

How to Show Character through Action

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<http://greatstorybook.com/how-to-show-character-through-action/>

This entry is part 6 of 6 in the series [Characters with Character](#)

[Characters with Character](#)

- [Top 12 Character Archetypes](#)
- [How to Breathe Life into Characters with Characterization: 5 Ways](#)
- [Character Names: What is ACTUALLY in a name?](#)
- [Start Your Story with Character](#)
- [How to Write Character Physicality Readers Never Forget](#)
- How to Show Character through Action

This is about how to write indirect characterization that vibrates with action, or how to show character through action. Action is incredibly important in stories. Without it, you end up feeling like it's just people talking about things. We can imbue the smallest details with a sense of action, so that even if there's a lot of talking, it's the ever-sought-after, always elusive, "dialogue as action."

There are a lot of ways to make your characterizations bristle with exciting details that feel like intense action.

Artwork by Junsung Back.

No matter what, your story has got to have things happening in it – even when nothing is moving.

When you consider someone you know well, you probably have a complete picture of that person in your mind. But it's most likely more than just how that person appears or dresses.

More likely than not, you think about their voice, how they walk, their general attitude or temperament and maybe some string of words they once said to you that sticks in your mind.

Bringing Character to Life (Mwah-ha-ha-HA!)

Getting all that great stuff into a story is really important, because it's exactly what brings your character to life. When readers think about any protagonist you might create, there should be something much

stronger and much more compelling in their minds than simply how the character looks.

Though character physicality is certainly important, it isn't enough all on its own. ([For details on how to describe how your character looks so that we care, go HERE.](#))

Action as a Type of Indirect Characterization

So let's add another important layer to developing your character: action. This isn't about rising action or falling action. I'm not even referring here to the important plot points that your protagonist needs to drive.

What do I mean? I mean the manner in which the character does regular actions like walking across the street.

- If your character is the type who would easily jaywalk across four lanes of rush hour traffic - that tells us something about that character.
- When a character who would normally never do such a thing suddenly does do it – that tells us something too.
- A character who always waits for the light signal to indicate it's safe to cross the street (even when there's no traffic) establishes something very particular about the character – no question.

Notice that in all of these examples, I don't express *specifically what the characters must be like*. I only share how the character takes this certain action.

That's exactly what indirect characterization is about. We show how the character is (yep, you got it: the "show don't tell" bit – this is largely where that comes in) without actually stating that the character is reckless or brave or overly cautious – or whatever.

We let the readers come up with their own adjectives there.

Dialogue as Action

Many writers wonder how to make their dialogue feel like action. This is one of the primary ways to achieve that. ([For more detail, go HERE.](#))

When your character speaks, their emotions and character need to be expressed – not just by what they say but how the words are delivered. A whisper in the right context can be anything from romantic to furious.

That's feeling expressed through how the character would behave in a certain context. All this taken together helps us feel what the protagonist is feeling, even if their temperament is totally different from our own.

Simple Movements as Characterization

When your character moves, even in an everyday sort of movement, their personality and even their feelings in the moment can be revealed. Placing a glass on the table can be

- slow and deliberate,
- sloppy and careless,
- shaky and insecure,
- slammed down in a temper.

There isn't a single action that cannot be expressed with personality. In fact, there isn't even an action sequence that cannot be chock-a-block full of indirect characterization.

Bond, James Bond

There's a sequence in the film *Casino Royale* (one of my favorites) when Bond chases terrorist bomber Mollaka (opening sequence with free runner Sébastien Foucan). Mollaka leaps around like a gazelle, and Bond plows through walls behind him, lumbering over obstacles like a grizzly bear.

Every beat was used as a way to express characterization. Inside the Embassy when bullets are flying, Bond pins down Mollaka as they together duck behind a column. In this moment, Bond hits Mollaka for good measure – never mind that the man was already cowering and not going anywhere.

It isn't just cool action. It's action with some serious personality behind it, in every movement.

No words were needed to explain how this Bond was going to be different from all the others. We knew it immediately; we saw it before the opening credits.

Economy of Words & Killing Darlings

Don't think that economic writing means you have to cut out this kind of attention to detail. Nothing could be further from the truth. When people talk about *Killing Your Darlings*, they don't mean deleting the great details that make a story really matter to us.

What is meant is that the details should all serve the point of the story you want to tell. If a great side character appears suddenly on page 120 and just as quickly disappears on page 125 never to be heard from again – then that might indicate a darling character ready for the chopping block.

Not necessarily! But it could be. And even if it isn't quite a darling, it might show that the plot point could be strengthened with a rewrite. You could either change the character (into one of the already established characters), or expand their importance in the story so that the character matters more to the protagonist.

What about you?

What's your favorite example of great characterization through action? Write below, let me know – or, as ever, just send me an email. You know I love getting those!

Keep creating, no matter what.

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