++++Character Development

Presentation by Marion Mike

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https://www.globesoup.net/writing-blog/character-descriptions-from-literature

Tips for Describing Characters + 50 Character Descriptions from Literature

It could easily be argued that characters are the most important part of any story. They drive the plot, they create and resolve conflict, they are your reader's steadfast companions during your narrative and often, even the vessel through which they enter the world of your story. Characters are important. Very, very important. But should you describe every character in every story you write?

Not necessarily.

There are good reasons to describe characters, of course. Describing their appearance can help the reader picture them in their mind's eye, and describing a character's disposition, mentality, or temperament can help the reader better understand them and their relationship with other characters, as well as give the reader a clearer sense of the conflict in the story. You also want your reader to feel like they know your characters, and describing them in some way can be the quickest way to achieving this.

But it is possible to over-describe characters and to add too much character description to your stories.

One way to add too much character description is by describing every character as they enter your story. This is usually a bad idea as it can feel like you're 'introducing' them to your reader, one by one.

We often talk about trying to impose yourself — the writer — into your stories as little as possible. (After all, you want your reader to lose themselves in the narrative, and it's hard to do that if you're always reminding them of your presence.) If you introduce the reader to every character as they appear, you're almost acting as an intermediary between them and your reader, instead of allowing the reader to get to know the characters more organically.

Unless you're writing meta-fiction or a very kitschy story, it's best to limit the number of introductory character descriptions in any one story. Some characters can appear without introduction and be described later, and some characters probably don't need to be described or introduced at all.

But don't let us put you off. A good, well thought out and well written character description, given at just the right time, can do wonders for your story. It's just that when to describe certain characters, how much description to give, what kind of description, which characters you describe and which ones you don't . . . that's for you to decide. There are no hard and fast rules.

Speaking of no hard and fast rules, here are our hard and fast rules tips and techniques for describing characters . . .

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Tips and Techniques for Describing Characters:

Don’t focus solely on their physical attributes.

Think about the way they move, smell, stand, sit, speak, laugh, smile . . .

Don’t write your character description as a list of attributes or characteristics.

Many new writers describe their characters using a simple list of physical attributes or characteristics. This is because they want the reader to picture what this character looks like or they want the reader to know what kind of person they are.

There’s nothing wrong with that.

But if your character descriptions are too perfunctory and obvious in their intention, you’ll just end up reminding the reader of your existence, as the writer. It’s like watching a puppet show and suddenly seeing the strings. Moments like this are jarring; they take us out of the story.

Let’s look at The Lord of the Rings as an example. Although we know that Gandalf and Bilbo are fictional characters from the imagination of J.R.R. Tolkien, when we read The Lord of the Rings, we forget this — or at least, we can suspend our disbelief — because they are so well written and described so brilliantly. If the description of Gandalf was simply:

“He had long white hair, a silver beard, and broad shoulders.”

We would feel like this description was meant for us, so that we know what he looks like. Instead, Tolkien describes Gandalf like this:

“**Gandalf was shorter in stature than the other two; but his long white hair, his sweeping beard, and his broad shoulders, made him look like some wise king of ancient legend. In his aged face under great snowy brows his eyes were set like coals that could suddenly burst into fire.”**

While the first example tells us what Gandalf looks like, the second example makes us feel like we are there, actually looking at him. The first example pulls us out of the story, Tolkien’s description keeps us in the story.

Make sure your description tells us something about that character; who they are.

Check out this character description from Dennis Lehane’s A Drink Before the War:

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“Sterling Mulkern was a florid, beefy man, the kind who carried weight like a weapon, not a liability. He had a shock of stiff white hair you could land a DC-10 on and a handshake that stopped just short of inducing paralysis.”

See how this description gives us a sense of who this character is?

Look again at some of your stories. Are you inadvertently telling us what a character looks like in one paragraph and then telling us about their personality in another paragraph? Look for places in your writing where you can do more than one thing at once.

Reading is an enriching experience. 2,000 words is 2,000 words no matter who the writer is, but reading 2,000 words from a great writer is a much richer experience than reading 2,000 words from a not so good writer. This is because great writing does several things all at the same time. Not-so-great writing does one thing, then another thing, then another thing.

Look at your stories, is each section of writing only performing one function? It’s not that tricky to add layers to your writing, you just have to be OK with the idea that rewriting is probably the most important part of writing. Nourish your readers by giving them something rich, hearty, and complex. This is how you win writing competitions!

Consider writing a character description from the perspective of another character.

If you’re looking for a way to make your writing richer, this is a doozy. Not only are you giving the reader a sense of your character, but you’re also giving the reader a sense of that character from another character’s perspective, thereby giving us a sense of their character and the relationship between both characters! Phew! That’s a lot of layers in one bit of writing! Here’s a great example from Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse:

“[Mrs. Ramsay] looked at him. He was such a miserable specimen, the children said, all humps and hollows. 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 …”

Try using backstory to give us an idea of who they are.

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As we said earlier, character description isn't just about telling us how a character looks. Sometimes we can reach the end of a story and the height, hair colour, ethnicity, beauty, or body-type of a character is completely unknown to us. Perhaps fiction is the place where 'it's what's on the inside that counts' is truest. It's much more important to give the reader a sense of who each character is than to make sure they know that Filbert has green eyes, instead of brown or blue or grey. When we feel we know a character intimately, we can happily fill in the way they look ourselves, but tell us that Filbert has green eyes and brown hair and we can hardly picture Filbert at all.

Backstory is a great way to give a sense of a character. Firstly, when we hear about something a character did before the story began, they automatically feel more real to us. They existed before we met them, just like real people. This doesn't mean you always have to include backstory, but you never want to give your reader the impression that a character only began their existence when you began writing about them.

Secondly, we humans love to judge people on their behaviour. How many times has someone cut in front of you in traffic and you know for sure, without question, that they are just a terrible human being?

When you include backstory in your characterization, your reader will use that character's past behavior to inform their opinion of them. Give the reader something in that character's past that exemplifies the type of person they are, and your reader will pick up on that, even if it's done subconsciously.

(To be honest, it's often better if it is subconscious.)

Check out this bit of backstory from Toni Morrison's novel, Jazz:

"I know that woman. She used to live with a flock of birds on Lenox Avenue. Know her husband, too. He fell for an eighteen-year-old girl with one of those deepdown, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going. When the woman, her name is Violet, went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face they threw her to the floor and out of the church. She ran, then, through all that snow, and when she got back to her apartment she took the birds from their cages and set them out the windows to freeze or fly…"

What kind of person is Violet?

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Jealous? Vindictive? Unhinged? Impulsive? Spiteful? Vengeful?

Notice how there's a question mark after each adjective. That's because we don't know. This character description only allows us to infer. Perhaps she's none of these things. Perhaps her actions were completely justified or totally out of character. We don't know.

There is so much detail in this piece of characterization, and yet Morrison doesn't give us the answers, not in concrete terms. Here's what's great about this kind of character description:

The reader can draw their own conclusions. This makes the experience of reading this passage active, not passive. If Morrison had described violet like this:

"Violet was a vindictive woman. Jealous, impulsive, and spiteful."

There would be no work for the reader to do because everything has been spoon fed to them. Good writing actively involves the reader in the story by giving them something to do, not-so-good writing is when the writer has imposed themselves too much in the story, leaving the reader passive, inert, and probably switched off.

(A small caveat: sometimes it's OK to do the work for the reader. In fact, it's necessary. Exposition, moments of telling, times when you're explicit rather than implicit, they all have their place. Think of it like sailing. Someone needs to turn the wheel, adjust the sails . . . That's your job. You need to put your reader into the story and allow them to participate, work things out, piece things together, come to their own conclusions. But fiction isn't virtual reality, your reader can't just wander around in your story aimlessly. You need to guide them, steer them in the direction you want them to go.)

All character description is really an act of turning the ship's wheel or adjusting the sails. You're influencing the reader with an image or an impression of that character, guiding them towards a clearer picture or a greater understanding of them. It's up to you how overtly you want to do this. Sometimes you'll want them to know something about a character, sometimes you'll want them to suspect something about them. Sometimes you'll want to be explicit, sometimes you'll want to be implicit. In our experience, new writers tend to be overly explicit, so if you're new to writing, you'll probably want to find ways to be less overt. There are ways to make your character descriptions less 'on the nose', but it's also fine if you'd rather be more explicit with your character descriptions and look for other ways to bring subtlety to your writing.

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Using backstory to give a character description is a great way to be more subtle with your writing. It's perfectly possible that someone could read a passage like the one in Jazz and the words jealous, vindictive, and spiteful wont consciously enter their minds. A big part of the reading experience is subconscious. Imparting certain ideas to your reader subconsciously is a sleight of hand that really pays off. These are the moments when you — the writer — completely disappear, and the reader feels like their on their own, lost in the story without the writer breathing down their neck, telling them what's what!

Another great thing about describing your characters in this way is that their personality, who they are, is not set in stone. If you introduce a character to your readers and tell them that she is jealous, vindictive, and spiteful, your reader will file that away as an absolute. Giving them an impression of who that character is allows you to build on that or even subvert your reader's expectation of that character later in the story. People are complicated and multifaceted, allow your characters the same freedom to be more than just one thing.

Adjectives aren't the friend you think they are.

At school, we are told that adjectives are describing words, and so they are. Adjectives describe nouns, adverbs describe verbs. But this sticks with us, and when we begin to write fiction we assume that adjectives are the best way to describe things, including characters.

A quick word about using adjectives and adverbs in your writing. . .

Don't get us wrong, if used sparingly (very, very sparingly with adverbs) they have their place, but they aren't quite as good as we sometimes think they are.

First of all, almost every sentence you write will contain a verb, as they are usually the driving force of the sentence.

Adjectives and adverbs are better thought of as additions to sentences. This is why it's almost always better to cut out adverbs and replace them with descriptive verbs.

Reading is a complex cognitive process in which we decode symbols (words) in real time, using each word — and the words around it — to derive meaning as we read. Don't worry, we're actually pretty good at it! However, this does mean that simple, short sentences are often stronger and more impactful than longer, more complex sentences.

That's why something like 'she idled' is more effective than 'she walked slowly'. Idled is also a much more vivid and interesting word; it carries more weight.

Remember earlier when we said that good writing is richer than not so good writing?

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Well, ‘She idled’ is fewer words than ‘she walked slowly’ and it carries more weight, in fewer words. That makes it richer.

Simple writing with fewer words and shorter sentences is not inherently better. Sometimes you can’t say all you want to say in just a few words, but concise writing that says more, is always better than more words that actually say less. Cutting out adverbs and replacing them with descriptive verbs is the best way to instantly elevate your writing and make it richer.

Now let’s talk about adjectives. . .

The job of an adjective is to give us more information about a noun, but their function in our every day use of language is usually practical, not creative. We use adjectives to tell someone that a plate is hot or that we want the blue carpet, not the green carpet. We can also use them to describe why we don’t like a particular dress a certain celebrity is wearing because it’s too long, short, puffy, unflattering. . .

But in these every day examples, we’re usually referring to something that is right in front of us. Saying we want the blue carpet, not the green one is fine when both carpets are there in front of us and our only reason to use the adjective is functional.

What happens when we try to use adjectives to describe something more complex than a carpet? What happens when we try to use adjectives to describe something that isn’t in front of us?

Try using only adjectives to describe a beautiful sunset to someone who wasn’t there to see it.

Most of the adjectives you’ll come up with will probably be pretty bland, and will be words that could easily describe every sunset, ever.

You might come up with one or two lovely adjectives. Perhaps the sunset was beguiling or bewitching, but both of those words are just synonyms for beautiful. We know the sunset was beautiful, but how to describe that beauty? You can’t properly describe it by simply using more words for beautiful.

A sentence full of dull adjectives is inherently dull and a sentence with too many elaborate adjectives is just. . . purple. [Purple prose = prose that is too elaborate or ornate.]

This brings us back to the problem of relying solely on adjectives for character description.

Tall is an adjective, but there are lots of tall people in the world.

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Tall is a useful adjective. If you want to differentiate between two people in front of you, describing one person as tall and the other as short is pretty effective. But on its own, tall isn't a great way of describing a character in a story.

Gigantic is an adjective and more interesting than tall, but it gives the impression that the character is very, very tall. What if she is just tall?

Monstrous is another synonym for tall, but you might start getting hate mail if you describe every character in your writing who is over 6ft as monstrous.

So tall is boring and describes too many people, whereas gigantic and monstrous don't mean quite the same thing as tall.

Curly is an adjective, but lots of people have curly hair.

Brown is an adjective, but lots of people have brown eyes.

This is the problem with believing that adjectives are your best friends when it comes to describing things, even characters.

Adjectives are useful, but it might be better to think of them as practical words, not the creative, magical words you might have assumed them to be.

Check out this character description from Amber Dawn's novel Sub Rosa:

"When he did appear his eyes were as brown as I remembered, pupils flecked with gold like beach pebbles."

Dawn uses the adjectives brown and gold in the description of the character's eyes, but they only really have a practical function in the sentence. They tell us facts about that character, but on their own they don't really describe him. They could fit anybody with brown eyes.

It's the words flecked and beach pebbles that are doing the creative and descriptive heavy-lifting in this sentence.

Adding the image of the beach pebbles to an image of a person's eyes is a great technique because it forces your reader to conjure up two visual references. The image of the eyes is overlaid in the reader's mind with an image of beach pebbles. It's giving your reader's imagination more to work with, and it's another way to make your writing richer because two visual images used to describe one thing is richer than one.

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Use dynamic verbs, not just stative.

A dynamic verb is a verb that indicates an action, process, or sensation. Stative verbs indicate a state of being. Stative verbs are static, dynamic verbs have movement or action.

Let's look at an example:

"She has brown eyes."

This character description has a stative verb (has), followed by an adjective (brown), followed by a noun (eyes). There is no movement in this sentence. Nouns don't move, unless you give them movement, adjectives don't have movement, and stative verbs don't have movement either. The sentence is static.

What's wrong with that?

Absolutely nothing. In any story, you'll find plenty of static sentences, and that's absolutely fine.

But you should look out for static chunks of writing.

Creative writing is all about flow, rhythm, musicality, fluidity. The experience of reading a story should feel a bit like stepping into a river and being carried along by the current.

Some stories might feel like a white knuckle ride through white water rapids, whereas other stories might feel more like floating lazily down some gently flowing, tree lined waterway. But a good story always flows.

Look for chunks in your writing that have only stative (static) verbs, no movement, and try breaking them up by adding sentences that include dynamic verbs. You might suddenly find that your stories flow better.

Character descriptions can often suffer from an overuse of stative verbs. When we describe the way a character looks, the impulse is often to describe them visually as if we are describing a photograph of them.

She has long hair, he has blue eyes, he has a scar across his left cheek, she has a wide smile. . .

And when you describe a character's personality, their temperament, what they are like, the impulse is often to use stative verbs because stative verbs indicate a state of being.

He was an impatient man, she has a disagreeable nature, she is compassionate and kind, he was immature. . .

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There's nothing wrong with including moments like this in your stories or in your character descriptions, but if you use too many static sentences in one chunk of description — without the addition of dynamic verbs and moments of movement — you'll interrupt the flow of your story, grind it to a halt, and draw your reader's attention to the fact that the narrative has stopped for you — the writer — to do something.

What exactly do we mean by adding movement to character descriptions?

Check out this example from Sherman Alexie's The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven:

"I thought she was so beautiful. I figured she was the kind of woman who could make buffalo walk on up to her and give up their lives. She wouldn't have needed to hunt. Every time we went walking, birds would follow us around. Hell, tumbleweeds would follow us around."

The first sentence is static. There's no movement because 'thought' and 'was' are stative verbs. But that's OK because the second sentence has movement. 'Make', 'Walk', and 'give' are all dynamic verbs. The next sentence has movement, too. 'Hunt' is a dynamic verb. Even though the sentence is saying she wouldn't have needed to hunt, just the inclusion of the word 'hunt' gives movement to the sentence. The rest of the description has movement as well because 'follow' is another dynamic verb.

Here's another example from John Kennedy Toole's A Confederacy of Dunces:

"A green hunting cap squeezed the top of the fleshy balloon of a head. The green earflaps, full of large ears and uncut hair and the fine bristles that grew in the ears themselves, stuck out on either side like turn signals indicating two directions at once. Full, pursed lips protruded beneath the bushy black moustache and, at their corners, sank into little folds filled with disapproval and potato chip crumbs."

See if you can identify all the dynamic verbs in this description.

There are more examples of character descriptions from literature at the bottom of this guide. Try to identify all the dynamic verbs as you read through them. Look at how much movement there is in these descriptions. Continue the motion of your story by adding movement to your character descriptions. This will help the flow of your story.

Don't over-describe your characters.

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If you're writing fantasy and you need to describe a creature in your story, it might be advisable to do a thorough head-to-toe character description because the reader is obviously going to be unfamiliar with a fantasy creature from your own imagination. If you're writing about people or animals, however, it's often better not to describe your characters from the ground up. Instead, pick a few character traits, quirks, or physical attributes that are unusual, noteworthy, or specific to that character. Ideally, these will be the ones that tell us the most about that character in the fewest amount of words.

When it comes to the physicality of that character, make sure that the details about how they look also tell us about the kind of person they are. Readers make assumptions based on what you tell them. If you tell them that a character is a great hulking beast of a man, with tattoos and a shaved head, it's unlikely the person they have in their mind will be gentle, shy, or sensitive. If you don't want them to be surprised later in the narrative when this character is revealed to be this way, draw your reader's attention to your character's gentle eyes or to the fact that he stoops as he walks in an effort to make himself more diminutive.

Look for places in your character descriptions where you've given inconsequential details. It's much better to have a few meaningful details about a character than it is to have too much detail, if the details are irrelevant or don't add much. This is something new writers struggle with. They'll often have a really great sentence or two, but those sentences will be surrounded by not-so-great sentences.

What do we mean by great sentences and a not-so-great sentences?

Great sentences are sentences that work, that are there for a reason, and that are pulling their weight. A sentence needs to earn its place in your story by doing something important. If a sentence isn't doing something important, it's freeloading and should (probably) be cut, trimmed, or changed.

The inexperienced writer thinks it's OK to have both hard-working sentences and freeloaders in their story. Either because they aren't quite sure of the difference yet, or because they think that even if a sentence isn't doing a lot, it isn't doing any harm, so why not keep it in?

The experienced writer, however, knows that the freeloading sentences are dragging down the hard-working sentences so they cut them out, trim them down, or change them. Often the best thing you can do for your story is to just cut all the freeloaders out. The quicker you get comfortable with cutting stuff out of your stories, the quicker you'll see your writing improve!

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New writers tend to over-describe characters, so look through your writing for character details you can cut out. If you can't cut it out, then keep it, but if you can cut something out, your story will usually work better without it.

When describing characters, you must remember that you're trying to give an essence of the character, not helping the police draw a composite sketch of a criminal!

Make your character descriptions subjective, depending on whose POV you're describing them from.

If you're describing a character from another character's point of view, try to imbue the description with subjectivity. The way we feel about someone will deeply impact the way we describe them, so think about whose point of view you're writing each character description from, and then think about the relationship between those characters. How will that affect the way the character is described? This is especially important when you're writing in first person point of view. In this case, every single character description will be filtered through your narrator. If the character descriptions read as just an objective description of that person, you'll lose the voice of the narrator in that moment and your voice — the voice of the writer — will take over. That's the quickest way to snap a reader out of a first person story!

Remember the five senses.

Ideally, when we read a character description, we want to feel like we're right there in the story. You want your stories to be immersive, and character descriptions shouldn't pull your reader out of the experience of your story. Using the five senses is a good way of keeping your reader immersed in your story, even during character descriptions.

Sight is obviously the sense you'll (probably) use most frequently in your stories, but simply telling your reader that someone has curly, black hair is not invoking the sense of sight. To properly employ this sense in your writing, you'll need to imagine that you are behind the eyes of the person who is looking at the character.

If you're simply describing the character from the perspective of the narrator, only for the benefit of the reader, it might be helpful to imagine your reader is in the scene, looking at that character. Now you describe what they see.

Vision is not static. We don't take a photograph with our eyes and then process it all at once. When we look at someone, our eyes move, they rove around. Not just up and down, they float over the thing we are looking at, taking in some details and hardly noticing others.

This is another good reason not to include too much description of one character or to describe characters from the ground up. When we look at people, we don't notice everything about them

and store it away as a complete image. Sometimes we might just notice one or two things. Perhaps their slightly crooked teeth and their expensive watch or the colour of their nail polish and the way they run their fingers through their hair.

The best visual character descriptions are often the ones that follow the way we see people in real life. We don't make a complete sketch of someone with our eyes when we look at them, we notice some details and other details slip by.

Also remember, when we observe someone in real life, they don't stand before us like a statue, waiting patiently while we look them over. When we take in their appearance, they are usually moving in some way. Perhaps they're walking into the room and talking to someone as they come in, perhaps we're watching them as they read something on their phone or they're playing with a small dog. Even if they are sitting quietly, on their own, there's probably some movement. A slight frown, the breeze in their hair, the way their eyes move around the room or they shift uncomfortably in their seat. Invoking the sense of sight in your character descriptions means including movement. The movement of looking and the movement in the scene. A static, photographic description will feel more like the writer is taking a break from the narrative to do something else, in this case telling the reader what the character looks like.

Sight isn't the only sense that can be used in character descriptions. Think about the sound of their voice, the rustle of their clothes, the way their long nails sound when they scratch their stocking-ed leg.

Consider the perfume they wear, the way their hands smell of butter after baking, the slightly fishy aroma that stays with them long after their shift at the docks is over.

How soft their hair looks, the way their skin feels when they shake hands, the textures of the clothes they wear. . .

OK, taste might be slightly trickier, unless you're writing about lovers or cannibals! But perhaps the tea they make is always on the sweet side because they can't help but add an extra half spoon of sugar.

Show and tell.

If you've read a lot of advice on how to write well, you're probably more familiar with the phrase 'show, don't tell' than you are with 'show and tell'. But, 'show, don't tell' has never been exactly accurate. This is because good writing uses a mixture of both showing and telling.

The reason why we come across 'show, don't tell' so often is because new writers usually do far too much telling and not enough showing. Telling is for when you want to be quick and explicit, showing is for when you want to reader to figure things out on their own.

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Too much telling pacifies the reader, it prevents them from becoming immersed in the story, switches off their imagination because there is nothing for it to do, reminds the reader that they are reading a story, reminds the reader of the presence of you, the writer, and makes the writing feel dull and flat.

This is why most writing advice encourages showing over telling.

But sometimes telling is necessary.

Character descriptions are a great example of where telling can be better.

How do you show that your character has red hair?

You might find a beautiful way of showing this. If you do, and it works in the story, that's great. But unless it really adds something special, it might be better — and easier — to just tell the reader that your character has red hair.

Check out the character descriptions at the end of this guide, you'll find plenty of telling going on.

That's because character descriptions are moments in your story when you want to directly influence your reader in a specific way at a specific moment. When you've chosen to describe a character, it means you actually want your reader to know things about them and if you really want your reader to know something, why not just tell them?

That's why character descriptions often contain moments of telling.

But variety is one of the core tenets of good writing. A mixture of both showing and telling in your character descriptions will work best.

Showing is also particularly useful when describing character traits. While it's fine to tell the reader that your character has red hair, it's sometimes better to show that your character is dishonest or cruel or generous.

Describe your characters by their possessions or proclivities.

Describing characters doesn't just mean describing what they look like or their personality. Just as a moment of backstory is a different way of giving the reader an impression of what a character is like, so too is using their possessions or proclivities to give the reader a sense of who

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they are. Do they like to play golf? Do they own 200 pairs of expensive designer sunglasses? Do they go to the Caribbean every winter? Do they cut coupons out of magazines? Use these details to help paint a picture of a character, just make sure you use the facts about them that most represent the kind of person they are. This means sometimes going further than just describing their possessions and proclivities. You might need to show how these things tell us something about who they are.

For example:

What kind of person likes to play golf?

Well, all kinds of people, actually. It doesn't really say that much about a character to say they enjoy golf. Tell the reader that your character likes to play golf and they'll either stop and wonder why this is relevant or they might think this fact will become salient later in the story. Is someone going to get beaten to death with a golf club in a few pages? This will definitely pull your reader out of the story.

So instead of just saying that your character plays golf, try finding something in this fact that actually does say something about who they are. Perhaps your character doesn't really enjoy the game as much as she enjoys the status that comes with her exclusive golf club membership.

Spread your descriptions throughout your story.

Remember earlier when we said that not so good writing is writing that does one thing, then another thing, then another thing? Make sure your stories can't be broken down paragraph by paragraph, with each paragraph performing one function. Short stories by new writers often can. Meaning that (for example) the first paragraph of the story describes the setting, another paragraph is all backstory and exposition, a later paragraph describes a character, another character is described in another paragraph later on. This is a big reason why your story might not have good rhythm and pace, because it feels too much like little 'episodes' instead of a continuous, flowing story.

If you've described Filbert all at once, in one paragraph dedicated solely to describing him, try breaking that description up and weaving it throughout the story. Not only will this help the flow of your story, but it will also allow the reader to get to know the character slowly. If we feel like we know everything about Filbert right away, we'll have one less reason to keep reading. Tell us something about Filbert, and then tell us something else later, and we'll start to believe that if we read on, we'll find out even more. Creating little things that push the reader onward through your

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story is another way of creating an immersive, engaging reading experience. Paragraphs that only do one thing (set the scene, describe a character) feel self-contained, complete. This means that when we finish the paragraph it feels like the end of something, a stopping point. This pulls us out of the narrative and then we have to re-immerse ourselves for the next paragraph. Too many stop and start moments and we never really get sucked into the story.

It's not just character description. If you have an entire paragraph just describing the setting, try breaking that description up and weaving it throughout the scene. You could even have a paragraph that contains action (something happening in the story), setting, and character description all in the same paragraph. You can do this by creating a relationship between the action, the setting, and the character all in that one moment.

Variety

Our last piece of advice for describing characters. Try to add as much variation to your character descriptions as you can. If you have several character descriptions in the same story, look at them closely. Are they all roughly the same length? Have you only used backstory as a way of describing each character? Have you focused only on their physical attributes each time? Have you used a description of the way they smell for each character? Have you told us hair and eye colour for each character? Have you mentioned a possession for each character? Look out for a kind of uniformity for all of your character descriptions. You don't want it to seem like you have a system or formula that you use every time you describe a character. If the character descriptions feel too similar to one another in style and structure, your descriptions won't feel natural and you'll once again be reminding the reader of your presence, showing them the strings, and pulling them out of the narrative.

More Character Descriptions From Literature:

"*He was a compact, clearcut man, with precise features, a lot of very soft black hair, and thoughtful dark brown eyes. He had a look of wariness, which could change when he felt relaxed or happy, which was not often in these difficult days, into a smile of amused friendliness and pleasure which aroused feelings of warmth, and something more, in many women***."** — A.S. Byatt, Possession

"She drinks pints of coffee and writes little observations and ideas for stories with her best fountain pen on the linen-white pages of expensive notebooks. Sometimes, when it's going badly, she wonders if what she believes to be a love of the written word is really just a fetish for stationery."— David Nicholls, One Day

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“I am an invisible man. No I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe: Nor am I one of your Hollywood movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids — and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, simply because people refuse to see me.”— Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man

“He had a thick moustache, and his eyes peered out from his long, lank black greasy hair, like a light from a cinema screen before the drab velvet curtains had been fully withdrawn.”— Jim Lowe, New Reform

“*The rural opinion about the new young ladies, even among the cottagers, 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.”*

— George Eliot, Middlemarch

"*The fourth Earl of Woolsey was much larger than Professor Lyall and in possession of a near-permanent frown. Or at least he always seemed to be frowning when he was in the presence of Miss Alexia Tarabotti, ever since the hedgehog incident (which really, honestly, had not been her fault). He also had unreasonably pretty tawny eyes, mahogany-colored hair, and a particularly nice nose."*

— Gail Carriger, Soulless

“She was delicately morbid in all her gestures, sensitive, arrogant, vulnerable to flattery. She veered between extravagant outbursts of opinion and sudden, uncertain halts, during which she seemed to look to him for approval. She was in love with the idea of intelligence, and she overestimated her own. Her sense of the world, though she presented it aggressively, could be, he sensed, snatched out from under her with little or no trouble. She said, “I hope you are a savage.”

— Mary Gaitskill, Bad Behavior

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“He was commonplace in complexion, in feature, in manners, and in voice. He was of middle size and of ordinary build. His eyes, of the usual blue, were perhaps remarkably cold, and he certainly could make his glance fall on one as trenchant and heavy as an axe… Otherwise there was only an indefinable, faint expression of his lips, something stealthy — a smile — not a smile — I remember it, but I can’t explain.”

— Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness

“The door flew open, revealing a wrinkled, forward-thrusting face wreathed with a nimbus of wispy white hair, a face resembling nothing so much as a mole emerging from its burrow. Her spectacles were so dirty that I could hardly see the use of them.”

— Lyndsay Faye, Dust and Shadow: An Account of the Ripper Killings by Dr. John H. Watson

"Tall and rather thin but upright, the Director advanced into the room. He had a long chin and big rather prominent teeth, just covered, when he was not talking, by his full, floridly curved lips. Old, young? Thirty? Fifty? Fifty-five? It was hard to say."

— Aldous Huxley, Brave New World

“He ... boasted an unassuming mustache, which was perched atop his upper lip cautiously, as though it were slightly embarrassed to be there and would like to slide away and become a sideburn or something more fashionable.”

— Gail Carriger, Etiquette & Espionage

“He smiled understandingly — much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced — or seemed to face — the whole eternal world for an instant, and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favor.”

— F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby

“Phyllida’s hair was where her power resided. It was expensively set into a smooth dome, like a band shell for the presentation of that long-running act, her face.”

— Jeffrey Eugenides, The Marriage Plot

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"The face of Elrond was ageless, neither old nor young, though in it was written the memory of many things both glad and sorrowful. His hair was dark as the shadows of twilight, and upon it was set a circlet of silver; his eyes were grey as a clear evening, and in them was a light like the light of stars."

— J.R.R. Tolkien, Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring

"*The only talents he possessed were delusions of adequacy***."**

— Jodi Taylor, The Nothing Girl

"For quite apart from the fact that he was barely three feet tall, a third of his diminutive person consisted of his head, which was obviously much too big for him, and was embellished with a huge long hooked nose and a pair of great round protuberant eyes. As his trunk was also rather long, there was only about four inches left for his legs and feet. However, good use had been made of the space available, for considered in themselves the baronial nether limbs were as elegant as one could hope to see."

— E.T.A. Hoffmann, The King's Bride

"*His khaki sleeves were rolled over his sunburned arms, and he had the flat green eyes and heavy facial features of north Louisiana hill people. He smelled faintly of dried sweat, Red Man, and talcum powder."*

— James Lee Burke, The Neon Rain

"*A coat hanger of a body trying to remember the coat that years before had fallen off"*

— Richard Flanagan, Gould's Book of Fish: A Novel in Twelve Fish

"Her skin glistening in the neon light coming from the paved court through the slits in the blind, her soot-black lashes matted, her grave gray eyes more vacant than ever."

— Vladimir Nabokov, Lolita

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“The woman was imposing, unusually tall and rippling with what seemed to be hard-won muscle. She wore a one-shouldered jumpsuit that looked like it had been stitched together from a mixture of animal hides and discarded armor. Her exposed arm displayed an elaborate stretch of short slashing lines that had been cut into her dark skin from shoulder to elbow, and below the elbow she wore a leather bracer. Her thick hair was dyed blood red and she held it back in dreadlocks that trailed down her back.”

— Rebecca Roanhorse, Resistance Reborn

“Though every vestige of her dress was burnt, as they told me, she still had something of her old ghastly bridal appearance; for, they had covered her to the throat with white cotton-wool, and as she lay with a white sheet loosely overlying that, the phantom air of something that had been and was changed, was still upon her.”

— Charles Dickens, Great Expectations

“Pastor Ben Bonner was a balding man with a face lined by laughter and pain, and eyes that always held more hope than despair. Barely as tall as Calum’s chest but stout as an oak, he clasped Calum’s forearm and pulled him into a fatherly embrace.”

— L.H. Leonard, Legend of the Storm Hawks

“He was sunshine most always-I mean he made it seem like good weather.”

— Mark Twain, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

“It was a compound of self-reliance, hard knocks, heart hunger, unceasing work, and generosity. There was no form of suffering with which the girl could not sympathize, no work she was afraid to attempt, no subject she had investigated she did not understand. These things combined to produce a breadth and depth of character altogether unusual.”

— Gene Stratton Porter, A Girl of the Limberlost

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"Without the coat, her body had a lean look to it — as if she worked too long, and ate too little or too poorly. Her gloves and tall brown boots were caked with the filth of the plant, and she was wearing pants like a man. Her long, dark hair was piled up and back, but two shifts of labor had picked it apart and heavy strands had scattered, escaping the combs she'd used to hold it all aloft." **—** *Cherie Priest, Boneshaker*

*"For such an extraordinary athlete—even as a Lower Middler Phineas had been the best athlete in the school—he was not spectacularly built. He was my height—five feet eight and a half inches…He weighed a hundred and fifty pounds, a galling ten pounds more than I did, which flowed from his legs to torso around shoulders to arms and full strong neck in an uninterrupted, unemphatic unity of strength."***—** John Knowles, A Separate Peace

"Once Addie let someone in, she was impossible to forget. There was something about her that crawled inside a person and built a nice comfy home there, her goodness expanding until it filled every limb."— Kasie West, Split Second

"He smiled understandingly — much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced — or seemed to face — the whole eternal world for an instant, and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favor."

— Amber Dawn, Sub Rosa

"Through the door came two Sardukar herding a girl-child who appeared to be about four years old. She wore a black aba, the hood thrown back to reveal the attachments of a stillsuit hanging free at her throat. Her eyes were Fremen blue, staring out of a soft, round face. She appeared completely unafraid and there was a look to her stare that made the Baron feel uneasy for no reason he could explain."

— Frank Herbert, Dune

"Standing at the original Victorian counter was a man in a long black leather coat. His hair had been grown to counteract its unequivocal retreat from the top of his head, and was fashioned into a mean, frail ponytail that hung limply down his back. Blooms of acne highlighted his vampire-white skin."

— Julia Stuart, The Tower, the Zoo, and the Tortoise

++++Character Development

Presentation by Marion Mike

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"He was a funny-looking child who became a funny-looking youth — tall and weak, and shaped like a bottle of Coca-Cola."

— Kurt Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse Five

“Sterling Mulkern was a florid, beefy man, the kind who carried weight like a weapon, not a liability. He had a shock of stiff white hair you could land a DC-10 on and a handshake that stopped just short of inducing paralysis.

Brian Paulson was rake thin, with smooth hair the color of tin and a wet fleshy handshake…. His greeting was a nod and a blink, befitting someone who’d stepped out of the shadows only momentarily.**”**— Dennis Lehane, A Drink Before the War

"Black-haired and slender, wearing the huge new dust-filtering glasses, she approached his car, her hands deep in the pockets of her brightly striped long coat. She had, on her sharply defined small face, an expression of sullen distaste."

— Philip K. Dick, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?

“None of them had ever seen such...an alluring person. From the brightness on her hair, her fluorescent icy colored irises and magenta lips.” — A.L Carine, Invasion

*“His long, long hair wafted around him like black smoke, its tendrils curling and moving of their own volition. His cloak — or perhaps that was his hair too — shifted as if in an unfelt wind.”***—** N.K. Jemisin, The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms

“*A creature–a frightfully, awful creature–was mere feet from her. Its eyes were enormous, the size of goose eggs and milky white. Its gray, slippery skin was stretched taut upon its face. Its mouth was wide and full of needle teeth. Its hands rested on the rock, hands that were webbed and huge with each finger ending in a sharp, curved nail. It was as tall as a human man, yet oddly shrunken and hunched.”*

— M.L. Legette, The Orphan and the Thief

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