

Descriptive Portraits

How to describe characters
for narrative writing

Characters

A character is one element of a piece of narrative writing. You can have a main character, who features a lot in the story, or a minor character, who only plays a small part in the story. Sometimes, the main character is called the protagonist. Describing characters is an important part of narrative writing.

Narrative Writing

Narrative Writing, sometimes called Fiction Writing, usually involves characters in a setting with a problem to be solved. Describing the characters in your story makes them more real for the reader, adds “colour” to the text and allows the reader to create “mind images” of the character.

Show, Don't Tell

When describing characters for narrative writing, it is useful to use the “Show, Don't Tell” strategy. This means that, rather than telling the reader exactly what the character is like, you show them through your use of description of the character. This allows the reader to experience the character more by your use of descriptive language.

Character Changes

Sometimes a character can change throughout the course of a book or story. They may change personality, change in appearance or change in their relationship with another character. The character may change due to their life circumstances or an event in the story. They may also change due to a change in setting or another character may force them to become a different type of character.

Describing Characters

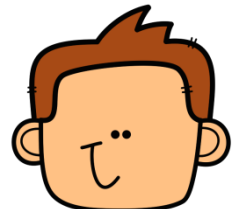
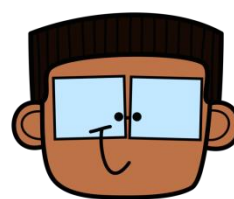
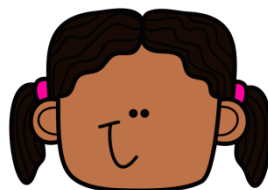
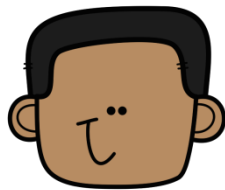
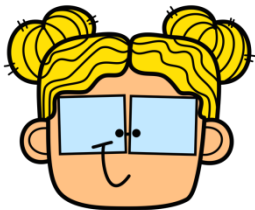
Look at each of the following ways in which you can describe your characters:

1. Character	8. Hair
2. Hands	9. Forehead
3. Tone of Voice	10. Nose
4. Complexion	11. Face
5. Gait	12. Lips & Mouth
6. Appearance	13. Mannerisms
7. Eyes	14. Clothing

I. Character

Describe the personal traits of your character

grotesque	repulsive	notorious	stubborn	obstinate	irritable
arrogant	rash	impulsive	impetuous	impatient	tenacious
sly	spiteful	charming	agreeable	attractive	handsome
jovial	jolly	sprightly	humorous	witty	gentle
humble	timid	loyal	courteous	friendly	sincere
polite	honest	moody	jealous	devoted	rude



2. Hands

Describe the appearance of your character's hands

slender

soft

delicate

tender

gentle

scarred

rough

small

skinny

large

clammy

wrinkled

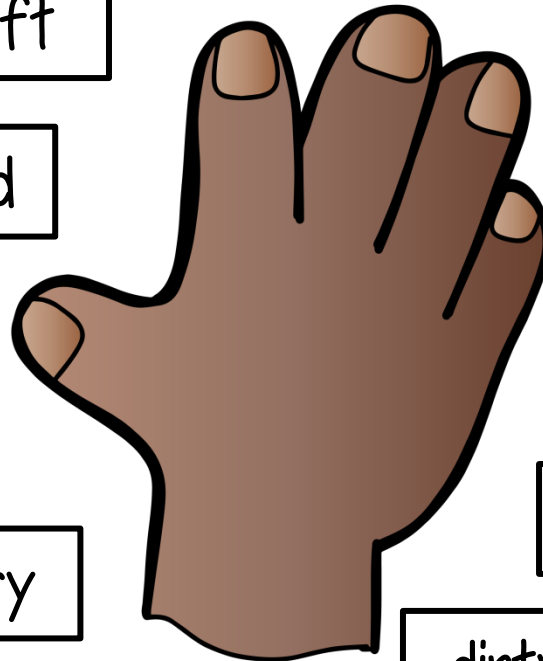
hairy

feeble

smooth

dirty

grimy



3. Tone of Voice

What does your character's voice sound like?



soft

hoarse

poignant

gentle

sweet

rich

melodious

clear

strong

soothing

deep

resonant

firm

sharp

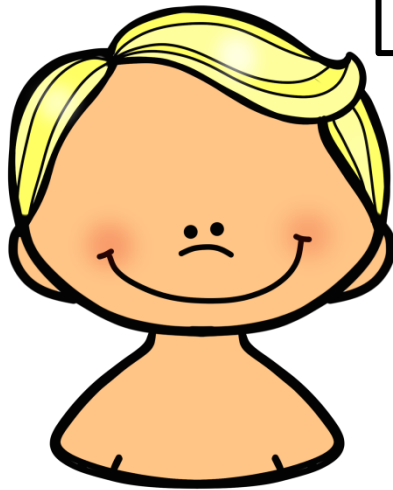
rough

husky

raucous

4. Complexion

Describe the appearance of your character's skin, especially the face



sallow

tanned

wrinkled

pale

ruddy

shrivelled

shrunken

freckled

rough

dry

blotched

flushed

tender

pallid

bronzed

weathered

blemished

wizened

dark

5. Gait

Gait means the way in which your character moves or holds themselves. It's a bit like posture.

shrunk

rambled

plodded

walked

slouched

sauntered

stepped

treaded

marched

strolled

ambled

strode

trudged

roamed

trampled

wandered



6. Appearance

Describe the overall “look” of your character

sturdy

strong

robust

brawny

slim

lanky

skinny

scraggy

thin

feeble

weak

bulky

bony

athletic

gaunt

rugged



7. Eyes

Describe the appearance of your character's eyes

bright

clear

shifty

sunken

sad

hazel

flashing

dry

grey

steely

hypnotic

piercing

twinkling

curious

tired

blue

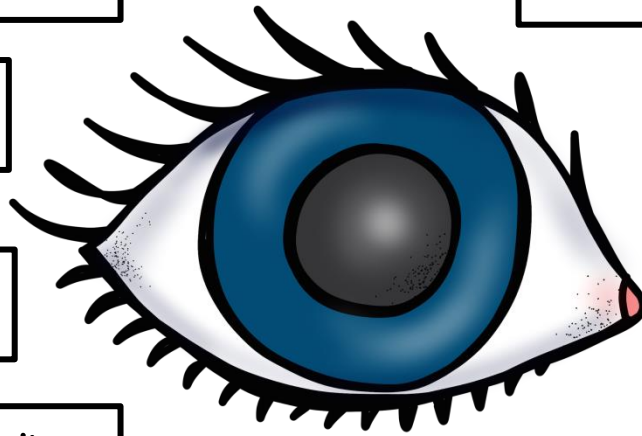
listless

squinty

despairing

haunting

glittering



8. Hair

Describe the appearance of your character's hair

straight

long

greasy

curly

oily

plaited

creased

wavy

reddish

sandy

pony-tailed

silky

auburn

tinted

unkempt

matted

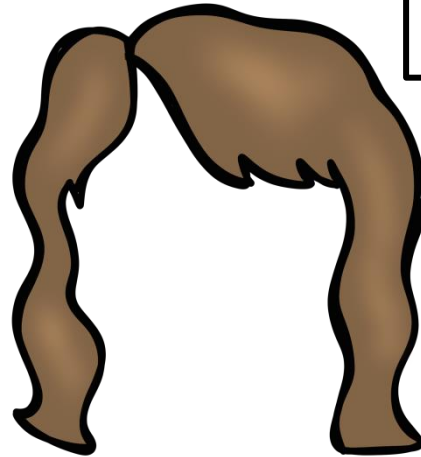
smooth

sleek

soft

tangled

unwashed



9. Forehead

Describe the appearance of your character's forehead



prominent

low

high

pale

protruding

broad

scarred

wrinkled

balding

round

smooth

freckled

receding

patchy

narrow

domed

10. Nose

Describe the appearance of your character's nose

prominent

twitching

inquisitive

small

pointed

flat

straight

large

dainty

snub

bird-like

thin

whimsical

round

runny

turned-up

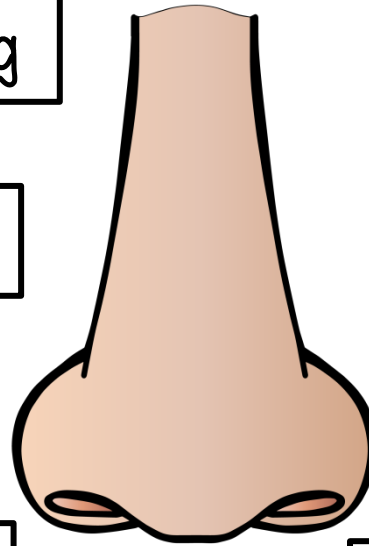
funny

narrow

bulbous

freckled

curved



11. Face

Describe the appearance of the shape of your character's face

round

baby-faced

oval

chiselled

thin

pointy

long

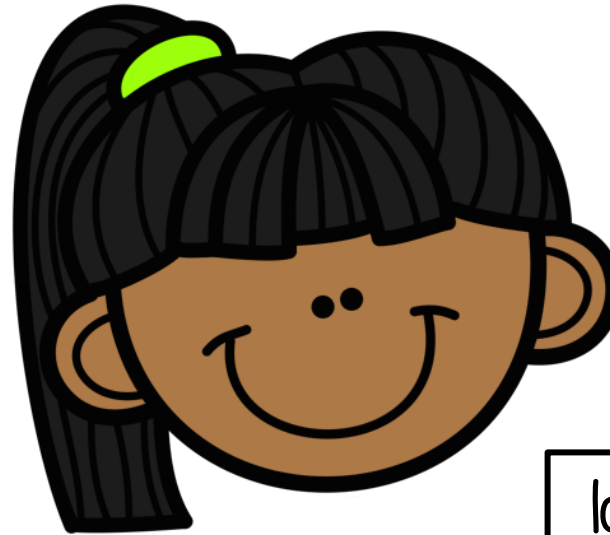
flat

wizened

moon

spotty

plump



12. Lips & Mouth

Describe the appearance of your character's lips and mouth

thick

protruding

soft

wide

open

small

gap-toothed

chapped

ruddy

full

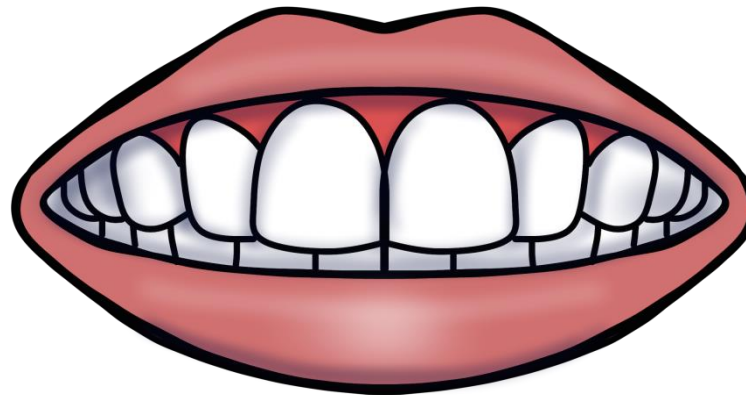
painted

cracked

gaping

smudged

stained



13. Mannerisms

A mannerism is a habit that a character performs, almost automatically. Mannerisms make your characters unique and tell us more about what kind of person they are.



twitching the nose

blinking the eyes

biting the nails

touching the glasses

clearing the throat

shrugging the
shoulders

tapping the feet

brushing back
the hair

picking the skin

14. Clothing

The clothing a character wears tells us a little more about them. Use adjectives to describe items of clothing.

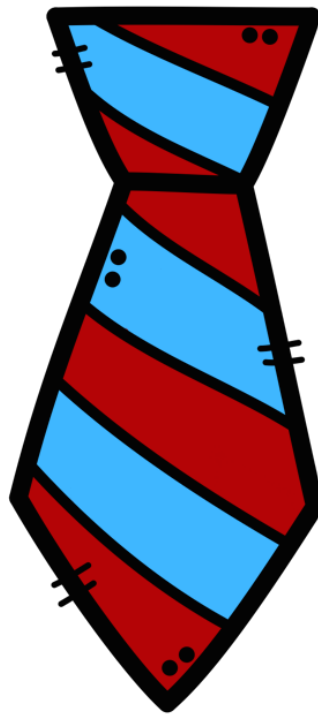
wide-brimmed hat

high-heeled shoes

red flannel trousers

short denim jacket

blue striped blouse



yellow paisley tie

hand-crocheted shawl

long worn scarf

dark frayed jumper

clean white socks

15. Using Similes

A simile is a Figure of Speech which compares two things which are dissimilar using the words "like" or "as". Using similes to describe characters adds great colour to your writing.

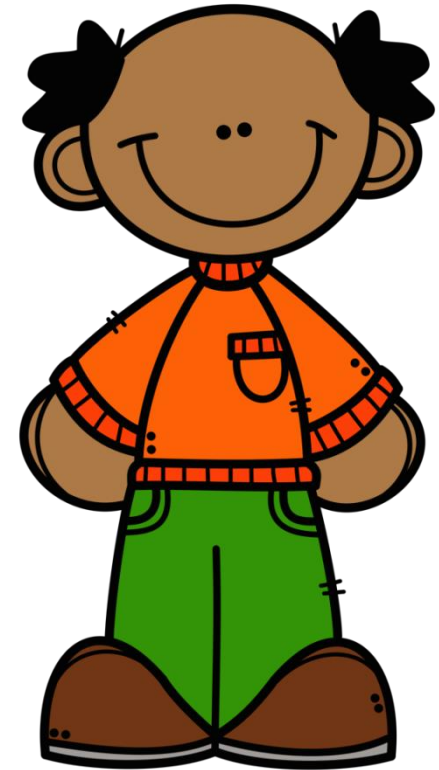
His hair was as black as coal.

She was as blind as a bat.

He was like a fish out of water.

She wore her shawl like a shell covering
a snail.

He ran like an athlete starting a race.



Resources used in this file from:



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