

# Character and Point of View

For a story to really resonate, it must have characters you can care about, relate to, understand, or even love to hate. How do writers create characters that trigger these kinds of reactions? How does *who* tells the story affect your feelings? In this workshop, you'll look closely at characterization and point of view, two techniques that help shape your reactions and opinions.

## COMMON CORE

Included in this workshop:

**RL 1** Cite textual evidence to support inferences drawn from the text.

**RL 3** Analyze how lines of dialogue or incidents in a story reveal aspects of a character. **RL 6** Analyze how differences in the points of view of the characters and the audience or reader create effects.

## Part 1: Point of View

**Point of view**—the vantage point from which a story is told—can affect your understanding of characters and events. Point of view is created by a writer's choice of **narrator**, the voice that tells the story. The narrator may be a character in the story or an outside observer.

This chart describes three points of view. You'll notice that all the examples focus on two students vying to win a school election. In each example, how does the choice of narrator influence your impressions of the characters?

POINT OF VIEW	EXAMPLE
<p><b>FIRST-PERSON</b> <i>The narrator</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>is a main or minor character in the story</li> <li>uses the pronouns <i>I</i> and <i>me</i></li> <li>shares his or her <b>subjective</b>, or personal, view of other characters and events</li> <li>doesn't know the thoughts, feelings, and opinions of other characters</li> </ul> 	<p>Nervously, I eyed Gwen, my competition in the election, and flashed her a gracious smile. Believe me—I wasn't feeling very gracious.</p> <p>After Gwen began her speech, I relaxed. What kind of campaign speech is <i>that</i>? I thought. There's no way I'll lose now!</p>
<p><b>THIRD-PERSON LIMITED</b> <i>The narrator</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>is not a character in the story but an outside observer</li> <li>zooms in on the thoughts, feelings, and opinions of one character</li> </ul> 	<p>Devin had trouble wiping the smile off his face as he listened to Gwen fumble through her speech. For a brief moment, he felt a wave of sympathy for Gwen. Then Devin forgot about his opponent and started planning his acceptance speech in his head.</p>
<p><b>THIRD-PERSON OMNISCIENT</b> <i>The narrator</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>is not a character in the story but an outside observer whose observations can be <b>objective</b>, or unbiased.</li> <li>is "all knowing"—that is, he or she has access to the thoughts, feelings, and opinions of all the characters</li> </ul> 	<p>Feeling confident and superior, Devin gave his opponent, Gwen, a genuine smile as she walked past him.</p> <p>Though Gwen returned Devin's smile, she was suspicious of his kindness. He's probably gloating over my mistakes, Gwen thought angrily.</p>



### MODEL 1: FIRST-PERSON

Emily, the young narrator of this novel, is visiting her sick grandmother, Ola. Emily and Ola have spent the entire day together trying on Ola's old hats and scarves. In this excerpt, Emily describes their special relationship.

## from **Toning the Sweep**

Novel by **Angela Johnson**

Ola and I lie on our backs in the kitchen, scarves and hats everywhere. I look over at the night-light by the table. It's the only light in the room now. Ola's eyes are closed, but I don't think she's asleep.

5 I have always loved my grandmother, but I know that she is a strange woman. I know that not too many of my friends would spend an evening trying on hats with their grandmothers. A few years ago they would have. Now most of them don't even admit that they like their grandparents, though they do.

10 I'm clueless about how to be cool. I've always told my friends that I like my grandmother. Since most of them only get a glimpse of who she is by the books and strange things she sends through the mail, I think secretly they think she's cool. That makes up for me being clueless, I guess.

### Close Read

1. One sentence that reflects the first-person point of view has been boxed. Identify another one.
2. Suppose Emily's grandmother was the narrator of this novel. How might that change what you learn about the woman and her granddaughter?



### MODEL 2: THIRD-PERSON OMNISCIENT

The narrator of this story shares the thoughts of more than one character. Alfonso is thrilled when Sandra agrees to go on a bike ride with him. Before his date, Alfonso breaks the chain on his bike. Will his brother help him out?

## from **Broken Chain**

Short story by **Gary Soto**

"Come on, man, let me use it," Alfonso pleaded. "Please, Ernie, I'll do anything."

5 Although Ernie could see Alfonso's desperation, he had plans with his friend Raymundo. They were going to catch frogs at the Mayfair canal. He felt sorry for his brother, and gave him a stick of gum to make him feel better, but there was nothing he could do. The canal was three miles away, and the frogs were waiting.

Alfonso took the stick of gum, placed it in his shirt pocket, and left the bedroom with his head down. . . .

10 At four he decided to get it over with and started walking to Sandra's house, trudging slowly, as if he were waist-deep in water. Shame colored his face. How could he disappoint his first date? She would probably laugh.

### Close Read

1. How does Ernie feel about Alfonso's predicament? How does Alfonso himself feel? Cite details to support your answers.
2. Suppose the narrator had not revealed Ernie's thoughts in lines 3–6. How might this affect your impression of Ernie?

## Part 2: Character Traits and Motivation

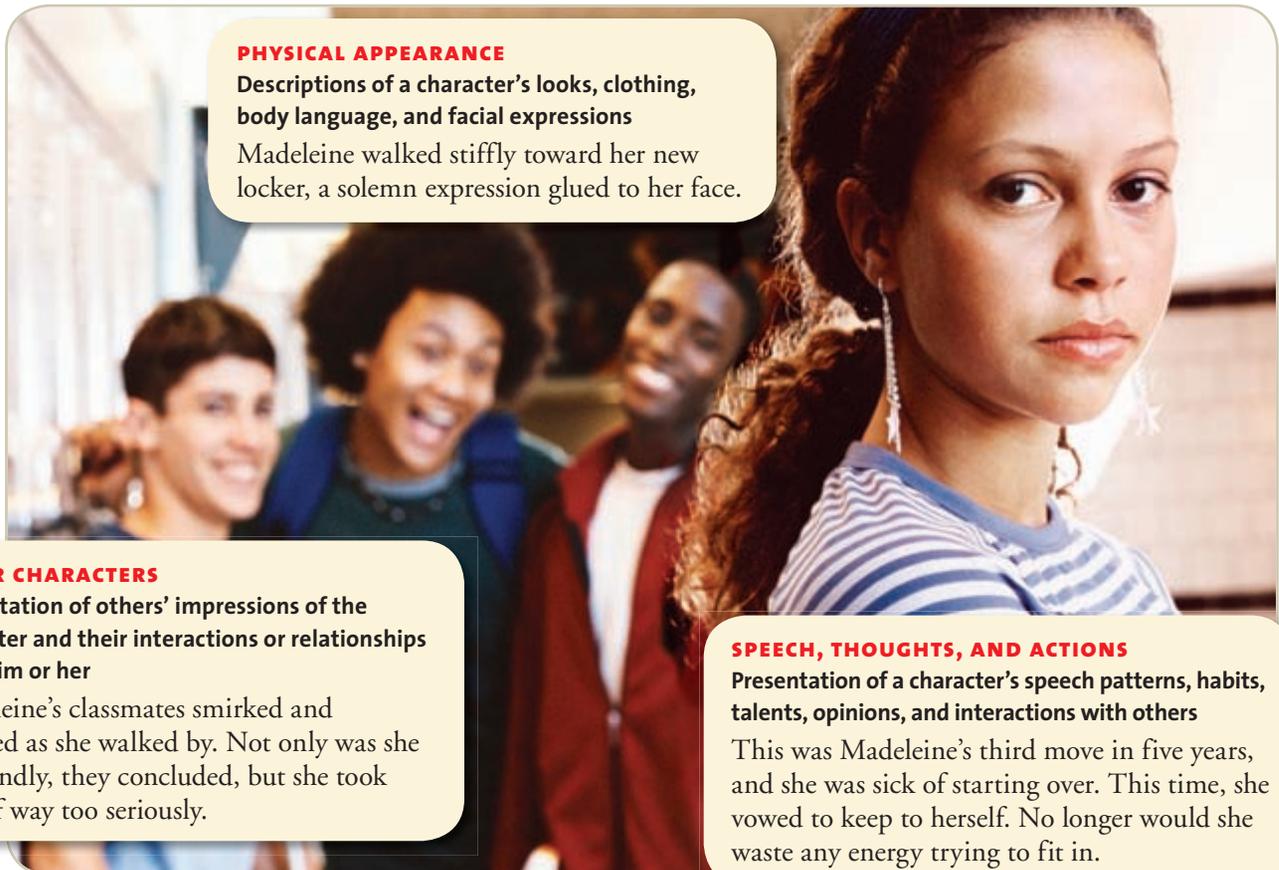
As a reader, you can't help but have strong reactions to the people you meet on the page. Did you know that writers use different methods of characterization to create these responses in you? Read on to find out exactly how writers develop lifelike characters with distinct traits and motivations.

### CHARACTER TRAITS

Loyal, outgoing, lazy—you might use words like these to describe people in your life. You may not realize it, but you learn about people's qualities, or **traits**, by observing the way they look, talk, and act. For example, a new neighbor probably wouldn't introduce herself by saying, "Hi! I'm outgoing." Instead, you would infer this trait by noticing her big smile and confident voice.

Like people, characters in literature have unique personalities and traits. Sometimes, a narrator will directly tell you what a character is like. More often, you have to infer a character's traits the same way you would a person's—by considering his or her appearance and behavior, for instance.

Writers show you what their characters are like by using the following **indirect methods of characterization**. Look at this graphic, noting the descriptions of the girl Madeleine. What traits can you infer?



**PHYSICAL APPEARANCE**  
Descriptions of a character's looks, clothing, body language, and facial expressions  
Madeleine walked stiffly toward her new locker, a solemn expression glued to her face.

**OTHER CHARACTERS**  
Presentation of others' impressions of the character and their interactions or relationships with him or her  
Madeleine's classmates smirked and laughed as she walked by. Not only was she unfriendly, they concluded, but she took herself way too seriously.

**SPEECH, THOUGHTS, AND ACTIONS**  
Presentation of a character's speech patterns, habits, talents, opinions, and interactions with others  
This was Madeleine's third move in five years, and she was sick of starting over. This time, she vowed to keep to herself. No longer would she waste any energy trying to fit in.

**MODEL 1: CHARACTERIZATION**

The narrator of this story takes the 8:12 train to work every day; he sees the same commuters and sits in the same corner seat. Today, however, he notices a stranger on the platform. What do you learn about the stranger from this brief excerpt?

from **Galloping  
Foxley**

Short story by **Roald Dahl**

The stranger was standing plumb in the middle of the platform, feet apart and arms folded, looking for all the world as though he owned the whole place. He was a biggish, thickset man, and even from behind he somehow managed to convey a powerful impression of arrogance and oil. Very  
5 definitely, he was not one of us. He carried a cane instead of an umbrella, his shoes were brown instead of black, the grey hat was cocked at a ridiculous angle, and in one way and another there seemed to be an excess of silk and polish about his person. More than this I did not care to observe.

**Close Read**

1. What methods of characterization has the author used to describe the stranger?
2. What kind of person do you think the stranger is? Cite specific details that affected your impression of him.

**MODEL 2: CHARACTER TRAITS**

Sopeap is a Cambodian teenager whose family recently moved to the United States. One day, a classmate walks into her family's store, lugging a green armchair. How does Sopeap respond to the classmate's request for help?

from **The Green Armchair**

Short story by **Minfong Ho**

*Thomas Ramsey.* For an awful moment she thought she had said his name out loud, but then realized it had only been in her mind.

Sopeap forced a smile. "Sure," she said, pleasantly surprised by how casual,  
how American, she sounded. "Be right with you."

5 "Hey, aren't you in my history class?" he asked.

"Algebra," she said quietly. At least he recognized her. She had long since noticed him, intrigued by the aloof, easy banter he carried on with his classmates, as if he were looking at them from the wrong end of a telescope.

A bit of a loner, and liking it that way. Sort of like me, she had sometimes  
10 thought, clutching onto her solitude as tightly as she held her textbooks. . . .

**Close Read**

1. How would you describe Thomas? Identify at least two details in this excerpt that influenced your impression of him.
2. Reread the boxed descriptions of Sopeap's thoughts and feelings. What do these descriptions suggest about her traits?

## CHARACTER MOTIVATION

Why did the boy decide to volunteer at the animal shelter? What prompted the woman to risk her life for a stranger? A big part of understanding characters is analyzing their **motivations**, or the reasons behind their actions. For instance, did the boy volunteer at the shelter because of his passion for animals or because he has a crush on someone who works there? Think about what each motivation might suggest about the boy's traits.

To uncover a character's motivation, you often have to look for details in the story. As you read, consider the following:

- the narrator's direct comments about a character's motivation
- a character's actions, thoughts, and values
- your own understanding of the emotions—love, greed, ambition, jealousy—that drive human behavior

In this story, 17-year-old Mike finally decides to visit his grandmother in the nursing home. What factors are motivating his actions?

# from *The Moustache*



Short story by **Robert Cormier**

5 . . . I told my mother I'd go, anyway. I hadn't seen my grandmother since she'd been admitted to Lawnrest. Besides, the place is located on the Southwest Turnpike, which meant I could barrel along in my father's new Le Mans. My ambition was to see the speedometer hit 75. Ordinarily, I used the old station wagon, which can barely stagger up to 50.

10 Frankly, I wasn't too crazy about visiting a nursing home. They reminded me of hospitals, and hospitals turn me off. I mean, the smell of ether makes me nauseous, and I feel faint at the sight of blood. And as I approached Lawnrest—which is a terrible cemetery kind of name, to begin with—I was sorry I hadn't avoided the trip. Then I felt guilty about it. I'm loaded with guilt complexes. Like driving like a madman after promising my father to be careful. Like sitting in the parking lot, looking at the nursing home with dread and thinking how I'd rather be with Cindy. Then I thought of all the Christmas and birthday gifts my grandmother had given me, and I got out of  
15 the car, guilty as usual.

### Close Read

1. Reread the boxed text. What is the narrator's initial motivation for visiting his grandmother?
2. The narrator has second thoughts about his visit once he's in the parking lot. What eventually motivates him to go inside?
3. Consider the two motivating factors that influence the narrator's actions. What do they tell you about him?

## Part 3: Analyze the Text

Meet Gene, a high school student in Mrs. Tibbetts' second-period class. Gene and his fellow classmates have just found out that Mrs. Tibbetts is taking the advanced English class to a poetry reading. What happens when Mrs. Tibbetts unexpectedly extends the invitation to Gene's class? Read on to find out.



from

# I GO ALONG

Short story by **Richard Peck**



Since it's only the second period of the day, we're all feeling pretty good. Also it's a Tuesday, a terrible TV night. Everybody in the class puts up their hands. I mean everybody. Even Marty Crawshaw. . . . And Pink Hohenfield, who's in class today for the first time this month. I put up mine. I go along.

5 Mrs. Tibbetts looks amazed. She's never seen this many hands up in our class. She's never seen anybody's hand except Darla's. . . .

But then she sees we have to be putting her on. So she just says, "Anyone who would like to go, be in the parking lot at five-thirty. And eat first. No eating on the bus."

10 Mrs. Tibbetts can drive the school bus. Whenever she's taking the advanced class anywhere, she can go to the principal for the keys. She can use the bus anytime she wants to, unless the coach needs it.

Then she opens her attendance book, and we tune out. And at five-thirty that night I'm in the parking lot. I have no idea why. Needless to say, I'm the only one here from second period. Marty Crawshaw and Pink Hohenfield will be out on the access highway about now, at 7-Eleven, sitting on their hoods. Darla couldn't make it either. Right offhand I can't think of anybody who wants to ride a school bus thirty miles to see a poet. Including me.

20 The advanced-English juniors are milling around behind school. I'm still in my car, and it's almost dark, so nobody sees me.

Then Mrs. Tibbetts wheels the school bus in. She's got the amber fogs flashing, and you can see the black letters along the yellow side: CONSOLIDATED SCHOOL DIST. She swings in and hits the brakes, and the doors fly open. The advanced class starts to climb aboard. They're more orderly than us, but they've got their groups too. . . . I'm settling behind my dashboard. The last kid climbs the bus.

And I seem to be sprinting across the asphalt. I'm on the bus, and the door's hissing shut behind me. When I swing past the driver's seat, I don't look at Mrs. Tibbetts, and she doesn't say anything. I wonder where I'm supposed to sit.

30 They're still milling around in the aisle, but there are plenty of seats. I find an empty double and settle by the window, pulling my ball cap down in front. It doesn't take us long to get out of town, not in this town. When we go past 7-Eleven, I'm way down in the seat with my hand shielding my face on the window side. Right about then, somebody sits down next to me. I flinch.

### Close Read

1. From what point of view is this story told? Explain how you can tell.
2. Reread the boxed sentences. What do they suggest about Gene's character traits?
3. How would this excerpt be different if Mrs. Tibbetts were the narrator?
4. Examine lines 32–34. Why do you think Gene hides when the bus passes the 7–Eleven?
5. Consider Gene's actions and body language in lines 27–34. Based on these details, what can you infer about his personality?