

# How to Breathe Life into Characters with Characterization: 5 Ways

by Chazda Albright -

<http://greatstorybook.com/how-to-breathe-life-characters-characterization-5-ways/>

This entry is part 2 of 7 in the series [Characters with Character](#)

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*This is about **how to create strong characters using characterization** and how we can do that intentionally and memorably. This is what you do after you've [chosen a character type](#), and after you've [created a great character profile](#). After all that, you still need to get the character onto the page. Here's how you do that.*

**Great characters who feel real are brought alive through *characterization*. So what is that exactly?**

**There is only one way to get a great character profile onto the page, and that's with characterization.**

Characterization is probably something you have *some ideas* about, but you might not have a concrete sense of what that really means or how you should DO it.

**What You'll Get Here:**

- What is characterization?
- The 5 types of characterization
- Great Examples of each type of characterization

## What is Characterization?

**Ultimately, characterization is everything you see on the pages of a story. If the character profile represents *who*, then characterization is *how* all that good stuff gets onto the page.**

But what about [narration](#), [dialogue](#), [action](#) – aren't those also things we need to see on the page? Yep. But those are all aspects of characterization.

So why do we even need a thing called characterization? Why can't we just have narration, dialogue and action? That's what I want to explain, right now.

## The 5 Parts of Characterization

There are 5 aspects needed to properly create characterization. If you know what these five attributes are, you'll know if you've neglected something in your story.

**If you love PARIS (Physicality, Action, Reactions, Inner thoughts, Speech), this list of characterization aspects will be easy to remember.** We'll always have PARIS! (I couldn't resist. Ahem.)

## Paris

### **Physicality (how the character looks, smells - any ticks they might have)**

The physicality of a character is what most people think of as characterization: the way a character looks, how they move, how they smell, etc. But all this is *just one aspect* of characterization, the first one.

A person's Physicality is about everything we take in when we look at and hear someone. Also smell. All the senses come into play here. The thing to remember is that you don't want to spend a couple of pages explaining the laundry-list of physicality details. Spread it out and reveal certain details when it makes sense to reveal them.

([Go HERE for more detail on just how to write powerful and memorable Character Physicality.](#))

### **Don't info-dump.**

The best way to avoid info-dumping is to actually write a complete character profile – for each of the central characters. I know that some writers hate creating these because they find them restrictive, but this is the best way to make sure you keep all the details straight.

**Physicality reveals a lot about who a person is. How they walk – if they walk at all – is how a writer**

**shows (and not tells) who a character is, bit by bit and detail by detail.**

### Great Example of PHYSICALITY Characterization

One of the reasons we love Sherlock Holmes so much is because he can transform himself completely – not just in a clever disguise, but by also speaking differently, walking differently. He can become someone else for the sake of his investigations. That he can do this at all reveals to us how very clever he is, but also that he is enigmatic.

### A picture is worth HOW MANY words???

The trick to remember here if you're writing for illustrated storybooks or graphic novels is that the physicality aspect is often allotted *almost* entirely to the artwork.

### When a writer teams up with an artist.

Having a good flow of communication between the writer and illustrator is really important. If the writer has a clear image of the characters in mind, that characterization information needs to be communicated to the artist.

The best example I've found are the [Fancy Nancy](#) books, written by [Jane O'Connor](#) and illustrated by [Robin Preiss Glasser](#). The Fancy Nancy visuals and text work together and create incredibly strong characterization.

- The drawings express Physicality, Action and Reaction.
- The text expresses Inner Thoughts, Reaction and Speech.

## pAris

### Action (contextual action, not plot)

Action is created when characters make decisions and then do something. Don't confuse this with certain types of plot points and things like [Rising Action](#) and [Falling Action](#). That isn't what is meant here.

An action as part of characterization can be something as simple as sitting in a chair. But it isn't just the act of sitting in the chair; it's also about the context of that action, why the character is sitting – and perhaps why in that particular chair.

There's a big difference between someone sitting down in a rocking chair, a dining chair, a loveseat and an electric chair. But also in *how* they might sit, the physical movement of that showing us what the character feels, but also how they generally would feel about a situation like this.

### Great Example of ACTION Characterization

[A. A. Milne's Winnie the Pooh](#) has to be the most brilliant example of this kind of characterization. The

way each character does certain actions tells us so much about them, we can easily picture how they would do anything at all – even things that are not written down in any story.

**When you express who a character is this tangibly, your character will be able to walk right off the page. They'll be able to exist anywhere.**

I think it's for this reason that the Latin translation of **Winnie the Pooh** actually made it to the *New York Times* Best Seller List in 1960. Milne's characterizations are so incredible *they can even thrive in a dead language*.

## paRis

### Reactions

Reactions to what a character does are really important. Especially in terms of defining the protagonist, it's important that we see how other characters react to this character.

- If you create a hero with an ensemble, then we need to see how the protagonist keeps the group together and how that character reacts to each member of the team.
- If you create a hero with a sidekick, then it's more important for us to see how the sidekick reacts to the hero.

In any kind of story, it's often important for us to see how society reacts to the characters in a story. When the story about our characters is reported in the news and in magazines, it matters to us. This is an example of Reaction characterization.

**Reaction is about validating something about the characters we love.**

How side characters – even tertiary characters – react to our protagonist (and how the protagonist handles that) tells us something about both characters, and it helps establish a deeper sense of context for everything that happens.

### Great Example of REACTIONS Characterization

[Douglas Adams](#) is the king of Reaction. How characters react to each other – through every step of every little thing they do, say, don't do and don't say – it's all there, in gloriously ludicrous detail. Most of the Action that takes place in an Adams story is typically a result of an unexpected Reaction.

## parIs

### Inner Thoughts (not necessarily shared openly with other characters)

Characters can have secrets, but they shouldn't be able to keep them from us readers. We should know when something is up. The inner thoughts of a character are vital to us feeling like we are close to them.

[Inner Thoughts are always expressed in narration. Go HERE for more detail.](#)

### Great Example of INNER THOUGHTS Characterization

[George R. R. Martin](#) does an excellent job of showing us the inner thoughts of all sorts of characters, even those we would typically think villainous. He brings us into their minds and lets us see a very different perspective - one that we find ourselves suddenly understanding instead of loathing.

We might *still* not like a character – we might even hate a character - but we'll certainly empathize.

## pariS

### Speech (a.k.a. dialogue)

What a character says is really important, but characterization is also about how the character speaks. Speech patterns are incredibly important to establishing a sense of who a character really is. If a character is from Virginia, they will speak in a way that someone from Detroit will not – and that's a speech difference created within just 600 miles.

Here is [IDEA, the International Dialects of English Archive](#) - one of the most valuable resources I've ever found for writers. You can click around and hear recordings of various English dialects.

Speech is the dialogue of a story, but if the narrator is the voice of a character in the story, then the narration has to be another aspect of Speech – as well as Inner Thoughts.

### Great Example of SPEECH Characterization

[Agatha Christie](#) is absolutely brilliant at characterization established through speech in particular. This is her forte, and it's the aspect of characterization she loved to write most. It's one of the reasons her books translate so well into film. The dialogue expresses everything we need to know about the characters involved.

You can even imagine how the characters might move (body language), based just on how they speak.

## Why Characterizations Matter

If you can craft stories that involve all 5 types of characterization – again, not as a laundry list, but by using what makes sense to use and in balance – then you will have an amazing story with incredible characters that lift themselves right off the page.

So tell me: what type of characterization speaks to you most? Write below, let me know – or, as ever, write me an email. I love getting those.

**Keep creating, no matter what.**

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