

Describing characters

PART 1

You will read about seven ways of describing characters in a story. For every description you will be asked to draw the character as it is described in the text.

(Use the dictionary for unknown words)



This part is done in pair, but both student must use their iPad

1. Describe character's personality using appearance

When you describe how a character looks, think about how appearance illuminates personality. In Margaret Atwood's novel *The Blind Assassin*, for example, Atwood's narrator Iris opens the story remembering her sister Laura's death. Atwood creates a clear sense of Laura's troubled personality by describing her clothing. Notice the specific details leading you to think she's potentially sad:

Your drawing of Laura

"I could picture the smooth oval of Laura's face, her neatly pinned chignon, the dress she would have been wearing: a shirtwaist with a small rounded collar, in a sober colour - navy blue or steel grey or hospital-corridor green. Prison colours - less like something she'd chosen to put on than like something she'd been locked up in."
(p. 4)

2. Descriptions from multiple characters' viewpoints

Multi-angled character description is effective because we start to see how each character in a story connects to and understands the others. It adds depth and complexity to characters and their relationships. Here is Virginia Woolf, describing Mrs Ramsay's husband's friend, Charles Tansley, in *To The Lighthouse*:

Your drawing of Charles

"Mrs. Ramsay looked at him. He was such a miserable specimen, the children said, all humps and hollows in his face. He couldn't play cricket; he poked; he shuffled. He was a sarcastic brute, Andrew said. They knew what he liked best - to be for ever walking up and down, up and down, with Mr. Ramsay, saying who had won this, who had won that ..."

(p. 11)

3. Use metaphor to describe characters

Using a simile or metaphor to describe something about your character or a person can make them seem more vivid, more appealing, more exciting... or more frightening... than they usually appear to be. In *Beauty and the Beast*, metaphors are used to describe the strong temperament of Gaston.

Your drawing of Gaston

« His cruelty towards Belle was thunderous [...] »

« He was dumber than a doorstep [...] »

« His pride and arrogance were wrapped around him, like a blanket shielding him from humility. »

4. Make character introductions memorable

The Victorian author Charles Dickens is a master of characterization. When Dickens introduces a character, he typically gives the reader multiple details. Dickens includes physical appearance alongside tics and shortcomings, to make a character stay with us. Here Dickens describes the boastful, self-important Mr. Bounderby in *Hard Times*:

He was a rich man: banker, merchant, manufacturer, and what not. A big, loud man, with a stare, and a metallic laugh. A man made out of rough material, which seemed to have been stretched to make so much of him... A man who was always proclaiming, through that brassy speaking-trumpet of a voice of his old ignorance and his old poverty. »
(p. 18)

Your drawing of
Mr Bounderby

5. Describe characters using action

To avoid usual sentences in character description, show character's nature and backstories using action. You'll see here the author doesn't say that Jasmine is anxious and Tony confident, he goes beyond by setting the context through specific situation. It gives a clear image of the couple dynamic.

Your drawing of Jasmine and Tony

« Jasmine was a nervous young woman who tended to fidget when she was under pressure. Even her clothes seemed to be on edge: they shifted and slid and drooped and were never still. Tony, on the other hand, was too sure of himself. But the more categorical he was about anything, the more Jasmine palpitated. The more she palpitated, the more irritated Tony got, until he was barking orders and she was near tears. »

6. Show characters through what they say

Describing characters in conversation is another way to make your characters come to life. A great advantage of dialogue is that you can juxtapose what characters say to each other with their hidden, unspoken feelings. J.D. Salinger does this in a scene between college couple Lane and Franny in his novella, *Franny and Zooey*. The author demonstrates through a conversation Franny's nonchalance.

Your drawing of
Lane and Franny

« He suddenly leaned forward, putting his arms on the table, as though to get this thing ironed out, by God, but Franny spoke up before he did. 'I'm lousy today,' she said. 'I'm just way off today.' She found herself looking at Lane as if he were a stranger, or a poster advertising a brand of linoleum, across the aisle of a subway car.» (p. 19)

7. Use comparison to highlight key differences between characters

Many aspiring authors struggle to make each character distinct. Each major character should have their own voice, appearance, world view and set of motivations. One way to make characters distinctive is to compare them. George Eliot clearly differentiates the two sisters, the pious Dorothea and the better seen character Celia in her classic novel *Middlemarch*:

Your drawing of Celia and Dorothea

'The rural opinion about the new young ladies, even among the neighbours, was generally in favour of Celia, as being so amiable and innocent-looking, while Miss Brooke's large eyes seemed, like her religion, too unusual and striking. Poor Dorothea! Compared with her, the innocent-looking Celia was knowing and worldly-wise.' (p. 9)