

# Species Characterization in Anthrofiction

## Ten Useful Techniques with Examples

### 1 Introduction

All writers of fiction know about characterization. Even those who haven't studied the subject still do it instinctively. Characters must be different from each other and they must have their own personalities. This is true for all genres of fiction.

Besides the characterization of individuals<sup>1</sup>, with anthrofiction we also have the opportunity to characterize species. For example, if writing a story with anthropomorphic raccoons, characterization of your raccoons as a species means you make them different from humans in ways that goes beyond mere appearance.

While it isn't a requirement that you do species characterization when writing anthrofiction, it does help your story come alive. Your characters may be distinct individuals, but without the addition of species characterization they will come across as little more than humans in fur coats. Your raccoon is a raccoon only because you say it is, not because it behaves like a raccoon, experiences the world as a raccoon does, or thinks like a raccoon.

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1 Renni Browne has an excellent essay on characterization titled, *Characters: Love Them to Life*. This can be found at [http://www.editorialdepartment.com/PDFs/rdb\\_characterization\\_article.pdf](http://www.editorialdepartment.com/PDFs/rdb_characterization_article.pdf)

As humans we cannot truly know how a raccoon experiences the world or what sort of thoughts it might have, even an anthropomorphic raccoon. But as creators of fiction we invent how others think, feel, and experience the world every time we write. We cannot truly know how Dudley Doright feels about his nemesis Snidely Whiplash, so we imagine.

Species characterization gives us a framework or method in which to stretch our imaginations so we can create the illusion that our character is a raccoon and not a human inside a raccoon's skin. When we push the raccoonness of our character down into the plot, or structure of the story, then we end up with a story where the character must be a raccoon—a human in that role would not be realistic. It's at this point when the story becomes what I call essential anthrofiction.

I should mention that you are not required to anthropomorphize only animals as characters to create anthrofiction. You may use plants or nonliving things too. Animal, vegetable, or mineral—all are fair game as characters in anthrofiction.

## **2 Anthropomorphizing Your Characters**

To anthropomorphize means to give something human attributes. In this case you will be giving human attributes to your prototype species to turn them into your story's character species. A big part of this process is to decide how far to push away from the original and how close to human to make them.

### **2.1 Which Comes First, the Characters or the Story?**

Sometimes you'll be inspired to create a story and will need to find the perfect species to fill the roles for that story. Sometimes you be inspired to create a nonhuman character, or inspired to anthropomorphize a particular species, and then to find a story to fit your characters. And sometimes your story will not have a need for any particular species and you can use almost anything. So the answer is: whatever fits.

When you select a species to fit a story, or select a story to fit a species, there's the possibility the result will be essential anthrofiction. If so, you have the option to use all ten of

the following techniques. But even when you pick species willy-nilly and write your story as anthrofiction because you want to and not that the story demands it, you can still use as many as half these techniques, and more if you push it.

## 2.2 The Process: an Example

In this section I'll give an example where I had the inspiration for a story, then invented a species to fill that role. Often the process is not this involved.

The theme for the summer 2007 short story contest was “a sense of wonder.” I wanted to write a sample story to illustrate the theme, but allowed myself less than 30 days to do so. I also chose the wrong story—it started with a young male *whatever* listening to an elder tell a story and vowing that he would go on a similar adventure when he grew up. The end of the story was to be his adventure when he makes a grand discovery. I'd written 4,300 words and was still less than half finished when I ran out of time.

Before I started writing I had to answer the question, what is a *whatever*? I envisioned a stone-age people and a social process where the young males are sent on quest for story. In fact I named it *Quest for Story: the Sky Serpent*. A man was not a man until he went on his story quest.

My characters wanted to be stone-age humans—*Homo sapiens* with the time dialed back a few tens of thousands of years. But one cannot write a sample story for an anthrofiction contest that uses humans as the characters. I needed another species.

My first thought was that this could be an alternate earth. So rather than modern people descending through the lineage of *Homo*, one of the other genera of great apes developed intelligence, a society, and eventually technology. However, I had certain attributes in mind for my characters' species, and none of the great apes fit. I then decided to create a species from scratch.

After some thought I settled on the idea that it was not a primate, but a member of the *Procyonidae* family (raccoons, coatimundi, kinkajou, cacomistle, and the red panda) that produced my characters' species. Not one of the existing species, but an invented species

from an invented genus within the family.

I imagined a bipedal creature a bit like a cross between a raccoon and a red panda in coloration and markings with the addition of some cryptic stripes that would vanish around weaning. The raccoon-like mask would also fade, but not vanish until later. A humanoid with fur, a tail, ears perched atop its head, a short muzzle, and a button-like nose.

***Quest for Story: the Sky Serpent – part 1***

Grandfather knelt in front of Tinker and stroked the top of his head, rubbing his small, rounded ears. “Besides, he’ll soon be a boy. His stripes and mask have faded, and next molt he’ll look like a proper little man.”

The *manmeri bilong bus* were the people of the forest and their cubs sported tawny stripes against reddish-brown fur, cryptic coloration in the dappled shade.

They lived in villages, tended garden plots, used tools, and cooked their food—but it was language that was critical to the story. Language was a major force behind their society, which revolved around the role of the storyteller. This was the story’s theme.

***Quest for Story: the Sky Serpent – part 2***

Stories stimulated their brains and separated them from animals. Stories drove the development of their language. Stories were the currency between clans and tribes, a civilizing influence. Stories were the core of their existence. They could not yet know it, but stories were their future—one day their Quest for Story would drive them to the stars.

Their society is partly inspired by African lions, where the females are the core of the pride and males come and go. However, in my storyworld once a male joins a clan, marries a female, and settles down—he stays. All the children in a clan are known as clan-brothers and clan-sisters. This is a major behavioral departure from the way humans live.

***Quest for Story: the Sky Serpent – part 2***

The Quest taught a boy lessons that no lectures or practice sessions ever could, provided he survived; it burned off the wanderlust and adventuresome spirit common in a young man’s heart; and as he traveled from village to village it gave

him the chance to meet the girl he would return to, once his quest was complete.

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Women were the heart of each village, the core of each clan. It was not proper a young man take his clan-sister to wife, and so the Quest removed him from that temptation.

Another source of inspiration was the Masai tribe of east Africa. The idea I borrowed was that at a certain age boys were taken from their mothers to join the other boys in training to be men. A bit like conscription for military service.

### ***Quest for Story: the Sky Serpent – part 2***

It was the first day of training, when the older boys were taken from their grieving mothers to start their journey toward becoming men. Elder Nori was welcoming the boys and listing their lessons for the coming moons. Once training was complete the boys went out on Story Quest, some singly, some in pairs.

While the boys go through training to prepare them for their quest and manhood, the girls go through similar training to prepare them for womanhood. Storytelling is different for women—they are the keepers and tellers of the parables and mythology of their people. In a way, that makes them the keepers and teachers of their religion, but there is no formal priesthood. The end of training and beginning of the quest is timed by the seasons and the moon.

### ***Quest for Story: the Sky Serpent – part 3, Kolta's 1<sup>st</sup> scene***

At the full moon after the season of heavy rains ended, came our passage from training for the Quest—we were now young men. The village held a feast for the four of us and our three clan-sisters—Ife, Jara, and Kama—who were now eligible for marriage, having gone through their own regimen to become young women. The girls wore *paspas* woven of colored grasses on their right arms to signal their womanhood and availability for marriage. Kama and I had played together as children and we had been kept apart during training. I already missed her joy of discovery and her mischievous streak and it seemed odd to see her in this new role. I wondered which of the parade of young men, who would soon pass

through our village on their own quests, would return to make her his wife and become a part of our clan.

It takes my two heroes, Tinker and Kolta, a few days to figure out that rushing from village to village, on their way toward the wilderness, doesn't give them any opportunity to experience the jungle and to begin to build a repertoire of stories—so they are stuck telling childhood stories. The content of the story, as well as the quality of the telling, imparts status on the teller. So without adult stories they are treated as if they were still boys. Once they figure this out, they slow down, wander off the path, and experience the jungle. This gives them their first powerful story, which elevates their status in the next village.

***Quest for Story: the Sky Serpent* – part 3, Kolta's 1<sup>st</sup> scene**

A young woman appeared by my side and offered me some dried fruit. She had a faint mask, which made her look younger than her mature curves suggested; soft reddish-brown fur; and the cutest little round ears that strained forward to hear everything I said. She wore several colorful *paspas* around her right arm, a sign of her availability. I'd noticed her earlier, but she had stayed half-hidden behind her mother at dinner. Now she was by my side and smiling. My eyes were drawn to her belly where she'd painted a circle using yellow pigment—a symbol of fertility, and highly erotic. That hadn't been there before! She giggled when her hand brushed mine. She caught my gaze then averted her eyes. She offered to fill my cup. My pulse raced. Oh, I could get used to this! And I noticed that Tinker seemed to be having similar luck.

Of course since my heroes haven't completed their quest so they are not yet attractive as a marriage partner—the girls are just practicing. Some of my characters' attributes were inspired by Eugene Arenhaus' focco<sup>2</sup>, in particular his ring symbol of the female sex<sup>3</sup>. Although this young woman didn't just draw a small ring, but encircled her belly with paint.

The language is a real one: Tok Pisin from the highlands of western Papua New Guinea. The names are real names from that region and I also borrowed their naming

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2 Focco are a race of fur-covered aliens. <http://www.chiseledrocks.com/galleries/focco.htm>

3 Gymnophile is a fancy way to say nudist. <http://www.chiseledrocks.com/galleries/focco/outfit4.htm>

conventions. I doubt the humans living in the western highlands form such tightly bonded villages where all the females in the village are blood relatives—that's my lion-inspired addition.

Their normal diet is fruits and nuts from the jungle, often from trees they cultivate; yams grown in garden plots; insects, mostly beetle grubs; and bird eggs, usually laid by the *kakaruks* (chickens) that stay around the villages. They almost never eat meat.

If this process looks a lot like world building, that's because it is. I've done more work than is needed for the typical short story, but not enough for a novel. The original story outgrew its target of 3,500 words, and it wants to keep growing—not as a single story, but as a collection of short stories that follow the lives of various individuals.

### 2.3 Other Examples

Consider a novel like *Watership Down* by Richard Adams. His rabbits look exactly like natural rabbits, eat the same things as natural rabbits, live in the same sort of dwellings as natural rabbits, have a society similar to natural rabbits, and have the same lifespan as natural rabbits. The attribute Mr. Adams anthropomorphized was that they could think, reason, and talk as humans do. During the process of anthropomorphizing his rabbits, Adams created a complex culture, language, proverbs, poetry, and mythology, including a mythological hero figure named El-ahrairah. Adams' rabbits are partly based on the work of British naturalist Ronald Lockley who's work *The Private Life of the Rabbit* was published a few years before Adams finished his manuscript.

Near the other end of the spectrum is a storyworld like you find in James Bruner's *Zig Zag the Story*<sup>4</sup>. Zig Zag is a borrowed character and including her dictated the shape of his storyworld. In his storyworld, species are used as if they were races and cross breeding is possible. Zig Zag is a tiger-skunk cross (impossible in reality) and her leading man is a German shepherd-coyote cross. The chief villain is a cheetah and many species of mammal are represented. All species

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4 <http://www.zzstudios.com/>

appear to be equally capable, approximately the same size, and have similar biological needs. They wear clothing, drive cars, live in houses, work at jobs, eat in restaurants, and go on vacations. While Mr. Bruner seems to have done no species characterization during the creation of his storyworld, he has slipped in some species-specific body language and a few behaviors.

Also consider a character like Wolf from the TV miniseries *The 10<sup>th</sup> Kingdom*. The magic of Wolf is on the inside, where he is very much a natural wolf in mannerisms, attitudes, and behaviors. Thus Wolf is the opposite of some anthropomorphic characters. Rather than being a human in a fur coat, he is a wolf trapped in a human body. Wolf is the grandson of Big Bad Wolf and Little Red Riding Hood, who married. So now we know how that particular fairy tale turned out. And like when his grandsire Big Bad first met Little Red, when Wolf first meets Virginia he can't decide if he wants to eat her or woo her.

### **3 Know Your Prototype Species**

First, know your species in its natural form. This usually means research. If you don't like research then either stick to species you know well—for example if you have pet ferrets then use ferrets in your story—or anthropomorphize something that no one can know, such as kitchen appliances or flowers, or create a species. And don't assume that watching Walt Disney's *Robin Hood* 20 times has given you special insight into foxes, or that extensive experience with house cats means you understand African lions. If you want to use foxes or African lions, do the research.

Research will do more than save you from embarrassment—it will give you a lot of details in your story. It might even give you the basic idea for a story.

### **4 Areas of Focus: Ten Techniques**

When characterizing species, there are several areas you can focus on. Physiology will drive almost every difference between humanity and your nonhuman characters. The big

questions are: do you make your characters a different size than their natural prototypes, how many reproductive cycles per year, what do they eat, what eats them, how long do they live, how do they die, etc. Psychology plays a role too. For example predators will have a different attitude on life than prey. Remember that some animals are both predator and prey (example: shrews) and some are neither predator nor prey (example: elephants). Some prey species may not expect to form long-term bonds with friends or family members—they can't count on anyone they know surviving very long.

The examples that follow are from my own work. Because the stories are different, the storyworlds are different, and the goals I had for my anthropomorphized species are different. This is a guide to the storyworlds I used as examples in this essay:

- ***Bot Story series:*** I've had my own Internet-based V.R. (virtual reality) world named SkunkWks since 2000. I wanted to run a few bots as nonplayer characters, but bot technology was, and still is, far too primitive to allow one to program any sort of personality. So I decided to write a few scenes where my imagined bots would interact with each other and with human visitors, and this evolved into *Bot Story Book 1*. Thus, *Bot Story* was driven by the characters and the story followed. I started with five ferret bots because we had pet ferrets, and with a name like SkunkWks I decided I needed a skunk bot too, which necessitated some research. The ferrets' role is to play the part of pirates and thieves, although they are more party pirates than slash-and-burn pirates. The skunk's role is that of the voice of reason. *Book 2* focuses on Milliscent the skunk bot and I decided to make Milli a different class of bot than the others—she was to be a true A.I. (artificial intelligence) capable of learning and emotional growth. I introduced two human characters—16-year-old boys who are into role playing, Tedd and Cisco. They tell Milli that in reality they are a humanoid fox and an alien, respectively. Although she's been told that all people are human in reality, as the story progresses she starts to believe the boys. The theme of the *Bot Story* series is the blurred line between fantasy and reality.
- ***Instinct and Intellect and the short stories An Apple and Family Christmas:*** I was captivated by Dido's song *Life for Rent* and tried to imagine what sort of person might be caught in such a lifestyle, not as a choice, but as a compulsion. If he were a human the temptation would be to say, "Get over it already and live the life you want!" But what

sort of creature might get stuck in a “life for rent,” even though he desperately wants to “learn to buy,” as Dido sang. I remembered something Scott Kellogg had touched on in his webcomic *21<sup>st</sup> Century Fox*<sup>5</sup> and so I cast my main character as a genetically uplifted red fox. As I started my research I had doubts—male red foxes are not compelled to disperse. But additional research taught me that they are highly adaptable with a broad range of behaviors, so I stuck with the species. *Instinct and Intellect* is the novel, and *An Apple... for Your Happiness* (formerly *Family Matters*) and *Family Christmas* are short stories spun out of incidents from the novel. Paris is the fox, Penny is his human girlfriend (Paris is desperate, so he’s dating a human) and Brigett is Paris’ sister. All other characters in the examples are human.

- ***Dream a Little Dream***: This short story is a noncanonical offshoot of *Bot Story* with my genetically uplifted foxes from *Instinct and Intellect* blended in. I wanted to explore an alternate end-game scenario between Milliscent and Tedd, but didn’t want it to be too close to the *Bot Story* storyworld. Thus Tedd Foxx is now a humanoid fox in reality, rather than a human. This new reality is set on an alternate earth where all humans died out millennia earlier, along with most of the species they uplifted. Leaving red foxes, Eurasian badgers, and a few other intelligent species to run the world.
- ***Melpomene’s Daughter and Beach Tour***: Doug Winger’s picture of a humanoid white lab rat<sup>6</sup> captured my imagination and I felt compelled to create a character and a backstory to explain her and the artifacts in the picture. In my storyworld she is the only one of her kind. I suppose it’s kindest if a whole species does not share her sloppy genetics and obvious endocrine problems. As I was creating Dr. Cheri Avant (the lab rat) I thought of a story she could star in, which grew into the novella *Melpomene’s Daughter*. *Beach Tour* takes place 11 months after the end of the novella. Dr. Avant is the only nonhuman character in these two stories.
- ***‘Round the World with Wee Mr. Winkle***: This story started with the idea of traveling around the world on vacation. I decided to write it as a parody of the style of anthrofiction where species are used like races. Wee Mr. Winkle is a naked mole rat-

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5 <http://techfox.comicgenesis.com/d/20010607.html> & <http://techfox.comicgenesis.com/d/20010612.html>

6 This one is definitely not work safe: <http://us-p.vclart.net/vcl/Artists/Doug-Winger/Zort.jpg>

monkey hybrid<sup>7</sup> because it seemed so delightfully silly. Species for the other characters were chosen more for their entertainment value than any sense of realism. Despite my attempt to do no species characterization, a little crept into the story in the form of body language and behaviors.

- ***Christmas Wish***: I wanted to do a transformation story with a twist, so I invented a future where humans have genetically engineered cheetahs. The story is about a cheetah named Kisura who is passionate about racing and passionate about her human master. She wants Santa Claus to transform her into a human woman so she can have a more satisfying relationship with him because in this storyworld a cheetah-human love match is illegal—she would be euthanized and he would be jailed. While my cheetahs walk on two legs, they run on four, and it's *de rigueur* to show off your million-dollar animal at the race club's "Owners and Animals" black-tie parties by dressing them up.

And now, the promised techniques....

## 4.1 Body Language

Body language is the character's involuntary response to emotional state, or to some external stimulus such as being tickled by a bug. Using body language is so simple there's no excuse for any author to leave it out of a story. There are rich worlds of nonverbal communications that we humans don't know because we haven't got the equipment. Think of all the ways a mammal can use its tail, ears, and whiskers; a bird that starts preening when it's uncertain what to do next; or the way fish communicate by how they hold their fins or the attitude of their body. But please understand your target species. If I have to read one more story where a healthy adult fox wags its tail, I'm going to scream.

Body language may be added as late as the editing process after the first draft is complete. Simply go through your text and everywhere you see human body language—she smiled, she raised her eyebrow, she tilted her head, etc.—ask yourself, is there something I can use that is more fitting to my character's species? And if you're not using any body

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<sup>7</sup> Inspired by this strip <http://www.jadephoenix.org/fwf/comics/index.php?date=furwillfly58.jpg> from Brian Daniel's webcomic *Fur Will Fly*.

language<sup>8</sup> now—not even for your human characters—shame on you!

***Bot Story Book 2: Milliscent Awakens – chapter 1***

“Sorry I’m late,” she said. “I had a bad night, then I had to take a nap, and then I forgot my lunch.” Her tail declined a few degrees with each admission.

***Bot Story Book 1: Nancy and the Ferrets – chapter 3***

She flattened herself against the trunk, her tail all fluffed out so that it looked like a bottle brush.

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Sparkle was taut like a coiled spring and her tail vibrated with anticipation.

***Family Christmas***

“That cur!” She flattened her ears. “Do not mention him again. We are through!”

***An Apple... for Your Happiness***

Paris appeared at her elbow. “Hello Missus Akamatsu, everything smells wonderful.” He licked the end of his nose. “Reminds me of when I was little and my mother would fix a holiday feast.”

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His ears pricked and swiveled back toward the door. “They’re coming.”

***‘Round the World with Wee Mr. Winkle***

The tip of Edda’s tail started twitching. “He must be *Amerikaan*. We should have a party.”

***Melpomene’s Daughter – chapter 1***

Her head snapped up and she turned to face one of the side tunnels; her nose and whiskers twitching as her ears tilted forward.

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8 Becca and Angela have started an Emotion Thesaurus, which, among other responses uses human body language to show the emotional state of your character. Links are in the bottom half of the bright green zone on the right. <http://thebookshelfmuse.blogspot.com/2008/01/introducing-thesaurus-thursdays.html>

## 4.2 Behaviors

Animals have behaviors that are quite different from human behaviors. This is partly due to having differently designed equipment and differently tuned senses. I.e. a muzzle and pointy teeth, and a sharper sense of smell and hearing. How different your characters' species are depends on the degree of anthropomorphizing, if your character has to fit into a foreign (human) society, and how motivated they are to fit in.

This is how a female ferret shows affection for her mate.

### ***Bot Story Book 1: Nancy and the Ferrets – chapter 3***

“OW, OW!” he yelled. “Let go. Ow, stop that.” He tried to wiggle away, his legs kicking, but she had his shoulder tightly gripped in her jaws.

She shut her eyes, clamped her teeth even tighter, and shook her head, a look of bliss on her face.

Natural foxes rub their chins and lips on objects in their environment as a sort of scent mark, and they have a scent gland on their chin to personalize this mark. For my characters this action is not only one of affection, like a kiss, but also a way to say, “You belong to me.”

### ***Family Christmas***

Brigett put her arms around his neck then touched the side of his face with hers. He felt her lips slide past his as she rubbed muzzles with him.

“Umm. I haven't seen my brother in years and when I finally do, it's two weeks before I can give him a proper kiss.”

“Sorry....”

“Penny. I can taste her on your lips. Don't apologize.”

Milliscent will shower every day and brush her teeth, she doesn't want to offend the human visitors to her world, but she does not care for a human-style bed and prefers sleeping in the woods.

### ***Bot Story Book 2: Milliscent Awakens – chapter 1***

Slipping between the flowers and the wall, Milli found the depression in the soil, which was a perfect fit for her body. She looked around out of habit and turned around twice before curling herself into this natural bed.

***Bot Story Book 2: Milliscent Awakens – chapter 1***

She stopped at the edge of the log, knelt down, and started poking around. She found a hole and stuck her nose in, taking a few deep sniffs.

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Milli moved down the log, sniffing at the cracks and holes.

***'Round the World with Wee Mr. Winkle***

It was a glorious sun-soaked afternoon and the Italian girls pranced past, swishing their tails and softly nickering. At first he thought the attention was for him alone, but then he noticed they flirted with any male, irrespective of species or nationality. Their noses were a bit on the long side, but he realized that as a naked mole rat-monkey hybrid he hardly had room to think critically of another's appearance. And besides, he decided, they looked good in their noses. Proper, exotic Italian beauties. And they looked like they could run very fast.

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Wee Mr. Winkle settled back in his seat on Kuwait Airways. He had a chance to talk a bit with Rosetta while they walked to the doctor's and when he asked the filly what she liked to do, the girl had mumbled, "Listen to hip-hop and gallop with friends." A typical teenager.

Dr. Cheri Avant is at least as much human as she is rat. She's infiltrated a terrorist cell and her cover is that she's one of the lab experiments—a dumb animal.

***Melpomene's Daughter – chapter 2***

Cheri sat up then started licking her skinned knee, the way an animal might. The wound had started to scab over and the dirt and rust in her fur tasted funny.

Hope opened the tailgate. "Oh, you poor thing!" ...

She stopped licking and let the woman inspect her wound. It was a lot cleaner and didn't look too bad. Her tongue tingled and she was sure she had swallowed a few hairs. Pretending to be a dumb animal was exhausting. She didn't know how real animals put up with it.

### 4.3 Senses

This technique can be huge!

Birds are visual. Fish operate on scent and vibrations, and some even see the world by detecting electric fields. Mammals, most mammals anyway, see the world through scent and sound. Most mammals are color blind—but then we are “nose blind” and can hardly imagine what it would be like to experience the rich world of scents.

The most effective way to use the senses of your nonhuman characters comes when you are writing a scene from their point of view. Rather than describe how things look, use the dominant sense of your character—exclusively if possible. I’m just starting to use this technique. If you wait to use this technique until your first draft is done you’ll need to some rewriting, but it shouldn’t be too much work.

#### *Family Christmas*

Paris leaned against the porch rail, his nose pointed toward the row of bare cottonwoods that lined the river. The scent from the field of mustard drifted on the night air and mingled with those of the soil, moldering cottonwood leaves, and other perfumes of the Salinas Valley countryside.

His ears flicked back as the door squeaked open behind him and he caught the fragrance of fox musk mingled with the piquant odor of pre-estrus hormones.

Without turning he said, “Hello Brig.”

“What are you doing out here?”

“Thinking. Reading the air.” He felt his sister’s hand on his shoulder.

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Paris cocked his ear. Something was tracking him, but the breeze was wrong to discover what it was. He set the basket down and slipped behind the trunk of a large cottonwood.

A familiar vixen walked over to the basket and nosed around. “Pari?”

The next example is of a fox disguised as a human.

#### *Dream a Little Dream – Act I*

Satisfied, he turned his head and studied his ears, touching the tips with his

fingers. *How could they have heard anything with these tiny things?* he thought.

Same character as above, but different storyworld. Here he is a human pretending to be fox forced to wear a human body.

***Bot Story Book 2: Milliscent Awakens – chapter 5***

“This is not so bad, I... Geezus!” He jumped and staggered back against a boulder as something raced off through the tall grass.

“Oh! That’s...” Milli was puzzled by his reaction. “It’s just a little rabbit. Couldn’t you smell it? Didn’t you hear it? I’m surprised you didn’t pounce on it.”

Tedd panted for a few seconds before speaking. “It’s... it’s this stupid avatar. For a fox, being forced to wear a human avatar is like being blind and deaf.”

“Blind?” she asked.

“Well, nose blind.”

Cisco laughed. “Nose blind! Zorro, that’s too funny.” He turned to Milli, “I’m afraid our boy’s been domesticated. He doesn’t get much rabbit... not unless Mickey D’s starts slapping them between buns.”

*Domesticated?* Milli thought. *I didn’t think you could domesticate a fox.*

“Hey, I like rabbit just fine. It’s this avatar. It’s like having a stuffed up nose.”

Milliscent and Tedd have transformed into robots with robot senses.

***Dream a Little Dream – Act II***

The low thrum of machinery came up through the workbench under them. Tedd studied her face. Its simple oviform shape was graced by a pair of glass eyes, their neutral-gray irises contracted to dots in the mercury-arc spot above the bench.

“Milliscent?”

“My husband?”

Her voice echoed in the laboratory and Tedd was aware of the tiny differences between the returning echoes, effortlessly calculating the distances to the darkened walls.

Dr. Avant’s first visit to a farm.

***Melpomene's Daughter* – chapter 2**

She sniffed the air, which was full of the scents of unidentified growing things, mingled with dust and the odor of pigs.

Not every type of critter has their senses tuned the same. The research I've read indicates most canines experience the same range of tastes we do, but that felines are missing the ability to taste sweet. Most birds have a poor sense of smell, and great horned owls don't seem to be able to detect skunk spray. Also, dogs are not completely colorblind but can discern the blue/green end of the spectrum. Many insects can see ultra-violet and the mantis shrimp doesn't have four distinct color pigments in their eyes as humans do, but as many as ten. They have hyperspectral color vision and can detect polarized light as well.

**4.4 Diet**

Humans can eat just about anything, but plenty of creatures are far more choosy. With omnivores you have quite a bit of latitude during the anthropomorphization process, but the wrong diet for carnivores or herbivores can throw the reader out of the story.

Milliscent the skunk was a lot of fun to write. In the following example bugs, and especially centipedes, are like candy to her—real candy would eventually make her sick. Then consider this is the human boy she's trying to impress with her worldly sophistication and smooth moves. Plus, you can't see it here, but she's wearing only her fur as she considers clothing to be a curse of domesticated beings and she's wild... sort of. But she's not completely uncouth. She did offer him her last centipede.

***Bot Story Book 2: Milliscent Awakens* – chapter 3**

Milli was in an awkward position; she caught a glimpse of something dark where the log had lain and made a leap to avoid falling in it. She ended up wildly out of balance and falling toward the dirty side of the log, now facing the sky. An orange flash and movement on the log caught her eye. *Centipedes!* She made a grab for the fast moving arthropods and ended up on her stomach, sprawled over the log, her tail in the air. She popped a pair of two-inch long centipedes in her mouth before rolling off the log and landing on her butt, plucking up a third centipede as it

dashed for the shadows. *Oh! My tail.*

“Sweet Maria!” Cisco was staring at her, his mouth open.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Want to try one?” she asked, holding her paw toward him.

Gripped between her fingers, the centipede thrashed around. “Is good. Kinda cinnamony.” She grimaced. *Cram! I think I’ve bent my tail.*

“No! Err, umm. No thank you. Are you okay?”

Natural skunks don’t get a lot of meat in their diet, but a snake would make a welcome treat. Yea, Milli gets most of her food prepackaged from the refrigerator, but a fresh snake... who can say no to that? Also note the nonhuman body language.

***Bot Story Book 2: Milliscent Awakens – chapter 4***

“What kind of snake was it?” Milli asked. “I hope it wasn’t a garter snake, they release this musk and it can taint the meat.” She made a face, wrinkling the skin along the sides of her muzzle and causing her whiskers to pull back.

In this next example Tyler is talking to Dr. Avant, the lab rat. Ibuprofen and acetaminophen can put some animals such as domestic ferrets into shock and even kill them, whereas aspirin will not. I remember reading that rodents are similarly affected, but I couldn’t swear to it—seemed like a nice detail though. From a writerly standpoint using both chemical names made the sentence seem too technical.

***Beach Tour***

This time, when Tyler peered into the mirror, the face of a black man looked back at him. His head still hurt. “I’m going to call room service for some aspirin and breakfast. Want any?”

“Yes please, but make sure it’s real aspirin, not ibuprofen. Oh, and some fruit would be nice, and juice, any kind, I’m not picky, organic if they have it.”

Nancy (who starts the dialog) is human, Sparkle and Weasy are ferrets, and Milliscent is a skunk. Two websites with articles on the proper diet for pet skunks mentioned they love chilies, so I imagine Milli would enjoy her red beans and rice fixed Cajun style.

***Bot Story Book 1: Nancy and the Ferrets – chapter 2***

“Crawfish? You bet! You can’t keep a Louisiana girl away from a crawfish dinner. How do you fix them? Étouffée? A jambalaya? In a bisque, or a nice crawfish pie?” She smiled just thinking of those dishes. “They sure would be good with some red beans and rice.”

Both Sparkle and Weasy had a pained expression.

“Red beans?” Sparkle asked.

“Rice?” Weasy added.

“Who would want to eat red beans?” Sparkle’s lip curled slightly at the thought.

“Or rice?” Weasy said. “And what is ‘i-tif-ooie’?”

“Ah, not even a nice crawfish cornbread?” Nancy said, loosing some of her enthusiasm.

“Well, I think red beans and rice sounds divine.” Milliscent turned to Nancy. “You need to understand that ferrets are strict carnivores. If they ate red beans and rice they would not be getting the nutrition they need.” She paused. “Although they like sweets too, mostly as dried fruits. Like raisins.”

**4.5 Not the Naked Ape**

We humans are quite good at believing that not having fur, feathers, or scales is some sort of advantage and that we are superior beings because of this. Argument can be made one way or the other, but when writing a character who does not sport naked skin at least rise to the occasion and use that fact.

Houston, Texas is hot in summer.

***Family Christmas***

“Some days I get sick of life behind glass: the air-conditioned home, the air-conditioned trans, the air-conditioned office, but I’d be miserable without the technology. It gets hot in this fur.”

Other authors, for example James Bruner, have used a fur dryer to solve this problem. From the standpoint of species characterization, either method is correct.

***Bot Story Book 2: Milliscent Awakens – chapter 1***

Milli stood in the shower and shook to get the excess water from her fur before opening the door and stepping out.

Milliscent feels she doesn't need clothing because she has long fur that keeps her covered. So for her any excuse to peel off her clothes, for those rare instances when you can get her to put something on, is a good one.

***Dream a Little Dream – Act I***

He wrapped his arms around her then ran his fingers through her fur, from the base of her spine up to her shoulders. “Umm, Milli, where is your costume?”

“Not wearing one.” She scrambled to her feet and offered him a hand.

“I thought Mrs. McDonnell was going to make a costume for you to wear to the party.” He took her hand and let her help him to his feet.

“She did, but the skirt didn't quite fit right around my tail.” To demonstrate she turned around and put her hands behind her back, just above her tail. “So I took it off.” She looked at him over her shoulder. “Then the sleeves of the blouse ruffed up my fur, so I took that off too.” As she turned around she stuck out her tongue, crinkling up the sides of her short muzzle and giggled.

Tedd was struck by her beauty—her dark brown eyes, glossy black fur, the white stripe between her eyes that ran up to the white patch on the top of her head.

“But the bustier was really cute! Green satin so it didn't ruffle my fur, and it laced up the back. I had an hourglass figure. Can you imagine?” She ran her hands up her belly, brushing the fur upward, and stopped just below her breasts. “But then the first guests started to arrive and they kept staring at me, so she made me take that off too.” She dropped her hands to her sides.

## **4.6 Clothing and Adornment**

If your characters are trying to fit into a human dominated society they will probably dress as humans dress. It's when you create a society without preconceived notions of dress and adornment where you can get creative.

Clothing has three main purposes: protection from the environment, as a means to

display one's status or wealth, and as a means of modesty because we humans have naked skin. In environments which are not hostile, some human societies allow almost total nudity. All that's really needed is a penis wrapper for the men and a bit of string with some shells for the women—status and wealth. Fur and feathers offer a lot more protection and modesty than naked skin and so in a society not influenced by humans, clothing and decoration could be quite different than what we normally encounter.<sup>9</sup>

Apparently the way to successfully get away with not wearing anything below the waist is with confidence and cutlery. Who would dare voice their disapproval?

***Bot Story Book 1: Nancy and the Ferrets – chapter 2***

Nancy studied Sparkle. She was about 3 feet tall and shorter than her mate Fizzgig. She wore a flamboyant ivory hat with a brim that was narrow and turned up at the sides, wider and turned down front and back. A pink ostrich feather was stuck in the band on the right side of the hat and trailed down her back. Her blouse was made of pink eyelet lace and was in three parts joined together by narrow strips of fabric under her arms, leaving her stomach and shoulders exposed. She also had on a black leather baldric decorated with pink and ivory, which swept down from her right shoulder to just above her left hip, and a similar narrower belt around her waist. A slightly curved broadsword hung from her left hip, its elaborate basket was silver and its hilt made of carved ivory. From her right hip hung a smaller copy. Then Nancy noticed the silver and ivory hilts of two small throwing daggers just visible above the frilled edge of each sleeve. *She must be ambidextrous. ...*

I'd always thought it stupid when some artists drew their fur covered anthropomorphic characters wearing certain types of human clothing, such as ladies stockings—fishnet stockings in particular. As *Wee Mr. Winkle* was a parody of a certain style of anthrofiction, and a silly romp, I had to use that device.

***'Round the World with Wee Mr. Winkle***

Wee Mr. Winkle was window shopping in Amsterdam, contemplating the

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9 Eugene Arenhaus has used this idea for many of his nonhuman characters, not just his focco. <http://www.chiseledrocks.com/galleries/galleries.htm>

wax-covered rounds of gouda, when he heard a female voice behind him.

“Hey, *weinig mens*, are you some kind of mutant *varken*?”

“What?” He turned around and leaning against a lamp post was a black cat in a red tube top, red miniskirt, and red fishnet stockings. The stockings looked ridiculous on her because her fur was poking out through the holes in random directions. He wasn’t quite sure what she asked, but he could guess. “I’m a naked mole rat-monkey hybrid.”

At the post-season cocktail party Conrad must show off his million-dollar animal and what better way to do that than dress her up in *haute couture*. A far cry from her racing togs.

### ***Christmas Wish***

The 400 meter mark passed as she floated down the track. Like her wild counterparts she raced on all fours. She wore only her fur, a numbered silk vest, and a pair of gloves to protect her hands. A genetic modification to please her species’ human masters.

...

“And that dress she’s wearing is simply adorable. A very becoming shade of blue, is it a Frances Chacon?”

“You have a good eye.” Conrad took a sip of his drink. “The fitting was amusing. I don’t think Ms. Chacon ever worked with a humanimal before.”

“Lowering the back of the dress a few inches so her tail could peek over the top is rather daring.” Mrs. Black turned to her husband. “Don’t you agree, Thurston?”

In *Instinct and Intellect* my foxes wish to fit into human society, so they wear human-inspired clothing styles. However there are modifications to accommodate their vulpine physiology—such as avoiding elastic bands because they would eventually rub their fur off, so no underwear; males have a sheath so they wear their pants loose and hold them up with suspenders rather than using a belt; and females have eight teats instead of two breasts, so they don’t need brassieres.

## 4.7 Catch Phrases

Every society creates its own catch phrases that reflect the outlook and values of that society, nonhuman societies should be no different.

The phrase “curl up together” suggests intimacy without sex. “Sleeping together” would work, but since the humans around them have already opted that phrase to mean having sex, my foxes needed an alternative. They normally use it when it’s not mating season.

### *Family Christmas*

Paris chuckled. “Spoken like a Texan.... Listen. Wild foxes calling by the river.” The sound of three sharp barks carried over the field. They were answered by a different voice, pitched higher.

“Our little cousins. It’s good to know someone has a mate to curl up with.”

Paris smiled. “You’ll find someone.

...

“I have a question. When do human females go into heat? I mean, Chrissy seems to go into heat every time her boyfriend comes over. But when Penny comes home after spending the night with you, I can smell you all over her, but that’s all. Like you two have only been curling up together.”

...

“When we curl up at night and I hold her in my arms, she fills my senses with her feminine charms and my head with dreams of our future.”

I’d originally written the 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph in the following example as: “I wasn’t blind. I should have left you two alone.” Brigett could smell that Penny (the human girl) was in “heat” and her brother was responding to her when he stupidly got up to open the door for his sister—that is, once he opened the door Brigett was instantly aware of what had been happening and it wasn’t because there was a naked girl behind him.

### *Family Christmas*

“Pari, I’m sorry for the other night. When I interrupted... If I had been thinking.”

“Don’t worry about it. That was weeks ago.”

“My nose wasn’t congested. I should have left you two alone.”

And remember the excerpt where Tedd the fox says that he is “nose blind” in the example in the middle of page 16.

Paris is normally very reserved, but when he runs into an old college buddy (Leo) he hasn’t seen in over 20 years he loosens up. “In heaven with the bunnies and chickens” is ideal for a fox, but probably wouldn’t work with some other species.

### ***Instinct and Intellect – chapter 1***

She laughed and looked her watch. “Good grief! It’s seven-thirty already. No wonder I’m starving. Let’s get something to eat.” She took the apple core from her husband and added it to the core in her left hand, then looked around. “Paris, what did you do with your apple core?”

“Umm.” Paris patted his pants pockets, then his vest pockets, and finally his stomach. “Found it. It’s in heaven with the bunnies and the chickens.”

Leo chuckled. “He means he ate it.”

“You ate the core?”

“I saved the stem.” Paris picked up an apple stem from the counter next to him and held it out for Lacie.

“The Itch” (capitalized) is how my female foxes refer to their heat cycle, which lasts from four to six days. “It’s The Itch that must be scratched.” And they have a whole set of rules and attitudes about how they deal with the season.

### ***Family Christmas***

“The Itch will probably hit me full force. I should start climbing the walls in a few weeks, but I can’t complain. I expected trouble when I decided to spend this year apart from our people.”

...

“Oh please... I’ve talked with Penny. Human females don’t get The Itch. She would have waited if she knew where she stood with you. You’ve known her for months, and from our vidcom conversations I got the impression she’s the one.”

Foxes have larger ears than humans, so this is a way to say someone talks too much.

***Family Christmas***

“I only caught a little. Mr. Akamatsu was filling my ears with ‘assisted evolution’ and ‘the manifest destiny of humankind’.” She rolled her eyes. “I told him I wasn’t a geneticist.”

“Get a nose full” means to describe something you’re looking for, or get a description of something someone else is looking for. In this case it’s literal and Brigett wants to sniff the basket.

***Family Christmas***

Paris picked up his basket. “Tree oysters.” He pulled back the cloth so she could see. “Katrin wants them for dinner tonight.”

“Ah, mushrooms. Well, I’m glad I found you. I wanted the chance to talk with you before we go back to Ventura tomorrow.” ...

Brigett smiled. “Now hand me that basket. I want to get a nose full of our quarry.”

## 4.8 Poetry, Literature, and Music

My *Quest for Story* storyworld is full of literature... or at least the spoken equivalent. And I’ve created nursery rhymes for *Instinct and Intellect*. I asked myself, if foxes created nursery rhymes to tell their kits, what would those nursery rhymes be like?

***Instinct and Intellect* – notes: vulpine poetry**

**Bunny Beware!**

Father's at the hedgerow,  
Bunny don't you peep.  
Kit needs a rabbit skin,  
To help her fall asleep.

**Hush Little Kit**

Hush little kit now don't you cry,  
Mama's gonna bake you an apple pie.  
Daddy gives a little mouse, it goes “squeak,”

Hush little kit now don't you peep.  
Hush little kit now don't you cry,  
Daddy caught for you a dragonfly.  
Mama's gonna rock till you fall 'sleep,  
Hush little kit now don't you peep.

The following is for older fox children and teaches them a lesson on how to select a mate. The idea is that with only one mating season per year, foxes need more than sexual combustibility on which to base a long-term relationship. Here Penny uses it to try to justify to her mother why she and Paris belong together.

***An Apple... for Your Happiness***

“Mama, Paris taught me a poem that his mother taught him:

“First a shared vision  
Blooms into friendship;  
Next comes passion,  
Then family with kits.”

“Honey, I don’t see...”

“It’s something every fox learns—how to select a mate....”

The concept with all of these is that nonhumans will probably value things that humans might not. In the examples above objects like mice, dragonflies, and rabbit skins are seen as acceptable gifts for an infant.

## **4.9 Religion and Mythology**

Most of my anthrofiction stories have centered around young races, those created by humans, so they haven’t needed to create their own mythology or religion. I have used religion a few times, but it was borrowed from humanity—the lab rat Dr. Avant was raised in a Muslim household, and the fox Paris attends an Christian Bible study in order to socialize with humans. My *Quest for Story* storyworld, detailed starting on page 3, will need all of this if I push it beyond the first short story. I make reference to a mythological character known as clever Hupu, protagonist of stories mothers tell their cubs to teach them survival skills. I

also make reference to parables, which are teaching stories aimed at all ages. I would imagine the *manmeri bilong bus* (what my characters call themselves) have also invented a mythology to explain the world, and a religion too.

Many human religions started as a way to explain what early man observed but did not understand. Why there are stars at night and a sun during the day. Why it rains some seasons and not others. Where we came from and where we're going. With differently tuned senses and a different outlook on life, your nonhuman species will probably invent a different mythos than many human societies have. However, you can always look to human cultures for inspiration.

#### 4.10 Reproduction

Compared to most mammals humans have a radically different reproductive system. For one, our females don't advertise their fertility. We males don't know which females to fight over or defend from other males. I suppose as a highly social animal such a reproductive strategy helps in crowded situations. Also the human female's cycle doesn't seem to be tied to anything other than her internal clock.

This technique is best used at the planning stages.

The next example is long, but it is the crux of my novel *Instinct and Intellect*. A single genetically uplifted male fox who has been "dispersing" all his adult life, driven by his instincts to seek a mate. Penny is the young human woman who wants to be that mate. The other characters are her family members.

##### ***An Apple... for Your Happiness (excerpted from Instinct and Intellect)***

"There is one issue I'm still struggling with," Paris said between bites. "The duel between instinct and intellect. I'm not supposed to be able to start and stick with anything as involved as a startup company without a mate at my side. It's the instinctive wanderlust of the single male fox."

"What'll you do?" Penny's dad, William, asked.

"It's easy to say I could just find a mate, but to even see a vixen of my kind outside of Houston is extraordinary. I could try to work within my instinct, as I

learned to do with my consulting practice. It's funny; I thought I'd conquered those impulses, but then I realized I'd only sidestepped the issue. Who is the very definition of a nomad, but a consultant? Always moving from town to town and client to client."

Katrin picked up her dinner roll. "Do you need a lady fox, specifically?" She glanced at her daughter and Penny was reminded of their earlier conversation.

"Maybe not, but I don't know what might trigger the feelings of belonging and stability I need. It may be as simple as having someone to hold and care for, or a specific pheromone, or perhaps a combination of factors."

"Why not just go to Houston to find a mate?" William asked.

"It's not that simple. I'd need to find the right person, someone whom I can give my all to; a meeting of the minds and the hearts. There are only a few hundred adult female *vulpes-hominis* in Houston and most of them are already in domestic partnerships. Also, I'd be asking her to give up her home. I'd need to be there most of the year, not just a few months before January, and I detest Houston's climate. Plus I've been living well north of the thirtieth parallel, so I'm running about a month behind the Houston population."

Bobby stopped chewing long enough to ask, "A month behind?"

Paris put down his forkful of potato. "That's something about humans that seems alien to me. Human females have no real heat-cycle, but ovulate a dozen times a year and seem to be receptive any time they feel like it. Human males need to be in condition and ready at any time. It must be distracting."

Bobby tilted his head. "The wild foxes that live around here seem to go crazy in February." He snapped his fingers. "That's why you've not slept with my sister yet. You're waiting for Valentine's Day!"

In Penny's backstory is a childhood experience where she gained an unusual degree of insight into how natural foxes live their lives. She found much of this knowledge directly applies to how she interacts with Paris and Brigett. During her visit to Ventura, Brigett has been living with Penny.

***Family Christmas (another excerpt from *Instinct and Intellect*)***

Paris smiled. “You’ll find someone.” He turned to face her. “I never got a chance to ask how it’s been working out with Penny?”

“She’s a slacker. She’s ‘top vixen’, but she’s been over at your place too many nights to keep my hormones suppressed. The Itch will probably hit me full force. I should start climbing the walls in a few weeks, but I can’t complain. I expected trouble when I decided to spend this year apart from our people. That Penny knows the customs was an unexpected bonus, but she’s not very diligent about it.”

**4.11 The Eleventh Technique**

With the first ten techniques, pretty much the more you use them the better your story, but the eleventh technique should be used sparingly. The eleventh technique is terminology.

Hands and feet, or paws? If you use paws you give the reader the sense that your character is not human, but you also risk confusing them. While readers who are familiar with your writing will know that paws really mean hands, some readers will visualize the sort of paws that their pet dog or cat has and become confused when your character picks something up.

The same can be said for furson versus person and the use of other cute words such as the term humanimal I used in the second example on page 22. When a character uses a cute word it can work, but when the narrator uses a cute word, or all the characters do it, then it gets old.

Related is the issue of whether to use man and woman, or male and female, or the proper human-invented terms for your anthropomorphized species. Part of the decision depends on the terms you might use and how familiar your readers may be with them, and if those terms carry any emotional baggage. For example bitch is the proper term for most species of female canid, but is a huge negative when applied to a human. So referring to your sweet-tempered wolf girl as a bitch will confuse many readers. Plus the term dog is the proper term for most species of male canid, but it too would be confusing. Adding to the confusion is that many of the proper terms vary from region to region.

For unfamiliar terms you can have some characters use the proper term and other characters use a defining phrase. In the following example one character (Penny) uses the proper term “vixen” and the other (Katrin) uses the defining phrase “lady fox”. I rewrote Katrin’s dialog after some feedback from a reader who asked, “What’s a vixen?”

*An Apple... for Your Happiness*

“You heard what he said at dinner.”

“He said he needs a lady fox.”

“No, he said he needs a mate and partner and that he hasn’t found a vixen to fill that role.”

It can be difficult at times because of regional terminology, and moreso if your work finds an international audience. Nonnative English speakers may not have seen a word you thought was common. I once had a reader ask me, “What’s a muzzle?” At least the way I was using the word is the first definition in the dictionary. About the only thing you can do is ask fellow writers to critique your work and point out possible problems.

Because of these problems, you cannot rely on terminology to impart a feeling of nonhumanness for your readers. Use the other techniques first, and special terminology only where necessary.

## 5 Conclusions

It’s your story and your characters and you need to do what is best for the story. If you characters are like the rabbits in Richard Adams’ book *Watership Down* you can use every one of these techniques. But if your characters are humans with only a few animal traits you can at least use body language, plus slip in a few other techniques such as behaviors and senses. After all, what fun would it be to be Panther Man if you’re not also stealthy, graceful, and enjoy a keen sense of smell and hearing?

Have fun writing.