

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

characterization: the way a writer creates and develops a character's traits

characters: the people, animals, or imaginary creatures in a work of literature

character traits: the qualities shown by a character

inferences: reasonable judgments, based on prior knowledge and the text

HERE'S HOW

Step 1: Identify methods of characterization. Writers use four main methods of characterization to develop characters:

- **Direct comments** through the voice of the narrator about a character's traits.
EXAMPLE Nita viewed the people around her with a mixture of anger and disdain.
- **Physical descriptions** of the character.
EXAMPLE Nita's small black darting eyes never quite focused on the people she spoke to.
- **Thoughts, speech, and actions** of a character
EXAMPLE "You refuse to let me grow up, Mom!" Nita stormed, pounding her fist on the table.
- **What other characters think, say, or do** toward one another.
EXAMPLE "That girl sure is a hothead," observed a neighbor, as Nita slammed the door and stamped down the front walk, with not so much as a "Good morning."

Step 2: Make inferences about character traits. Writers may describe characters indirectly. Look for clues that allow you to make an inference, or educated guess, about a character.

- **Physical Appearance:** The way people appear can hint at who they are.
EXAMPLE Name; Clothing; Voice; Features; Grooming or hygiene; Possessions; Stature, posture, nervous tics.
- **Behavior and Thoughts:** Look for actions, dialogue, inner thoughts:
EXAMPLE Speech; Facial expressions; Gestures; Daydreams or sleeping dreams; Writing (letters, diaries, e-mail); Inner monologue, or thoughts
- **Relationships and Interactions:** Clues can come from *other characters*:
EXAMPLE Speech; Facial expressions; Gestures; Daydreams or sleeping dreams; Writing (letters, diaries, e-mail); Inner monologue, or thoughts

"Miss Murdstone Arrives" (from *David Copperfield*)
by Charles Dickens

It was Miss Murdstone who was arrived, and a gloomy-looking lady she was; dark, like her brother, whom she greatly resembled in face and voice; and with very heavy eyebrows, nearly meeting over her large nose . . . She brought with her two uncompromising hard black boxes, with her initials on the lids in hard brass nails. When she paid the coachman she took her money out of a hard steel purse, and she kept the purse in a very jail of a bag which hung upon her arm by a heavy chain, and shut up like a bite. I had never, at that time, seen such a metallic lady altogether as Miss Murdstone was.

She was brought into the parlor with many tokens of welcome, and there formally recognized my mother as a new and near relation. Then she looked at me, and said: "Is that your boy, sister-in-law?"

My mother acknowledged me.

"Generally speaking," said Miss Murdstone, "I don't like boys. How d'ye do, boy?"

Under these encouraging circumstances, I replied that I was very well, and that I hoped she was the same; with such an indifferent grace, that Miss Murdstone disposed of me in two words: "Wants manner!"

As well as I could make out, she had come for good, and had no intention of ever going again. She began to "help" my mother next morning, and was in and out of the store-closet all day, putting things to rights, and making havoc in the old arrangements. Almost the first remarkable thing I observed in Miss Murdstone was, her being constantly haunted by a suspicion that the servants had a man secreted somewhere on the premises. Under the influence of this delusion, she dived into the coal-cellar at the most untimely hours, and scarcely ever opened the door of a dark cupboard without clapping it to again, in the belief that she had got him. . . . She was up (and, as I believe to this hour, looking for the man) before anybody in the house was stirring. Peggoty gave it as her opinion she even slept with one eye open; but I could not concur in this idea; for I tried it myself after hearing the suggestion, and found it couldn't be done.

Directions: Use the excerpt from “Miss Murdstone Arrives” to fill in the chart.

- Find details about Miss Murdstone.
- Write each detail in the box for the appropriate method of revealing.
- Then determine overall traits describing the nature of Miss Murdstone's character.

Characterization Chart

Methods of Revealing Character	Clues or Details	Miss Murdstone's Character Traits (My Inferences)
Narrator's Direct Comments		
Physical Appearance		
Character's Words, Actions, Thoughts		
Other Characters' Words, Actions, Thoughts		

Directions: In this passage from *Life on the Mississippi*, Mark Twain characterizes his boss and instructor, Mr. Brown, a riverboat pilot in the 1850s. Read the passage. Then fill in the chart with examples of Twain's characterization of Mr. Brown. Write inferences about Mr. Brown's traits, in the chart's last column.

He was a middle-aged, long, slim, bony, smooth-shaven, horsefaced, ignorant, stingy, malicious, snarling, fault-hunting, mote magnifying tyrant. I early got the habit of coming on watch with dread at my heart. No matter how good a time I might have been having with the off-watch below, and no matter how high my spirits might be when I started aloft, my soul became lead in my body the moment I approached the pilothouse.

I still remember the first time I ever approached the presence of that man . . . There was silence for ten minutes; then my new boss turned and inspected me deliberately painstakingly from head to heel for about—as it seemed to me—a quarter of an hour. After which he removed his countenance and I saw it no more for some seconds; then it came around once more and this question greeted me . . .

“What’s your name?”

I told him. He repeated it after me. It was probably the only thing he ever forgot; for although I was with him many months he never addressed himself to me in any other way than “Here!” and then his command followed.

“Where were you born?”

“In Florida, Missouri.”

A pause. Then, “Dern sight better stayed there!”

Methods of Revealing Character	Clues or Details	Mr. Brown's Character Traits (My Inferences)
Narrator's Direct Comments	(1.)	(5.)
Physical Appearance	(2.)	
Character's Words, Actions, Thoughts	(3.)	
Other Characters' Words, Actions, Thoughts	(4.)	