

# **Characterization**

## **Part Three: How to Write about Characterization (Structure)**

## Literary Devices are Analytical Tools

To analyze is to break something down into its component parts, and a tool is a means to achieve an end. What this means is that analysis of direct and/or indirect characterization should be at the service of some larger goal.

What you don't want are paragraphs that have topic sentences like, "The author uses the literary device characterization." It would be like writing about a construction site with paragraphs that begin, "The construction workers use a hammer." Even if that were worth establishing (it's not-- all construction sites use hammers, and all narrations include characters with personality traits), proving it in a paragraph would tell you nothing interesting about how the building process/story works. Hammering, like characterization, is just a means to an end.

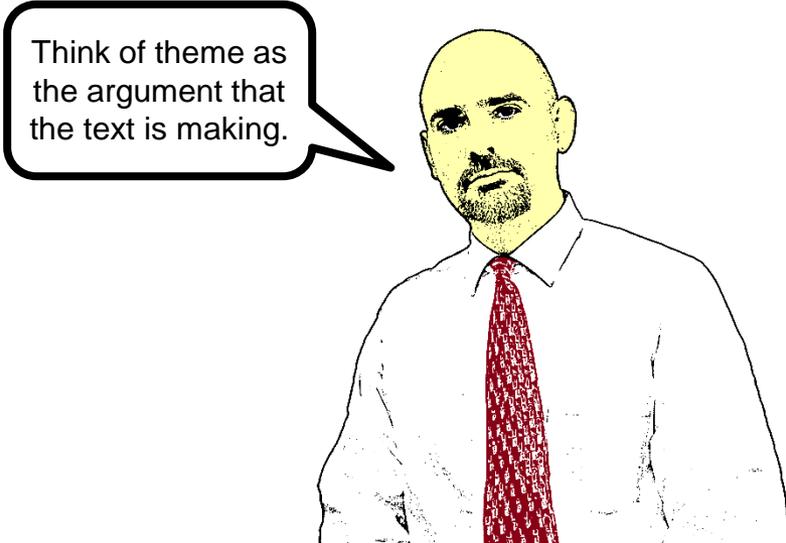
Instead, ask yourself, "What trait does the characterization establish," in conjunction with, "Why is it necessary for the narration to do it that way?" The answers to those questions should tell you what your topic sentences should be.

I know it's depressing to read this, since everybody loves to do what's easy (and organizing paragraphs by literary device is so, so easy). However, there are no short-cuts here. You need to actually think about what you are reading and how the text works.

## Use a Literary Device to Uncover the Bigger Ideas in a Text

What does this mean?

Most obviously this can mean connecting to a theme. Every literary text is trying to communicate a particular point of view about the world. It can be descriptive (*This is the way the world works*), or it can be prescriptive (*This is the way the world should or should not work*). How this works in literature is analogous to how non-fiction texts can usually be categorized as either expository or persuasive. If you don't understand these terms, stop now and look them up (because they are critical).



Think of theme as the argument that the text is making.

## Use a Literary Device to Uncover the Bigger Ideas in a Text

*What does this mean?*

Second, you can write about character. Notice I didn't write *characterization*, and there is a difference. The way that authors fill in the personalities of their creations (characterization) is not the same thing as larger conclusions about the nature of their creations (the character as a whole). For example, you can measure the degree of growth in a character over the course of the text (a character arc), or you can define the complexity of an important character if the multi-faceted nature of that character impacts the work as a whole. If you go the character analysis route, though, make sure the end result illuminates the text in some important way.

## Use a Literary Device to Uncover the Bigger Ideas in a Text

*What does this mean?*

Third, you can define the scope of a conflict-- especially when you are writing about a multi-faceted problem that can't be defined in a sentence or two. This strategy works best when dealing with excerpts. Since you don't have complete access to the entire narrative, the scope of your possible ambitions is going to be necessarily limited.

Doing this can take the form of a complex internal conflict (often with two equally desirable or two equally undesirable choices) or an interrelated internal and external conflict revolving around a single thematic idea. You may not have enough information to form a clear idea about the *ultimate* development of the themes in the text, but you can still write about why the conflict is fundamental to the human condition.

## Use a Literary Device to Uncover the Bigger Ideas in a Text

*What does this mean?*

Fourth, you can focus on writer's craft. This only works if you're focusing on a literary strategy that is part of a larger pattern in the text. Examples, of this include looking at the ways patterns of imagery develop, an extended metaphor that governs the logic of a text, the establishment of tone or mood through patterns of diction and imagery usage, or the way that irony is developed in a text. This strategy works best with a shorter text (especially a poem) or excerpt.

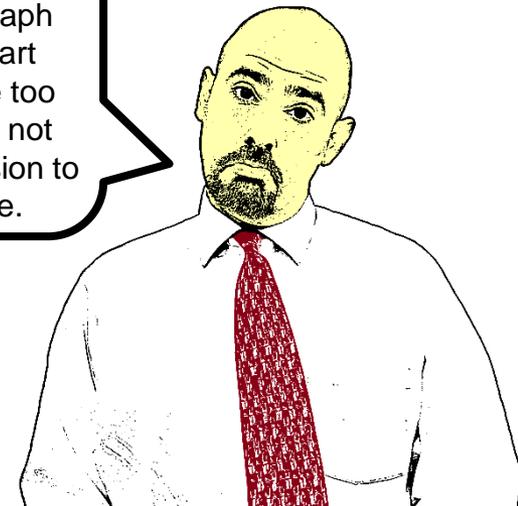
There are obviously other big picture ideas, but keeping these four in mind should give you plenty of options for virtually every task you will be asked to accomplish in this class or on the AP exam. Whatever you choose, though, the take-away idea is that thinking about the big picture cannot be an afterthought; rather, it should be the animating idea behind your argument.

## Divide Your Argument into Two Parts

There is nothing magical about a two-part structure, but it will be the scope of the majority of the assignments in this class. This is because a four-paragraph structure (intro, two body paragraphs, and conclusion) is the most practicable structure for the essays on the AP test (given the time limitations under which you will be working). As a result, my minimum expectations for most tasks will be two paragraphs (in which the information that would normally appear in an intro and conclusion are either implied or they are folded into the argument in abbreviated form).

The big advantage of thinking about a writing task as consisting of two parts is that it's easy to do, especially if you have a limited numbers of structures at the ready that will work in virtually every situation.

Depending on your argument and the way that you paragraph ideas, a two part division may be too limiting. You do not need my permission to break this rule.



## Four Common Structures You Should Know

I will emphasize four of these structures throughout this class: Before/After, Cause/Effect, Contrast, and Idea/Qualification. What all of these have in common is the way that they develop a single idea over two paragraphs, where one paragraph sets up the next (leading to a cohesive whole). There are obviously other potential structures, but at least one of these four will work for the overwhelming majority of writing tasks. Learning these four structures, then, frees up valuable time in a timed writing setting (or at home-- when you just want to get your homework done).

A fifth structure (Reason One/Reason Two) is not advised, as it is almost always two superficial mini-essays that should have each been expanded into their own separate arguments. The test for this kind of superficiality is whether the body paragraphs can be switched around and the essay still makes sense. This is true the vast majority of the time for Reason One/Reason Two essays, suggesting that the writer is not really developing a single idea with any kind of depth.

A sixth structure (Author Uses Literary Element X/ Author Uses Literary Element Y) is not only ill-advised, it is also incompetent. Don't even think of doing this unless your goal is to fail the AP test and make Cs, Ds, and Fs in this class.

## Structure One: Before/After

- I. Intro and thesis
- II. Up until X moment, Y is true (Y=an interpretation, not an event)
- III. After X moment, Z is true (Z=an interpretation, not an event)
- IV. Conclusion: change shows something important in the text (from thesis)

What you're looking for here is a turning point. This isn't a literary term per se, but most narratives have moments that fundamentally change the nature of a text. If characterization is going to be your primary analytical tool, the ideal scenario to use this structure to focus on a moment when a character either grows or changes as person. It could also be a moment when a character is given a chance to grow, but fails to take advantage of the opportunity (and suffers the consequences).

That said, one can still analyze in terms of character even when these conditions are not explicitly present or exist only at the level of implication (as in my example).

## Structure One: Example

I am using the “Jabberwocky” poem and connecting to a theme in the text for my big picture idea.

- I. Thesis (my argument): The way that Carroll characterizes the father reveals the way people react to obstacles in their lives.
- II. Simplified topic sentence for paragraph one: Before his son dispatches the Jabberwock, the father’s fear of the unknown defines his interaction with his son.

Potential evidence: 1) “beware” x2, “shun”: diction choices that establish caution 2) “jaws that bite,” “claws that catch”: images of danger; usage implies fear 3) son lost in “uffish thought”: indirect characterization-- possible indecision which implies the son’s internalization of the father’s fear 4) “manxome foe,” “eyes of flame,” “burbled”: Jabberwock perceived by the son in terms of threat, which implies the son’s internalization of the father’s fear

- III. Simplified topic sentence for paragraph two: After the monster’s dispatch, however, the father’s newfound support for his son points to how potentially destructive his former attitude was.

Potential evidence: 1) “beamish boy”: pride in his son’s accomplishment 2) “O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!” “in his joy”: direct characterization– happiness 3) the relative ease of the monster’s dispatch: indirect characterization-- the son was always competent; there was never any need to doubt him; the greater danger was holding him back

- IV. Conclusion (the big picture): The father’s initial attitude is unproductive. The fear of overcoming obstacles in one’s life leads to paralysis; a more productive response is to confront obstacles directly. When one is defined by fear, avenues toward progress are stymied, and nothing ever changes. The poem argues that one must be braver than that and slay the monsters that stop one from truly experiencing life, since living in fear is not truly living in any meaningful sense.

## Structure Two: Cause/Effect

- I. Intro and thesis
- II. X is true
- III. X causes Y
- IV. Conclusion: Y shows something important in the text (from thesis)

This is pretty straightforward; you're looking for critical preconditions that act as a catalyst for something else that drives the story. This can be an event (in which case it usually turns into a specialized case of Before/After), a decision a character makes, a personality trait, or even a feature of the setting (such as an oppressive social norm). Really, it could be anything.

The trick to using this structure is to work backwards. Identify the interesting or important thing you want to examine in your writing and ask yourself, "How did it arise." Boom! You now have an essay plan.

This is an especially useful essay plan if you want to describe a character arc by measuring the way that a character changes or grows as a person.

## Structure Two: Example

I am using the material surrounding the “Jabberwocky” poem and the excerpt from Chapter 6 and connecting to a conflict in the text for my big picture idea.

- I. Thesis (my argument): Alice’s reaction to Wonderland reveals the nature of world divested of conventional notions of common sense.
- II. Simplified topic sentence for paragraph one: Wonderland is defined by resistance to explication. This is partially established by Alice’s reaction to it.

Potential evidence: 1) direct characterization—Alice “puzzled” over “Jabberwocky;” 2) She recognized it was a “Looking-glass book,” but it doesn’t help; the poem is still “pretty” but “rather hard to understand;” direct characterization-- Alice doesn’t want to admit to herself that it still makes little sense; 3) Like Wonderland in general, it possesses “ideas” even as “I don’t exactly know what they are!” (direct characterization)

- III. Simplified topic sentence for paragraph two: This puzzlement, in turn, leads Alice to try to find answers, though the answers are just as nonsensical to her as the questions.

Potential evidence: 1) Humpty Dumpty “seem[s] very clever at explaining words” (direct characterization of him as expert, and indirect characterization of Alice as doubting his expertise; 2) Humpty Dumpty is arrogant and condescending, explicating the poem with precision (indirect characterization); 3) His explication makes little sense, and is not grounded in text. It feels arbitrary; 4) Alice is able to add to his explication, but it feels like a game with no real rules; it is unsatisfying (indirect characterization).

- IV. Conclusion (the big picture): The nature of the conflict is such that it is not meant to be resolved. Gaining understanding of illogic does not make it logical. This is the point of the world in which Alice finds herself. It provokes Wonder, resisting satisfying explication. On a narrative level, it is a conflict felt by every child trying to make sense of the adult world. The rules are arbitrary and confusing to those not accustomed to living with its illogic.

## Structure Three: Contrast

- I. Intro and thesis
- II. Concept X
- III. Contrasts with Concept Y
- IV. Conclusion: Difference/Preference for X or Y shows something important in the text (from thesis)

Contrast essays are almost always more interesting to read than Compare essays. The reason for this is pretty straightforward: most Compare essays are really Reason One/Reason Two essays in disguise, where you're taking two independent routes to proving the same thing. As a result, Compare essays read like two superficial mini-essays, each lasting a single body paragraph.

That is not to say there aren't good Compare essays, but I would be extremely wary of the structure, especially when you have better alternatives.

Contrast essays are certainly one of them. Differences imply conflict, so writing about them is much more likely to get at something fundamental about how the text works. If, for example, you are defining something as important to the text, looking at its opposite can't help but generate insights about what makes the idea important in the first place.

## Structure Three: Example

I am using the material surrounding the “Jabberwocky” poem and the excerpt from Chapter 6 and connecting to character for my big picture idea.

- I. Thesis (my argument): The contrast between the puzzlement of Alice and the certitude of Humpty Dumpty reveals something essential about the nature of childhood.
- II. Simplified topic sentence for paragraph one: Alice naïvely believes the world should make sense. She is innocent and childish.

Potential evidence: 1) direct characterization—Alice “puzzled” over “Jabberwocky;” 2) The poem is still “pretty” but “rather hard to understand;” 3) The poem possesses “ideas” but “I don’t exactly know what they are!” (direct characterization); 4) She believes the poem should make sense, but cannot figure out how; direct characterization-- Alice doesn’t want to admit to herself that it makes little sense; 5) She trusts the adult’s world’s reassurances that things can be explained (indirect characterization: innocence)

- III. Simplified topic sentence for paragraph two: Humpty Dumpty falsely believes the world does make sense. He is pompous and didactic in his false knowledge.

Potential evidence: 1) Humpty Dumpty is a self-styled expert (direct characterization: “master”) with words and “seem[s] very clever at explaining” (direct characterization); 2) His expertise makes no sense, as his literalization of the metaphor of words working for the writer reveals (indirect characterization); 3) He “understands” the nonsense words in the poem (indirect characterization: arrogant and condescending); 4) None of his glosses on the words improve the reading of the poem or help to explain its meaning; he is a charlatan

- IV. Conclusion (the big picture): Alice lost in Wonderland is analogous to a child attempting to navigate the adult world. As such, her essential characteristic is her innocence and naïveté. She expects the world around her to make sense. The adult world, however, is nonsensical, filled with pompous nitwits who have deluded themselves into believing that they have figured it all out. Alice’s childishness is actually a better response to an absurd world, as it lacks the pretension of certitude.

## Structure Four: Idea/Qualification

- I. Intro and thesis
- II. Idea/Expectation/Appearance
- III. Idea/Expectation/Appearance is qualified/contradicted/reversed by another Idea/Reality
- IV. Conclusion: The gap between the two shows something important in the text (from thesis)

These are specialized contrast essays where the ideas being contrasted are contradictory on some level. However, in these essays, both ideas are still true on some level, as the tension remains unresolved.

The most common forms this essay takes are the paradox essay (where the two ideas seem to cancel each other out, yet are nonetheless both true), the irony essay (where expectation and reality both exist on some level, creating the potential for the doubled meaning), and the complexity essay (where the two ideas reveal inconsistency, but it don't rise to the level of paradox).

The last form is the most useful if characterization is going to be your primary analytical tool. Character essays where one paragraph is about one trait or desire and another paragraph is about an inconsistent trait or desire are very easy to write, and the conclusions lend themselves to discussions about the essential nature of the character and the conflict s/he must navigate in the text.

## Structure Four: Example

I am using the excerpt from Chapter 6 and connecting to author's craft for my big picture idea.

- I. Thesis (my argument): Humpty Dumpty's didactic stance toward the world around him is intended to undermine the reader's faith in the logic that supposedly orders the world.
- II. Simplified topic sentence for paragraph one: Humpty Dumpty believes that he can navigate and parse the world around him.

Potential evidence: 1) Humpty Dumpty is a self-styled expert (direct characterization: "master") with words and "seem[s] very clever at explaining" (direct characterization); 2) He "understands" the nonsense words in the poem (indirect characterization: arrogant and condescending), as well as the principle of the portmanteau logic that formed them; 4) His reading reveals the poem to be about badger like animals living in sun-dials, etc.

- III. Simplified topic sentence for paragraph two: This expertise is undermined, however, by the fact that his explication increases confusion, rather than introducing clarity.

Potential evidence: 1) Humpty Dumpty admits the poem is "hard" (direct characterization); 2) His gloss on the words, even if correct, decreases comprehension of the text; it is all a load of nonsense; he seems oblivious to this fact (indirect characterization); 3) Alice is skeptical of both his expertise and knowledge (indirect characterization); 4) Ironically, her lack of understanding, where the poem is about "ideas" that fail to resolve as meaning, contains more explanatory power than knowledge that breaks down meaning.

- IV. Conclusion (the big picture): The gap between false knowledge and unknowable reality reveals irony. The world is understandable, but only in the most superficial and misleading way. Humpty Dumpty's arrogant conviction about his knowledge only underscores his pretension. This destabilizing of the possibility of determining truth is Carroll's strategy for destabilizing the verities of adult knowledge. He expects the adult reader to understand the arbitrariness of the rules that govern daily life, as satirized by Humpty Dumpty's attempt to explicate Wonderland. The more one understands, the less sense things makes.