

Developing Characters

1. No more “all-points bulletin.”

It reads something like this: “My father is a tall, middle-aged man of average build. He has green eyes and brown hair and usually wears khakis and oxford shirts.”

1a. Write the “all-points bulletin” as the character is moving/doing something/as the story still goes on.

As I was walking in the hallway, I noticed a tall, middle-aged man of average build looking at me with his green eyes.

2. Strengthen physical descriptions by making details more specific.

The description of the father’s brown hair might be improved with a detail such as “a military buzz-cut, prickly to the touch” or “the aging hippie’s last chance— a long ponytail striated with gray.” In the same way, his oxford shirt could become “the same style of baby blue oxford he’d worn since prep school, rolled carelessly at the elbows.”

3. Select physical details carefully, choosing only those that create the strongest, most revealing impression.

As you describe real-life characters, zero in on distinguishing characteristics that reveal personality: gnarled, arthritic hands always busy at some task; a habit of covering her mouth each time a giggle rises up; a lopsided swagger as he makes his way to the horse barn; the scent of coconut suntan oil, cigarettes, and leather each time she sashays past your chair.

4. Characters reveal their inner lives—their preoccupations, values, lifestyles, likes and dislikes, fears and aspirations—by the objects that fill their hands, houses, offices, cars, suitcases, grocery carts, and dreams.

What items would your character pack for a weekend away? What would she use for luggage? A leather valise with a gold monogram on the handle? An old accordion case with decals from every theme park she’s visited? A duffel bag? Make a list of everything your character would pack: a “Save the Whales” T-shirt; a white cotton t-shirt; breath mints; a Mickey Mouse alarm clock; a photograph of her husband rocking a child to sleep; a can of Pringles; three Hershey bars.

5. To make characters believable to readers, set them in motion.

To enlarge the description, be specific as possible as you set your character in motion. Often this means breaking a large, generic activity into smaller, more particular parts: “scowling at the Dow Jones averages,” perhaps, or “skimming the used-car ads” or “wiping his ink-stained fingers on the monogrammed handkerchief.” Besides providing visual images for the reader, specific and representative actions also suggest the personality of the character, his habits and desires, and even the emotional life hidden beneath the physical details.

6. Description doesn’t have to be direct to be effective.

Techniques abound for describing a character indirectly, for instance, through the objects that fill her world. Create a grocery list for your character—or two or three, depending on who’s coming for dinner. Show us the character’s credit card bill or the itemized deductions on her income tax forms. Let your character host a garage sale and watch her squirm while neighbors and strangers rifle through her stuff. Which items is she practically giving away? What has she overpriced, secretly hoping no one will buy it?