

Characterization

What is it?

Characterization is the way in which authors convey information about their characters. Characterization can be direct, as when an author tells readers what a character is like (e.g. "George was cunning and greedy.") or indirect, as when an author shows what a character is like by portraying his or her actions, speech, or thoughts (eg. "On the crowded subway, George slipped his hand into the man's coat pocket and withdrew the wallet, undetected."). Descriptions of a character's appearance, behavior, interests, way of speaking, and other mannerisms are all part of characterization. For stories written in the first-person point of view, the narrator's voice, or way of telling the story, is essential to his or her characterization.

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Why is it important?

Characterization is a crucial part of making a story compelling. In order to interest and move readers, characters need to seem real. Authors achieve this by providing details that make characters individual and particular. Good characterization gives readers a strong sense of characters' personalities and complexities; it makes characters vivid, alive and believable.

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How do I create it?

Create characterization by choosing details that make real or fictional characters seem life-like and individual.

To create characterization in fiction or non-fiction,

- Tell the reader directly what a character's personality is like:

"Mrs. Freeman could never be brought to admit herself wrong on any point."

—Flannery O'Connor, "[Good Country People](#)"

- Describe a character's appearance and manner:

"The Baker, who was an older man with a thick neck, listened without saying anything when she told him the child would be eight years old next Monday. The baker wore a white apron that looked like a smock. Straps cut under his arms, went around in back and then to the front again, where they were secured under his heavy waist. He wiped his hands on his apron as he listened to her. He kept his eyes down on the photographs and let her talk."

—Raymond Carver, "[A Small, Good Thing](#)"

- Portray a character's thoughts and motivations:

"I didn't come to Utah to be the same boy I'd been before. I had my own dreams of transformation, Western dreams, dreams of freedom and dominion and taciturn self-sufficiency. The first thing I wanted to do was change my name. A girl named Toby had joined my class before I left Florida, and this had caused both of us scalding humiliation.

"I wanted to call myself Jack, after Jack London. I believed that having his name would charge me with some of the strength and competence inherent in my idea of him. The odds were good that I'd never have to share a classroom with a girl named Jack. And I liked the sound. Jack. Jack Wolff."

—Tobias Wolff, *This Boy's Life*

- Use dialogue to allow a character's words to reveal something important about his or her nature:

"Unable to contain herself, [Mrs. Bennet] began scolding one of her daughters. 'Don't keep coughing so, Kitty, for heaven's sake! Have a little compassion on my nerves. You tear them to pieces.'"

—Jane Austin, *Pride and Prejudice*

- Use a character's actions to reveal his or her personality:

"He would hang around our place on Saturdays, scornful of whatever I was doing but unable to leave me alone. I couldn't be on the swing without him wanting to try it, and if I wouldn't give it up he came and pushed me so that I went crooked. He teased the dog. He got me into trouble—deliberately and maliciously, it seemed to me afterward—by daring me to do things I wouldn't have thought of on my own: digging up the potatoes to see how big they were when they were still only the size of marbles, and pushing over the stacked firewood to make a pile we could jump off."

—Alice Munro, "Miles City, Montana"

- Show others' reactions to the character or person you're portraying:

"No respect at all was shown him in the department. The porters, far from getting up from their seats when he came in, took no more notice of him than if a simple fly had flown across the reception room."

—Nikolai Gogol, "*The Overcoat*"

- Give fictional characters meaningful names or use real people's nicknames that relate to their personalities:

Severus Snape—"Severus" means "strict" or "severe" in Latin. Severus Snape is a strict professor who treats Harry harshly.

Sirius Black—"Sirius" is the brightest star in the Canis Major or "Great Dog" constellation. Sirius Black is a wizard who transforms into a black dog.

Peeves—"To peeve" means "to annoy." Peeves is a ghost who pesters people at Hogwart's School.

—J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter* series

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