Characterization: Getting the essence (personality) and emotion (motivation) of a character onto the page.

All characters are heroes in their own story. Even villains.

All characters are complex and layered. They have positive and negative traits (strengths & flaws).

Characterization is FAR more than physical attributes; in fact, when the physical takes a back seat to emotional attributes, the character becomes automatically more compelling. UNLESS a physical attribute is critical to the reader’s understanding of the character—but in those cases, the emotional impact of the physical trait is critical to the character, which in turn makes the character more compelling to the reader. (The Flying Circus, Susan Crandall)

Consider comics: Peanuts, for instance. Each character is unique, unmistakable, and reliable. Their essence does not change. The humor comes from a twist that causes their character to respond in an authentic yet fresh manner to the world around them.

The purpose of characterization is to create a point of connection between the character and the reader. While the reader may find a character’s actions or choices abhorrent or inexplicable, the author’s goal is to create a sense of empathy in the reader. This does not mean the reader approves of a villain’s actions, but if the author has done a good job of characterization, readers will recognize themselves in the villain, at least a little. Since we all have the capacity to do evil, it may be an uncomfortable (if unconscious) connection, which makes for excellent literature. (Karen Ullo’s Jennifer the Damned)

Carrying this idea a bit further, empathy for characters who are not like us on the surface leads to conflict and suspense. These are also excellent elements in fiction and literature.

Characterization is not entirely separate from plot, or even setting. All the elements interact with each other to reinforce each other.

Consistency is the first hallmark of authentic characterization. The writer must create a “habit of being” for each character. Think of characterization as world building on an individual level.

An outgrowth of consistency is motivation. Any deviations from a character’s “habit of being” MUST be adequately developed. A character who is forced to act in a manner contrary to their basic personality in the course of a story (which makes for a great story, btw) MUST have sufficient motivation to do so.

Once you’ve created a character, the character must change (usually in the direction of growth) through the course of the novel. This is called a character arc. Arc is not smooth. Think about story structure: There will be external obstacles and internal conflict that drive the character into increasing dire circumstances. There will be a black moment followed by a strong reversal and change. But it’s not just the circumstances that change. The character must change, and that is typically the moment in story structure that it happens. The more personally significant the change is to the character, the more satisfying the transformation will be in the reader’s eyes.

Tools for creating a character’s personality include:
Lists of physical and psychological attributes, character’s history, politics (what underlying motto drives them, often unconsciously), childhood, school, defining or traumatic events, pets, family (multi-generational), ethnic/cultural background, expectations (and how the character may fail or rebel against them), etc.

Vices and Virtues

Lives of the saints

Enneagram – 9 broad personality types

Myers-Briggs Personality Types – 16 specific personality types
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myers%E2%80%93Briggs_Type_Indicator

Methods and literary devices for revealing character on the page:

Names—an excellent shortcut or reinforcement of the qualities of specific characters:
- Ebenezer Scrooge, the Grinch Who Stole Christmas.
- Characters’ nicknames, whether given or chosen, i.e. Holly Golightly (Lula Mae Barnes from Breakfast at Tiffany’s by Truman Capote). This can be especially effective if the character hates the nickname, increasing conflict and tension.
- Any name that has specific meaning (Lilac Girls by Martha Hall Kelly; a main character notes the meanings of many other characters’ names in German or Polish, which acts as a shortcut to characterization for these often-secondary characters.

Psychic distance, or Point of View
- 1st person can be more intimate, and can reveal character through his/her own thoughts.
- 3rd person can be more removed, and allows character revelation through the eyes of other characters
- There are exceptions to these; when an author understands how to manipulate POV, it is possible to “zoom in or out” for a more intimate feel or for colder, more impersonal sense in either style of POV.

Word choice—a subtle and very effective method of revealing character. Active versus flowing verbs (never use passive verbs!); create a voice that fits the character, using the words that character would use, and describing what that character would notice.

***Specific language is key to characterization. With the perfect word in the right place, it is possible to establish and reveal characters’ personalities, motivations, and arcs with brevity.

Dialogue—Again, use words and cadence the way the character would. Each character should speak in a distinct manner. The reader should be able to tell which character is speaking in a long exchange of dialogue, without having to go back and “count.”

***What the character chooses to reveal or not reveal in dialogue adds depth to his/her characterization. Sometimes the most powerful character revelation is silence or omission.
**Other features** that affect, or can be affected by characterization:

Weather—Storms as characters, where the storm is as much of a character as the people in its way; perhaps using a specific type or aspect of weather as a motif to develop or reveal characterization (don’t overdo this one; it could get trite).

Animals or inanimate objects—Moby Dick, the sea in Melville’s work; Mount Everest in Jon Krakauer’s Into Thin Air; a marauding grizzly bear (Prey by Linda Howard); the horse in Seabiscuit by Laura Hillenbrand, etc.

Handling of time—Slowing the pace during a traumatic time for a protagonist, or leaping forward, and leaving much unsaid. Both can reveal or not reveal important information about the character.

Choice of events to include or not include. Every event and every scene in your story/novel must **SERVE THE STORY**.

**Avoid:**

Cookie cutter characters, two dimensional, choosing to show the same details for each

Surface or physical details only – UNLESS they reveal far more about the character than eye color and hairstyle

Characters so similar the reader can’t tell them apart (particularly in dialogue)

Black-and-white/all-or-nothing characters.

Villains (or any other characters) who simply inhabit a role. Even villains need depth and complexity, which means readers needs to see themselves in the character (empathy) or the character needs to be developed in a way that the reader understands why they do the dastardly deeds they do.

For that matter, any character who simply inhabits a role because the author wants them to be there (they’re cute, or funny, or a mentor/commentator). If a character is in your work, they deserve to be developed into multi-faceted, rich characters of their own. (You never know when you might spin them off into their own story; make it easy for yourself by making even secondary characters strong.)

**Summary:**

Characterization is the art of using words to convey a character’s personality on the page, using specific word choices to create his/her “habit of being,” motivation, and arc throughout the book. Think of it as world building on an individual level. It is far more than a list of traits.

Characterization, plot, and setting enhance each other to create deeply layered, subtle, and powerful fiction. We humans are hardwired to desire story—but story is all the more effective when told through characters we care about. Creating those characters is our job (and our joy!) as authors.