How to Make Readers Care

A Guide to Characterization in Creative Writing

You've probably heard the advice: "Plot matters." True—of course it does. But let's be honest: readers don't fall in love with plot the way they fall in love with *people*. In fact, many writers—especially in literary fiction—start with the character because characters are what stay in the reader's memory. A plot is just the set of events in someone's life; a character is the reason those events feel personal.

So in this article, you'll learn how to build characterization that feels alive on the page. You'll use both **direct** and **indirect characterization**, plus practical techniques (action, dialogue, exaggeration, selective detail) to deepen motivation, personality, and emotional impact. Along the way, you'll get strategies you can apply immediately—because characterization isn't a mystery. It's craft.

1) What Is Characterization?

Characterization is the set of choices you make to describe and develop a character so readers understand:

- what they look like,
- how they think and feel,
- how they act,
- how they speak,
- and what they want.

In other words, characterization answers: *Who is this person, really—and why should I care?*

Think of it like seasoning. You can cook a perfect meal, but if it has no salt, it's technically edible and also… kind of forgettable. Characterization is the salt that makes the story taste like something.

Key idea: You don't need to make your characters likable. You need to make them **interesting**—and understandable enough that their choices carry weight.

2) Direct vs. Indirect Characterization (and Why You Need Both)

Characterization usually comes in two major forms:

A) Direct Characterization (Telling)

Direct characterization happens when the author explicitly tells the reader what a character is like—through statements about personality, appearance, occupation, passions, or moral qualities.

Example (direct):

"Mara was stubborn and selfish."

This gives the reader information fast. It's efficient—like microwave popcorn. But sometimes it can leave you with a bland aftertaste if you rely on it too heavily.

Why direct characterization can be risky:

- It can feel like a lecture.
- It can rob the reader of discovery.
- It may cause you to "name" traits without proving them.

B) Indirect Characterization (Showing)

Indirect characterization happens when you reveal character through:

- actions,
- speech and dialogue,
- thoughts and private reactions,
- and the way the character interacts with the world.

Example (indirect):

Mara kept borrowing money, smiling sweetly, and never once asked if anyone was okay.

Instead of declaring "she's selfish," you show patterns that let the reader infer it.

This is often more powerful because it follows how real people reveal themselves: through behavior, not labels.

The most effective approach (my recommendation)

If there's one craft rule you should adopt, it's this:

Use direct characterization like a label on a bottle—and indirect characterization like the smell and flavor you notice after you open it.

You *can* tell the reader something directly, but the character truly sticks when the reader feels it through evidence.

3) Indirect Characterization: Show, Don't Tell (But Don't Be Sloppy)

Indirect characterization is more than a slogan. It's a method.

What indirect characterization includes

You guide readers to conclusions by giving them:

- **What the character does** when they're stressed, tempted, afraid, or bored.
- **What the character says**—and what they avoid saying.
- **How the character thinks privately** (even in a single sentence).
- **What the character notices** (detail selection matters).
- **How other people react** to the character—and how the character interprets that reaction.

Why "unsaid" can be stronger than "said"

A powerful thing about indirect characterization is what it leaves open. Often the reader completes the meaning in their own mind, and that makes them feel smarter and more invested.

It's like watching a friend walk into a room and instantly know they've been crying—without anyone stating the obvious. You're doing that on the page.

A caution: don't under-signal

Indirect characterization works only if your clues are *present*. If you hide the evidence too well, readers may miss what you intended—and miss the emotional payoff. Sometimes that creates interpretive variety (which can be good). Other times it just creates confusion (which is… not good popcorn).

So ask yourself as you draft:

If a reader didn't read your mind, would they still understand your character?

4) Direct Characterization: When Telling Is Actually Helpful

Let's defend direct characterization for a second—because it gets bullied a lot.

Direct characterization is useful when:

- you need to establish a baseline quickly,
- you want a tone of narration that openly "interprets,"
- you're writing in a style where the narrator functions like a commentator,

- or you're building a character who carries a clear public role.

For example, a line like "Atticus was a lawyer who believed in fairness" can be useful—especially if it's immediately supported by actions and dialogue.

Think of direct characterization as a "thesis statement"

In education terms, direct characterization can act like your paragraph's topic sentence. It tells the reader what to pay attention to.

But it must be followed by **proof** through indirect characterization.

5) Characterization Through Action: The Fastest Way to Make Someone Real

One of the best techniques in characterization is extremely simple:

Let behavior reveal personality.

If your character is "jealous," show it in what they do. If your character is "brave," show it in what they risk.

Here's why this works:

- Actions are observable.
- They imply values.
- They reveal contradictions.
- And—importantly—they create cause-and-effect, which makes the story feel inevitable.

Mini-exercise (do this now)

Take a personality trait you want to write (example: "impatient"). Write two actions that an impatient person would do:

1. In private (alone)
2. In public (around others)

Then write one detail that only the impatient character would notice.

You'll be shocked how quickly you generate characterization without "telling."

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6) Characterization Through Dialogue: What People Say (and What They Can't)

Dialogue is characterization's natural habitat. People reveal themselves constantly through:

- word choice,
- tone,
- interruptions,
- what they joke about,
- what they refuse to answer,
- and how they react when challenged.

A character's dialogue can show:

- intelligence,
- insecurity,
- social class,
- moral beliefs,
- emotional defenses,
- and even desire.

The key: dialogue should do double duty

Good dialogue doesn't just exchange information. It also:

1. **pushes the scene forward**, and
2. **reveals character through conflict, misunderstanding, or pressure**.

Ask yourself: *What does this character gain by saying this? What do they risk if they don't?*

Humor note (because life is too short)

If you make your characters sound like polite robots delivering exposition, readers won't trust them. Let them ramble. Let them contradict themselves. Let them be petty for reasons that—while not noble—are painfully believable.

Your job isn't to write perfect people. It's to write recognizable ones.

7) Exaggeration and Comparison: Characterization by "Bigger Than Life" Details

Not all characterization is literal. Sometimes writers use **exaggeration**—especially in speech—to communicate personality quickly.

For example:

- "He was so tall he needed permission to fit through doorways."
- "My nerves are fried like bacon at the bottom of the pan."

Exaggeration can:

- reveal how a character thinks (hyperbolic? dramatic? anxious? comedic?),
- establish voice,
- and make traits memorable.

Comparison to known quantities

A character might say:

- "He was Wilt Chamberlain tall,"
- "She moved like Fred Astaire,"
- "The room felt like a freezer."

These comparisons work because they transmit a feeling instantly. Just be careful: if you overdo it, the character can become a cartoon instead of a person.

A good rule of thumb:

If your exaggeration makes the character's *voice* clearer, use it. If it replaces character entirely, cut it.

8) Selective Detail: What You Notice Reveals Who You Are

When you describe a character, you choose details. That choice is characterization.

In fact, two writers can describe the same person and create opposite vibes by selecting different observations:

- One focuses on **eyes** and how they avoid or confront.
- Another focuses on **posture** and how it signals confidence or insecurity.
- Another focuses on **hands** and what they fidget with.

Practical tip: describe behavior instead of anatomy

Instead of listing eye color or height as isolated facts, ask:

- *How does the character use their eyes?*
- *Where do they look when they lie?*

- *Do they make eye contact, and how does that feel?*

This turns description into evidence.

9) Multiple Characters at Once: Double-Characterization in a Single Scene

You can characterize more than one person at a time.

Dialogue does this naturally:

- The speaker's words characterize them.
- The reaction (or lack of reaction) characterizes the listener.
- And the social dynamics reveal everyone's position—status, fear, attraction, loyalty, resentment.

A great scene often contains characterization like this:

- One character speaks to dominate.
- Another character responds to protect themselves.
- A third character watches to calculate whether it's safe to interfere.

So as you write, don't ask only "What does my character do?"
Ask: **What does the whole interaction reveal about everyone involved?**

10) Contradictions in Characterization: Two Views, One Solution

You may notice a tension in characterization advice:

- View A: *Always show, don't tell.*
- View B: *Direct statements help clarity and pacing*.

Both views have merit.

Argument for "show more than tell"

Indirect characterization:

- creates discovery,
- builds emotional investment,
- feels immersive,
- and reflects how readers infer real personalities from behavior.

Argument for "tell strategically"

Direct characterization:

- prevents confusion,
- speeds up setup,
- supports an explicit narrative voice,
- and can anchor readers when you're dealing with complex backstory or quick pacing.

My effective-choice recommendation

Use both, but with a rule:

Let indirect characterization do the heavy lifting; let direct characterization confirm, frame, or sharpen.

If you show a character is angry through actions and dialogue, you might still include one direct line like "Mara wasn't just angry—she was terrified of what she wanted." That's not redundant; it's a spotlight.

11) Common Novice Mistakes (and How to Fix Them)

Mistake 1: Over-characterizing with too many details

Novice writers often dump a character file:

- eye color,
- childhood summary,
- favorite food,
- moral outlook,
- and a list of "quirks."

Readers don't absorb "character facts" as easily as story evidence. Too much upfront detail can make your character feel like a worksheet.

Fix: Pick 1–2 revealing traits and tie them to behavior in scene.

Mistake 2: Relying on labels

If your draft says "He was confident" but then he hesitates constantly, readers won't believe the label.

Fix: Align narration labels with observable evidence, or rewrite the evidence so the trait becomes true.

Mistake 3: Making characters talk like narrators

If dialogue sounds like essays, it won't feel like real speech.

Fix: Give dialogue a purpose: negotiation, avoidance, intimidation, confession, performance.

Mistake 4: Waiting too long to reveal who the character is

If your story starts with action before character investment, readers ask: *Why should I care?*

Fix: Even a tiny early scene can reveal character through choice. Give readers something to observe immediately.

Closing: Make People Fascinating, Not Just Correct

If characterization feels hard, remember this: you don't have to create a perfect person. You have to create someone whose behavior makes sense—someone the reader can "track," emotionally and logically, through the story.

When you do that, plot stops being random events and starts becoming experience. The bridge jump becomes "Harry," not "a man." The trial becomes a moral conflict, not just a courthouse timeline. The scene becomes something readers feel in their chest.

So, your task is simple:

Pick one character in your draft. Identify one trait you've been relying on. Then write a short scene where that trait shows up through action, dialogue, and selective detail—without leaning on labels first.

Do that once, and you'll feel the difference immediately.