

Direct vs. Indirect Characterization

Characterization is an important element in almost every work of fiction, whether it is a short story, a novel, or anywhere in between. When it comes to characterization, a writer has two options:

1. DIRECT CHARACTERIZATION - the writer makes direct statements about a character's personality and tells what the character is like.

2. INDIRECT CHARACTERIZATION - the writer reveals information about a character and his personality through that character's thoughts, words, and actions, along with how other characters respond to that character, including what they think and say about him.

An alert writer might recognize that the two methods of characterization fall under the decision to “show” or to “tell”. Indirect characterization “shows” the reader. Direct characterization “tells” the reader.

To observe the difference between direct and indirect characterization, read the paired paragraphs below. Each is written to convey the same basic information. One of each pair demonstrates direct characterization while the other demonstrates indirect characterization. See if you can identify which method is being used.

EXAMPLES

Paragraph Pair 1:

A. Ed Johnson scratched his head in confusion as the sales rep explained Dralco’s newest engine performance diagnostic computer. The old mechanic hated modern electronics, preferring the old days when all he needed was a stack of manuals and a good set of tools.

B. “That Ed Johnson,” said Anderson, watching the old mechanic scratch his head in confusion as the sales rep explained Dralco’s newest engine performance diagnostic computer. “He hasn’t got a clue about modern electronics. Give him a good set of tools and a stack of yellowing manuals with a carburetor needing repair, and he’d be happy as a hungry frog in a fly-field.”

Paragraph Pair 2:

A. Julie owned a multitude of outfits and accessories, and it always took her forever to decide which combination might impress Trent. As usual, she called her sister several times for advice. After doing so, Julie decided to give the navy blue skirt with the white sweater a try.

B. Julie held up six different outfits in front of the mirror and pondered which would go best with her navy blue shoes, pastel eye shadow and the diamond earrings she’d already procured from her overflowing vanity. After ninety minutes of mixing and matching, and cell-phoning her sister three times for advice, Julie finally made up her mind. She’d give the navy blue skirt and white sweater a try, hoping Trent would love it.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Class: _____

OTHER EXAMPLES OF DIRECT AND INDIRECT CHARACTERIZATION

Direct: She was rich.

Indirect: She wore a ten carat diamond necklace everywhere she went.

Direct: Joe was having fun at the party.

Indirect: Joe couldn't believe it was already 2 in the morning, he didn't want to leave yet.

Direct: Sally is socially awkward.

Indirect: All Sally does when people are around is say weird things that nobody understands.

Direct: The clothes that John wears are outdated.

Indirect: John wore bellbottoms, gold chains, platform shoes, and huge sunglasses to the homecoming dance.

Direct: Dylan thought that reading was boring.

Indirect: No matter what he read, every time Dylan opened a book, he'd be snoring in five minutes.

Direct: Dee thinks that she is better than everyone else.

Indirect: Whenever anyone tries to speak to Dee, she says, "You don't know me," rolls her eyes, and walks away.

Practice #1

Rewrite each of the direct characterization examples as an indirect characterization.

Direct: He smells bad.

Indirect: _____

Direct: Eva is clumsy.

Indirect: _____

Direct: Terry doesn't like pets.

Indirect: _____

Name: _____ Date: _____ Class: _____

Direct: Parker really cares about other people.

Indirect: _____

Direct: Sonya is very smart.

Indirect: _____

Practice #2

Rewrite each of the indirect characterization examples as an direct characterization.

Indirect: The man's clothes were filthy, probably since he'd been sleeping on newspapers all night.

Direct: _____

Indirect: Martha warned Toby, "She'll never know who broke the window unless *somebody* says something."

Direct: _____

Indirect: Jorge's neighbor, Suzy, said, "Jorge is too smart to fall for such a dumb trick."

Direct: _____

Indirect: When she heard her baby crying last night, she just gritted her teeth and turned up her iPod.

Direct: _____

Indirect: Tim croaked, "I'll go start the car," and ran away because somebody tried to start a fight with his friend.

Direct: _____
