

## Characterization

**Characterization** is the process of creating characters in fiction. Thorough characterization makes characters well-rounded and complex even though the writer may not be like the character or share his or her attitudes and beliefs. This allows for a sense of realism. Characterization can involve developing a variety of aspects of a character, such as appearance, age, gender, educational level, vocation or occupation, financial status, marital status, social status, hobbies, religious beliefs, ambitions, motivations, fears, emotions, backstory, issues, beliefs, practices, desires, and intentions. Often these can be shown through the actions and language of the character, rather than by telling the reader directly. In essays or novels, characterization is character development, which helps to establish themes. Characterization can be presented either directly or indirectly. **Direct Characterization** takes place when the author literally tells the audience what a character is like. In **Indirect Characterization**, the audience must deduce for themselves what the character is like through the character's thoughts, actions, speech, looks and interaction with other characters.

When analyzing a character look at the following:

- A. Motivation - cause of actions
- B. Behavior - actions of the character
- C. Consequences - results of actions
- D. Responsibility - moral, legal, or mental accountability
- E. Expectations – what is going to happen

N.B. This may be helpful in also determining a novel's theme.

### Types of Characters

*All novels have **major characters**.* These characters, as a rule of thumb, usually have a lot to say and appear frequently throughout.

- **The protagonist** is the main character of a story. He or she is the one character readers should care about and root for. The protagonist should be likable but not perfect. Flaws and weaknesses make the character more realistic and can help make him or her more endearing to readers.
- **The antagonist** is the character who is in direct conflict with the protagonist. He or she is usually in competition with the protagonist for a specific goal, such as power or a love interest. Ideally, readers should dislike and root against this character.

You may also have one or more **minor characters** in your novel. Minor characters can be useful in getting information across to your readers when they act as confidante to either the protagonist or antagonist. They can also provide subplots, enhancing the primary plot and making a novel more interesting. Minor characters should have their own unique personalities but should not overshadow the main characters.

- In many novels, there is a **love interest** who is sought after by both the protagonist and the antagonist.
- The protagonist may also be accompanied by a **sidekick** who helps the main character.
- **Confidantes** are someone in whom the central character confides, thus revealing their personality. Once again, that someone need not be a person.
- A **foil** is someone whose character contrasts that of the protagonist. This contrast is sometimes helpful in delineating the protagonist's faults.
- The **narrator** is the fictional storyteller. Narrators can either be reliable or unreliable. Narration can be done through 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> person. The narrator can also be an omniscient all knowing outsider.

**Cardboard characters** are a stereotype, mannequin, drone or otherwise uninteresting dull characters passing for a real character. Cardboard is what is used when, for whatever reason, the author has failed to put themselves into the character.

A **developing/dynamic character** is a character who changes over the course of the story. The central character is often but not always a developing character. However, it's crucial that the action of the story causes some character to change.

A **flat character** is someone who is characterized by one or two traits. "Flat" and "round" were terms first proposed by E.M. Forster in his *Aspects of the Novel*. This is a character who can be summed up in a sentence.

A **round character** is a character who is complex and perhaps even contradictory. The test of a round character is whether they are capable of surprising readers in a convincing way. If a flat character can be summed up in a sentence or two, a round character would probably take an essay.

A **static character** is a character who does not develop. Most characters in a story should be static, so as not to distract from the significant changes depicted in the central character. Static, however, does not mean boring.

A **stock character** is a character representing stereotypes of people in society, but actually a special kind of flat character who is instantly recognizable to most readers. (E.g. the angry teenager)

**Sympathetic characters** are characters whose motivations readers can understand and whose feelings they can comfortably share. Readers will say, "I could identify with him/her." The protagonist is often, but not always, sympathetic. However, it is also important to note that a sympathetic character need not be a good person.

**Unsympathetic characters** are characters whose motivations are suspect and whose feelings make us uncomfortable.

## Character Traits

Character traits fall into three main categories: physical, identity, and social/moral.

- Physical traits refer to the character's appearance.
- A character's identity is made up personality traits like habits and quirks, vices, psychological/emotional problems, and behavior. Their identity also includes external things such as occupation, education, and hobbies.
- Social/moral traits define how a character interacts with others and his or her code of ethics.

These Traits are revealed through:

- **Exposition:** Exposition is a technique where the narrator simply describes the character. This should be used sparingly because it can slow down the pace of a novel and may bore readers. Giving too much description at once is called an "information dump" and should be avoided.
- **Self-description:** While exposition works when using third person point of view, self-description is its first person counterpart. Like it sounds, the character describes aspects of him/herself.
- **Confession:** Some traits can be revealed by what your character tells someone else in the story.
- **Action:** Action is how the character behaves. Interactions with other characters, interactions with his or her environment.
- **Speech:** How a character talks, including the specific words and the manner in which they are said.
- **Internal thoughts and/or philosophical outlook.**
- **Revelations about their past.**
- **Name:** Different names evoke different mental images.
- **Appearance:** This includes everything from physical characteristics, clothing to style to body language.