Characterization

Part Four: How to Write about Characterization (Developing the Argument)

Do Not Do These Things (Rookie Mistakes)

Do not write some version of this sentence: "The author uses the literary element characterization when..." This is clunky and reads like you're filling in a worksheet.

Do not write some version of this sentence: "One characterization is when the author..." If feel the need to do this sort of thing, use the verb form of the word ("the author characterizes").

Do not write some version of this sentence: "The author characterizes the character by…" Character and characterizes are obviously different forms of the same root word. Vary your language choices by either using synonyms or just referring to the character by name.

Do Not Do These Things (Rookie Mistakes)

Do not write that *the reader* characterizes. Characterizing is what *the author* does by describing characters and inserting details that reveal character. What the reader does is *infer* (based on the descriptions and details that the author included).

Do not include words or phrases that imply judgment on your part. Even if you despise what a character represents, unless that's also the point of view of the text, you have no business editorializing with the insertion of value judgment adverbs and adjectives to describe the character's behavior or choices. What you think is irrelevant to how the text works.

Do not write that an author characterizes his or her creation in a certain way to make him or her more interesting or make him or her more vivid for the reader. First, this has zero grounding in text, as the reader has no access to the author's thought process. Second, it says nothing about the text, as the idea that authors attempt to create interesting and vivid characters applies to virtually any narration. When you write things like this, what I (or any AP grader) reads is, "I have no idea what the hell is going on in this text."

Things You Don't Have to Do

You don't have to use the word *characterization* or *characterize* at all. You just have to cite the evidence (in the case of direct characterization) and explain how you formed your inferences (in the case of indirect characterization).

You don't have to keep straight for the reader the difference between direct and indirect characterization. These concepts are more for you, labels to help your understanding. The reality is that it seldom makes any difference to your argument whether or not you are distinguishing between direct and indirect characterization. The obvious exception to this is when the focus of your argument is the contrast between the two (such as an argument explaining how the gap between the two creates irony). Even then, however, you don't have to actually use the words "direct" and "indirect."

You don't have to "prove" direct characterization. The explanation here should involve a discussion of *the implications* of that trait, not *a restatement* of ideas that are already explicit in the text.

Things You Have to Do

You must establish context-- most commonly establishing at what point in the text a character trait is displayed. Someone who hasn't read the text should still be able to follow the structure of your argument, and this is only possible if you remind your reader of the context for your evidence. Little is more frustrating than reading a paragraph where the writer has just strung together a bunch of random quotes without trying to show how they are related in the text.

You have to explain inferences if you're analyzing indirect characterization. Just writing "what this shows" doesn't cut it. You are trying *to convince* the reader that you're right, and that means you have to *actually explain* your thinking when you make claims. A "what this shows" claim is only an overview of an explanation to follow, not the explanation itself.

Your analysis of characterization must have a point. On a large scale (your overall argument), you should be connecting to a bigger idea in the text. On a smaller scale (within individual paragraphs), your analysis should be developing your arguments. What this means is that there should be a discussion of the implications of character analysis in addition to an explanation of how it works. If you can imagine a grader writing *So what?* in the margin, you haven't done enough work.

Strategies for Finding the Evidence You Need

Pretend the characters are real people. Based on what s/he does, what kind of person is s/he? Imagine, for instance, how that person would react in situations not described in the text. Doing this helps you to get a basic sense of the personality that is being developed by the author.

Look for turning points in the text. These are usually the most interesting places to find evidence about character, since how a person responds to stress is often the biggest clue to his or her real character. For example, it's easy to not be a liar when you have nothing at stake; your honesty is only really tested when it is personally disadvantageous to tell the truth.

Do not simplify complexities. When characters display contradictory traits, it not only makes them more three-dimensional, it also gives you things to talk about in your explanations. A common refrain in this class is that if one thing is true and another contradictory thing also seems to be true, it's more interesting to assume that the contradiction is purposeful and important.

Work backwards when analyzing characterization. Where a character ends up is usually much more important than where that character started. Starting with the end in mind also helps you to understand the extent to which a character grows or the extent to which a personality trait intensifies.