

Chapter Eight - Defining character

An earlier chapter devoted considerable attention to Ahab's character and how one might research and then define it. In this chapter, we will explore the challenge of defining the character of a city, a writer and a restaurant. These three are used as examples to illustrate the thought process that will produce a winning document. Character is an issue running through much that matters. It is worthy of careful analysis.

After considering these three thinking and writing tasks, you will be well prepared to identify and describe the character of many other institutions ranging from banks and utilities to hospitals and symphony orchestras.

In each of these three challenges, you will begin by studying and learning. You will gather evidence to help you make a list of key words that capture the essence of the city, the writer and the restaurant.

Once you select a city, you will ask many questions. Unlike the typical school report about a city, you do not care much about basic facts like the number of museums or acres of parks. You want to know if these museums are exciting and worth a visit. You want to know if the parks are inviting and safe for a runner even in the early morning or evening hours. Do people smile at strangers? Are they warm and welcoming? Are they in a big hurry? Do they tend to be rude? Does the city have a joyful, pleasant spirit? An esprit? Is the city suffering from an opioid epidemic? Are there many homeless? Panhandlers? Police that seem well trained and respectful? Is housing reasonably priced or barely affordable? How is the air quality? The crime rate? The climate in summer and winter? The traffic during rush hour?

These are just examples. Each person cares about different things, so try adding another 15-20 questions that would help you to characterize a city. Once you have your list of questions, try answering them. You will quickly discover that the intangibles like the mood of a city can be very difficult to capture. Many Internet resources for cities have been launched by the Chamber of Commerce, businesses and agencies who want folks to visit. They may play down the negatives and exaggerate the

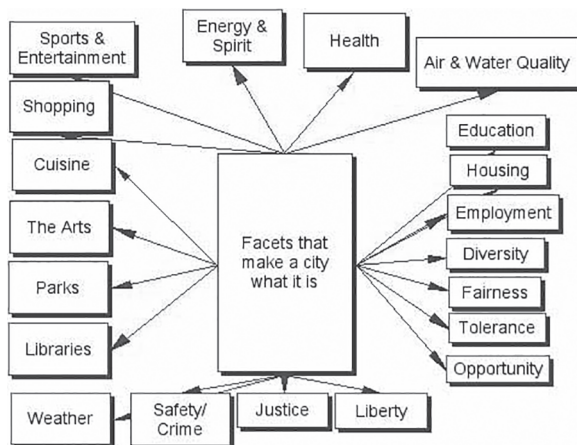
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positives. Having lived in downtown Denver for several years right next to the 16th Street Mall, I witnessed a disturbing amount of panhandling aimed at tourists and convention attendees, but if you do a Google search for “16th Street Mall” you will find mostly positive descriptions. If you add the word “problems” to your search you will discover the dark side, with the Denver Post reporting on June 27, 2016, “Denver going after ‘scourge of hoodlums’ on 16th Street Mall.”¹



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In 2002, I published an article, “Other Worldly Research” in my online journal, *From Now On*, that details strategies to find the truth about a city.²



That article will equip you with the tools to approach veracity as you learn about your city.

¹ “Denver going after “scourge of hoodlums” on 16th Street Mall.” <http://www.denverpost.com/2016/06/27/denver-going-after-scourge-of-hoodlums-on-16th-street-mall/>

² “Other Worldly Research.” <http://fno.org/dec02/owl.html>

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Once you have completed your research, you will ask yourself questions like the following:

1. Did I make a list of qualities and issues the city fathers and mothers might want to keep in the shadows?
2. Did I deconstruct messages and ads to identify classic distortion strategies?
3. Did I locate critics, unusual sources, and critical comments?
4. Did I challenge claims by checking facts?
5. Did I look for evidence to the contrary?
6. Are my findings and conclusions anchored in facts?

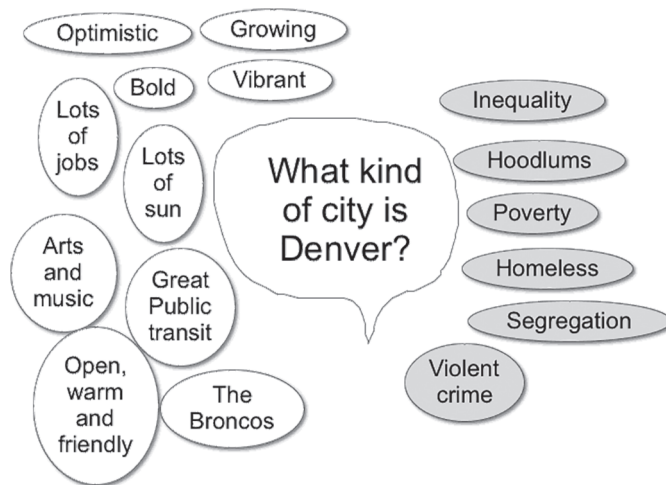


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Eventually, you will seize upon a dozen or more key words and phrases that synthesize and summarize your findings. You will list these in your mind mapping software as we did with Ahab in Chapter Three, and you will attach evidence to each of these words to substantiate your choices.

Because I loved Denver for its many outstanding features, my own list is quite a mix of praise and what may be taken as concerns.



Having completed your city research, you will consider your audience and what kind of document you intend. Is this a short review for a travel Web site? Is it an opinion piece for a local newspaper? Is it an article for a travel magazine? Answering these questions will shape the length, the focus and the tone of your piece.

You will compose an opening paragraph that captures the essence of your city. You will be emphasizing 4-5 major themes that help the reader understand your city.

Because of its altitude, Denver was known as the Mile High City long before marijuana use and purchase became legal, but the name is also fitting because it is bold and optimistic — the fastest growing city in the U.S.A. — sadly burdened by serious problems of crime, homelessness, poverty and vagrancy. Reasons for pride such as a vibrant art scene, wonderful restaurants, sunny days and a booming economy are undercut by persistent social problems and inequality.

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Having made a clear opening statement, you will set about building a case in much the same manner outlined in Chapter Five. If the document is brief, you will be quite selective in your choice of evidence. In the case of Denver, for example, I found information about crime in *Neighborhood Scout*:

For Denver, we found that the violent crime rate is one of the highest in the nation, across communities of all sizes (both large and small). Violent offenses tracked included rape, murder and non-negligent manslaughter, armed robbery, and aggravated assault, including assault with a deadly weapon.³

In writing your document you will mine the evidence you collected, reporting mostly the nuggets likely to give credence to your view of the city.



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The Writer

You may select a writer you admire or one who really bothers you. It is important to distinguish between the artist on the one hand and the artist's work on the other hand. While Hemingway wrote some astonishing sentences and paragraphs, many find his personal attitudes offensive. It would be a shame to let our feelings about an artist block us from reading a book as remarkable as *The Old Man and the Sea*. Sometimes, the artist's struggles in real life are transformed by the art into something astonishing.

³ <https://www.neighborhoodscout.com/co/denver/crime>

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As the saying goes, “You’ve got to suffer to sing the blues.”⁴

Once you select a writer, you will ask many questions, just as you did with the city. Does she invent characters who seem real and interesting? Are her stories captivating? Does she write page turners? What are her stylistic tendencies? Does she make you think? Are the issues facing the characters intriguing? Does she write dialogue that is realistic and contemporary? Does she make you laugh? chuckle? cry? Does she describe locations in a way that makes them easy to picture?

You will be able to add at least another dozen questions, some of which you may draw from earlier sections of this book like those on the elements of style.

Gillian Flynn, author of the novels *Gone Girl*, *Dark Places* and *Sharp Objects*, is a novelist I would select for this challenge. Having explored questions like those above, I create a diagram like the city diagram, and I gather examples from her books to support those judgments.



As with the city challenge, synthesizing and condensing findings into a few pages is a difficult task. The opening paragraph sets the stage for the rest.

Gillian Flynn may be the best American writer of this decade. In *Gone Girl* she created a thriller that did much more than tease, tantalize and entertain. She captured much that is true about our times, and she managed this with hard-edged, often ironic panache.

⁴ Line from a David Bromberg song - “Suffer to Sing the Blues”
https://youtu.be/nE_IXJyHlSI

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The Restaurant

Imagine you are writing a review of your favorite restaurant for TripAdvisor or Yelp. What are the elements that you care most about when you rate a restaurant? If you are limited to a half dozen paragraphs, what will be your focus?



- Variety?
- Taste?
- Price?
- Decor?
- Service?
- Price/value?
- Location?
- Noise?
- Crowd?
- The view?
- Live music?
- Background music?
- Speed?

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Sometimes customers use social media to complain about bad shopping, hotel or restaurant experiences, but for the purposes of this chapter, focus on what makes you love the restaurant you have chosen. You do not need to comment on all the aspects listed above. Mention those that make your choice special and remarkable.

Jax's Fish House and Oyster Bar in Denver is my favorite bar and restaurant because of the great people who work behind the bar and the almost always festive crowd that gathers there. The food is always amazing, but it is the down-home feeling that makes this a great place to spend an evening. You can choose between the very large bar or tables, but I think the bar offers the most friendly interaction, whether you are a local or a visitor from out of town.