing masks and people won't be looking out for each other. What evidence of this is there? Dropped City Hall IDs. Records of previous investigations in the library. Uncooperative police. Manhole covers, if you want.
4. Find out ways for the players to get clues – no matter what. The only way for the scenario to resolve is for players to find clues. Typically, for each piece of knowledge you want players to learn, you want 3-4 clues to go with it. So: You want players to track someone down in City Hall. First, you provide some research instances in the library. If they miss it, place an inconspicuous City Hall ID in a location they DO investigate. They still miss it? An NPC tells them that they saw men in black suits carrying away a girl nearby. ARE THEY STILL FUCKING MISSING IT? Great. City Hall doesn't like their snooping and kidnaps them. Either way, they've figured it out – but the consequences are more dire.
5. Add spooky moments to terrify both investigators and players. Kidnap someone. Remove their favorite NPC. Attack them with Deep One Hybrids and make them run away. Remove Gravity. Give them scales. Kill them. The possibilities are endless, as long as they're fucked up!
6. If you're having trouble, steal from horror movies.
7. Don't worry about whether or not everything makes sense. Like I said, "it's magic" is a great explanation for almost everything that happens in CoC. "If I tell you I have to kill you" is a great explanation for everything ELSE that happens in CoC.
8. Make contingency plans. Anticipate how the players may ruin your finely crafted scenario and smack them down when they try.
9. Don't plan too many contingencies. It makes the game seem stuffy. Be prepared to improvise when necessary.
10. Fail forward on pushed rolls. Don't do this all the time, but the game gives you the option. If a player pushes a roll and fails, give them what they want with godawful consequences to make. For example, a player pushes a Lockpick roll and fails – the lock breaks, but noisily, attracting cultists abound.

11. Prepare descriptions. Not for everything, but if events or characters or monsters are going to appear no matter what, then make sure you know what they look like, sound like and do. IT makes things run smoother and you look WAY more authoritative.
12. Consider player skills when you put events and locations together.
13. Don't be afraid to railroad sometimes. This one is going to be super controversial, and this all depends on your idea of what CoC is supposed to be as a game. Don't ever tell your players no, but in my opinion, it is okay to rewire events so that, no matter the choices they make, they all result in pretty much the same thing happening. Just don't let them know!

If you're confused, don't worry – there's a lot to this shit. Your first attempt at this may take hours, days, even. But you'll get better. Or not – who knows. There's enough prewritten stuff to go around that it doesn't really matter anyway!

Part 8 – Yes, Call of Cthulhu has Campaigns too

And they're easier to put together than you'd think. The worst hurdle people have regarding building a campaign for this game is the idea that each scenario has to follow the same line. A campaign isn't a long, start to finish story – it's just a way to tie all that shit together.

1. Pick a Deity. Doesn't matter who – like it REALLY doesn't matter who. Pick a name and read up on them a bit, cause they'll probably pop up someday.
2. Create a cult. Make it big. Give it a leader, and a lot of presence.
3. Give that cult a symbol. Give that deity a symbol. Put that symbol around from time to time at the least opportune minutes. It takes barely any effort, and it gives your scenarios that extra boost of "oh, these guys again."
4. Use all this information to "seed" adventures. Basically, include it when the time comes to guide the players to the next location you want to have your scenario. Checking out some forged ledgers? Stamp them with your cult's symbol. Pop them in every other scenario to remind players they're there, but don't make it super easy to get to them. Eventually players will find these guys on their own, in time.
5. Ultimately, the deity you chose is the cause of everything bad in the world, but it doesn't really matter, because if your investigators explore enough to find that out, they've also explored enough to die violently.
6. Run side scenarios. This is really the best way to create a campaign that feels living and breathing, but it requires your players to do some extra legwork. If one player character retires or goes to a different location, don't leave them hanging – everyone else creates new characters (it really doesn't take that long) and follows a guy for a little bit of side action. Take a trip to the Dark Ages or Gaslight (there's extra books for both of these) and explore the origins of a previous encounter. If you're feeling REALLY ballsy – Go back in time and play through a scenario that directly influences an event in the mainline game – for example, if your New Orleans' City Hall is in league with monsters, jump back 200 years, violently invade their little town with Deep One Hybrids, and force them to make that pact. Watch the looks on their faces as they process the idea of being their own worst enemies.
7. Visit dreams. They're awesome, they make no sense, and you can revisit them as mainline locations several sessions later for an extra mindfuck.

Part 9 – Fuck, I Only Have 85 Points!

Okay, real quick – what other shit can I recommend you do so I can hit 100?

1. House rule if you don't know something. Stop consulting the fucking book in the middle of a game – just figure it out later.
2. Killing characters is not the end all be all for this game. It's more fun to watch them struggle. Don't be AFRAID to do it, but allow for attachments.
3. Give deadlines and timelines. IF players don't move, make them by destroying their hotel rooms, killing their friends, and giving them the chance to fail completely.
4. Track time for their sake. If something takes an hour to do, let them know in order to drive that deadline home.
5. Hide Sanity and Health, and describe it in narrative fashion. Don't say "You lose 4 sanity," Say "your head swims and you are momentarily overcome with rage as you struggle to wrap your mind around what you've just seen."
6. Can I just do 90?
7. No? Fine. Don't use monster names, just descriptions. If your players are versed in Lovecraft lore, alter it so they don't know what to expect. Deep Ones don't shed scales and walk around town, but yours do if you want them to. YOUR story is more important than Lovecraft's in this game, and they're your monsters as long as you're the one telling it.
8. This applies to deities, spells, and tomes as well. Don't say "you cast Flesh Ward," say "you look on in terror as your skin hardens like diamonds. Hard, bulbous blisters form – protecting you, but deforming you."
9. Some clues must be found. Make sure players find them.
10. CoC is all about the Unknown. Don't let your players know.
11. Go watch True Detective – just season 1 though.
12. Victory in CoC is living and trying to forget. It's not killing a god – it's keeping the world alive for just a few more years.
13. Combat is lethal. Avoid it. Stress this to your players.
14. Story and Scares are the second most important thing in this game.
15. Having fun is the most important.
16. Ha, I did it!

ANNEX

KNIFE THEORY

When writing a character's backstory, it's important to include a certain number of "knives". Knives are essentially anything that the DM can use to raise the stakes of a situation for your character. Anything that can make a conflict personal, like a threatened loved one or the appearance of a sudden enemy. They're called "knives" because the players lovingly forge them and present them to the DM so that the DM can use them to stab the player over and over again.

The more knives a player has, the easier it is for the DM to involve them in the story. So it's important to have them! When breaking down a backstory, it kind of goes like this:

- Every named person your character cares about, living or dead (i.e. sibling, spouse, childhood friend) +1 knife [EDIT: a large family can be bundled into one big knife]
- Every phobia or trauma your character experiences/has experienced +1 knife
- Every mystery in your character's life (i.e. unknown parents, unexplained powers) +1 knife
- Every enemy your character has +1 knife
- Every ongoing obligation or loyalty your character has +1 knife
- Additionally, every obligation your character has *failed* +1 knife
- Every serious crime your character has committed (i.e. murder, arson) +1 knife
- Every crime your character is falsely accused of +1 knife
- Alternatively if your character is a serial killer or the leader of a thieves guild, those crimes can be bundled under a +1 BIG knife
- Any discrimination experienced (i.e. fantasy racism) +1 knife
- Every favored item/heirloom +1 knife
- Every secret your character is keeping +1 knife

You kind of get the point. Any part of your backstory that could be used against you is considered a knife. A skilled DM will use these knives to get at your character and get you invested in the story. A really good DM can break your knives into smaller, sharper knives with which to stab you. They can bundle different characters' knives together into one GIANT knife. Because we're all secretly masochists when it comes to D&D, the more knives you hand out often means the more rewarding the story will be.

On the other hand, you don't want to be a sad edgelord with too many knives. A buttload of knives just means that everyone in your party will inadvertently get stabbed by *your knives*, and eventually that gets annoying. Anything over 15 knives seems excessive. The DM will no doubt get more as time goes on, but you don't want to start out with too many. You also don't want to be the plain, boring character with only two knives. It means the DM has to work harder to give you a personal stake in the story you're telling together. Also, knives are cool!! Get more knives!!!

I always try to incorporate at least 7 knives into my character's backstory, and so far the return has been a stability good time. Going back into previous characters, I've noticed that fewer knives present in my backstory has correlated with fewer direct consequences for my character in game. Of course, this isn't a hard and fast rule, it's just something that my friends and I have come up with to help with character creation. We like to challenge each other to make surprising and creative knives. I feel I should mention it's important to vary up the type of knives you have. All 7 of your knives shouldn't be family members, nor should they be crimes that you've done in the past. That's a one-way ticket to repetitive gameplay. Part of the fun is making new and interesting knives that could lead to fun surprises in game.

20 Questions for Deep Character Creation

There are a lot of ways to start a roleplaying character. After playing countless games and trying lots of methods, I've settled into a set of 20 questions. Whether I'm making a player character or GMing a new campaign, I use it every time to focus on the key elements that not only give a character a deep and significant background, but probably more importantly make them fun to play and easy to integrate into adventures.

I break the whole thing down into four parts. You can start anywhere, but I recommend doing a section all at once instead of skipping around. Each stage goes deeper. You can easily do just the first five for a short game, saving the whole list only for very long campaigns, or even revisit the list at major intervals as your character develops.

Concept

These are the fundamentals, the broadest strokes. Every character should have answers to these five, including NPCs. It's the quickest way to give the sense of a full individual instead of a cardboard stereotype.

1. **What emotion best describes your character?** Find one primary emotion your character expresses. Try to use a colorful, specific word to describe it. For instance, instead of "angry" you might say "vengeful" or "raging," or instead of happy you might say "cheerful" or "exalting."
2. **What emotion does your character evoke in others?** How do others react to you? Do you impress, scare, calm, excite, or perhaps annoy? Again try to find the most specific term you can. Is this reaction different between friends and enemies?
3. **What does your character need most?** If your character had everything he or she needed, why go on an adventure? Most people's needs are fairly universal, although they can change over time. Common needs are survival, security, companionship, esteem, romance, family, or wisdom. Consider what your character's starting needs are, and where you want them to be by the end of the adventure or campaign. It helps to establish this need with the GM, to ensure it fits with the themes of the game.
4. **What is your character's goal in life?** This should be the principle, underlying motivation for everything your character thinks, says, and does. If your character were lying on the brink of death, what makes him or her cling to life? What could your character lose that he or she would consider worse than death? This goal is often broad, and sometimes unachievable. Whatever the nature of the goal, it should be something your character can strive for his or her entire life. The best goals are ones that can be threatened, as they will help create more compelling adventures. Ideas include justice, revenge, protecting loved ones, redeeming one's self, or gaining some kind of power. When you think of something, ask yourself "why?" to make sure it isn't because of some larger, more important goal.
5. **How does your character believe this goal can be accomplished?** Because the goal can often be ideological, the method to achieving it is sometimes equally insubstantial. Your character's methods should be strongly tied to beliefs (or lack of beliefs), and primarily be a decision of lifestyle. A character bent on revenge might consider perfecting a fighting discipline, while a character devoted to a cause might consider a religious or philosophical doctrine.

Background

For any campaign, a character should have come from somewhere. Spend any length of time with someone and their history is bound to come up. These questions give your character history, and therefore dramatic and emotional weight.

6. **Where did your character come from?** Consider your character's initial roots, before he or she was a teenager. These times are what shape your character the most. Who were your parents? Where did you live? What was your family's economic and social status? How were you educated? What were the three most important lessons you learned?

7. **When did you grow up?** Everyone begins taking responsibility for their own lives at different times and in different ways. Describe the events related to when your character started taking care of him- or herself.
8. **What values does your character hold?** Name three things your character considers sacred, and three things he or she is ideologically opposed to. These things will usually stem from a combination of your goals and your personal history. Consider especially where the values came from. Was your character taught these values? Did they develop as a reaction to something your character considered noble or diabolical? Establish lines that your character will not cross in pursuit of his or her goal to add challenge to playing your character.
9. **How does your character dress?** Start generally with an overall statement of the quality of your character's appearance, such as projected social status, trade, common activities, or how groomed or slovenly your character is. Begin to hone in on telling details, especially those things that most people take for granted. How exactly does your character style his or her hair? What decorative articles does your character wear, such as jewelry, decorated buttons or buckles, a belt, gloves, etc.? *One especially telling detail is footwear.* Describe in detail what your character wears on his or her feet, including cut, tightness or looseness, heel height, sole hardness or softness, lacing/buckling/tying or lack thereof, toe shape (square, round, pointed...?), color, material, shininess, cleanliness, repair or disrepair, and any other details you can think of.
10. **What are your character's means?** Consider all the resources your character has. This should include material resources such as money and property, social resources such as friends and allies, and personal resources such as skill, courage, strength, wits, etc. It might help to make a list of all your character's resources that he or she might use to overcome adversity. Consider challenges like fights, puzzles, traveling, persuading (and being persuaded), and any others.

Details

Now we're picking nits. These five are all about texture and color. These answers take your character beyond an adventure serial persona and into reality. Answers to these make your characters memorable for years.

11. **What are your character's personal tastes?** Name at least three things your character enjoys for no reason other than personal preference. A good place to start is with each of the five senses. Consider a sound, smell, taste, feeling, or sight that is uniquely pleasing to your character. Also consider activities such as hobbies or habits. Name three things your character dislikes, as well.
12. **What are your character's opinions?** Decide upon at least three major aspects of local society and your character's opinion on them. This could be generalizations such as rich or poor people, more specific areas like a particular political or religious group, or very specific things like a prominent individual or an aspect of the character's job. Check with your GM for relevant things in the campaign to have opinions about.
13. **What is your character's comfort zone?** What environment, activity, or mindset puts your character at ease? This can add a lot of color to your character during stressful moments, as he or she will have a place to go or a thing to do at these times. It helps to have a comfort zone broken up into the above parts so at least some of it is portable.
14. **Who has had the biggest impact on your character's life?** Name and briefly describe at least one person who had a significant impact on how your character perceives the world today. You can name more than one, but they should each reflect different aspects of your character's beliefs. Use this as a reference point when your character has to make difficult decisions (i.e., "What would so-and-so do?").
15. **What are some of your character's unexpected quirks?** Name three things that are unexpected about the way your character behaves, such as things that go against his or her normal social status, age, or trade. How about three unexpected talents or abilities like being able to sing, or knowing some trivial knowledge, or being good at math? Three things your character can't do that most other people can such as whistling, swimming, or reading well? How about three things your character fears, such as heights, dogs, or insects?

Player

These five questions direct your play experience itself rather than your character. What do you want out of your game? If a group answers these together, they can expect dramatically rewarding game sessions, and the GM will know clearly what's expected to give everyone a good time.

16. **What kind of story does your character belong in?** Who are the characters your character interacts with? What settings does he or she inhabit? What themes are important? What conflicts does your character face? These things are important to understand so your GM can create adventures that will engage your character, and so you will have a better chance at getting along with your fellow players' characters.
17. **What role does your character fill?** Roleplaying is all about the ensemble cast. Make sure you fill a unique role in the party, and you aren't stepping on anyone else's toes. Consider your role in the interpersonal relations of the party, your role in combat, what skills your character is best at, and what thematic note your character hits.
18. **What should the other players know about your character?** These should be major thematic points, your character's general emotion (if it isn't secret), potential surprises or areas that might be difficult, and any other pertinent information. Also start sketching out potential interactions, such as another character you might go to for help (or who might go to you for help), or someone you'll probably butt heads with. Getting these things out in the open is important to ensure there aren't unpleasant surprises.
19. **What is your play style?** Do you like heavy character immersion, or attention to detail in the rules, or perhaps you're especially goal-oriented? Maybe you're a bit competitive. Do you prefer lots of colorful descriptions, or a quicker framework understanding of situations? Do you speak in your character's voice? You may not even be aware of your own play style. Keep this in mind as you play so you can better communicate with your fellow players about the direction of the party as a whole, and the course of the adventure. This also helps your GM understand your personal needs at the gaming table.
20. **How do you want your character to die?** Your character won't live forever, although you might not play him or her to the end. If you had your choice of deaths for your character, what would it be? Death of old age, having survived through all his or her trials? Perhaps a bloody, violent death? A noble sacrifice? Happenstance? It can also provide an unusual layer of texture to your roleplaying, as you have a better understanding of your character's fate. It will also tell you if your character is a tragic or heroic one. Finally, it can help your GM in resolving conflicts in-game if he or she has an idea of your comfort zone with threats to your character's life.