

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS ESSAY

Character in literature is an extended verbal representation of a human being, specifically the inner self that determines thought, speech, and behaviour. Through dialogue, action, and commentary, literature captures some of the interactions of character and circumstance. Literature makes these interactions interesting by portraying characters who are worth caring about, rooting for, and even loving, although there are also characters at whom you may laugh or whom you may dislike or even hate.

In literature you may expect completeness of context. That is, you may think of each action or speech, no matter how small or seemingly unusual, as an accumulating part of a total portrait. Whereas in life things may "just happen", in literature the actions, interactions, speeches, and observations are all arranged to give you the details you need for conclusions about character. From these happenings in their contexts you make inferences about the characters involved. In effect, you determine the "character" of the various characters.

In writing about a literary character, you should try to describe the character's major trait or traits. As in life, characters may be lazy or ambitious, anxious or serene aggressive or fearful, assertive or bashful, confident or self-doubting, adventurous or timid, noisy or quiet, visionary or practical, reasonable or hot-headed, careful or careless, fair or partial, straightforward or underhanded, "winners" or "losers", and so on. With this sort of list, to which you may add at will, you can analyze and write about character.

The appearance of a character is also worth noticing. Often a writer gives physical features to a character in order to match them or contrast them with some aspect of the character's mind and personality. Even the name of the person may be significant. Charles Dickens, for example, uses character names with efficacy. He names one of his characters, a brutal schoolmaster, "Wackford Squeers". The name conjures up a man given to thrashing his pupils (literally giving them "wacks").

When you study character, be sure to consider physical descriptions, but also be sure to relate the physical to the mental. Suppose your author stresses the neatness of one character and the sloppiness of another. Most likely, these descriptions can be related to your character study. The same also applies to your treatment of what a character does. Go beyond the actions themselves and try to indicate what they show about the character. Always try to get from the outside to the inside, for it is on the inside that character resides.

Now that you have learned that character in literature is "an accumulating portrait", note also how a character changes. Most works of literature contain both flat characters (the ones that are of less significance with shallow personalities, showing little change) and dynamic or round characters. The round characters are the most interesting because they are changeable, developing like ordinary people with thoughts, emotions, and actions similar to all of us.

Literary characters should be true to life, under given circumstances and within certain literary specifications. The key to your study of character should always be to discover if the character – whether intended by the author to be a lifelike person or a romantic hero – does and says what you believe human beings might do and say under the exact conditions presented by the author. Do the characters ring true? Do they come to life? Do they illustrate many qualities that add up to accurate representations of human beings? Or do they seem to be one-dimensional or flat? The degree to which an author can make a character come alive is a mark of skill, and if you think that your author is successful in this regard, you should say so in your theme.

One last thing to notice before going on to write your essay on character is how the writer has chosen to show the character to you. In preparing your theme, you should look for the following four specific ways in which writers may give you information about character. Always remember that authors rely on you for the knowledge of ordinary behaviour.

1. **What the characters themselves say (and think, if the author expresses their thoughts).** On the whole, speeches may be accepted at face value to indicate the character of the speaker. Sometimes, however, a speech may be made offhand, or it may reflect a momentary emotional or intellectual state. Thus, if characters in deep despair say that life is worthless, you must balance this speech with what the same characters say when they are happy. You must also consider the situation or total context of a statement, and whether speeches show change or development. A despairing character might say depressing things at the start but happy things at the end. Your analysis of such speeches should indicate how they show change in your character.
2. **What the characters do.** You have heard that "actions speak louder than words", and you should interpret actions freely as signs of character. Sometimes you may find that action is inconsistent with words. Here you might have hypocrisy, weakness or an approaching change of character.
3. **What other characters say about them.** In literature, as in life, people always talk about other people. If the speakers are shown as honest, you may usually accept their opinions as accurate descriptions of character. But sometimes a person's prejudices and interests distort what that person says. You know, for example, that the word of a person's enemy is usually slanted, unfair, or even untrue. Therefore, an author may give you a good impression of characters by having a bad character say bad things

about them. Similarly, the word of a close friend or political manager may be biased in favor of a particular character. You must always consider the context and source of all dramatic remarks before you use them in your analysis.

4. **What the author says about them, speaking as storyteller or observer.** What the author says about a character is usually to be accepted as truth. Naturally, authors must be accepted on matters of fact. But when they interpret the actions and characteristics of their characters, they themselves assume the critic's role, and their opinions may be either right or wrong. For this reason, authors frequently avoid interpretations and devote their skill instead to arranging events and speeches so that their conclusions are obvious to the reader.

Plan your character essay according to the steps outlined on the literary essay worksheet. When you are ready to make your rough list of points that will comprise the body of your essay, you have a number of ways in which to organize them. The organization is designed to illustrate and prove your central idea. Some possible methods are the following:

1. **Organization around a central characteristic**, like kindness, gentleness, generosity, firmness, or resoluteness of will frustrated by inopportune moments for action, resulting in despondency, doubt, and melancholy. A body containing this sort of material would demonstrate how the literary work brings out each of these qualities.
2. **Organization around a development or change of character.** Here you would attempt to show the character traits that a character possesses at the start of the work and then describe the changes or developments that occur. Try to determine the author's view on such changes; that is, is the change genuine, or does the author establish hidden traits in the character which are brought out as the story progresses?
3. **Organization around central incidents that reveal primary characteristics.** Certain key incidents will stand out in a work, and you might create an effective body by using three or four of these as guides for your discussion, taking care to show in your topic sentences that your purpose is to illuminate the character you have selected, not the incidents. In other words, you would regard the incidents only as they bring out truths about character. Naturally, with this arrangement, you would have to show how the incidents bring out the characteristics and also how they serve to explain other things the character might do.

Here is an example of a short character essay constructed according to the previous guidelines. Read it and see if you can identify which one of the three organizing principles (listed above) has been used.

**The Character of Mathilde Loisel in Guy de Maupassant's The Necklace**

Guy de Maupassant's character Mathilde Loisel, in "The Necklace", is above all a dreamer. Her dreams make her both weak and strong. Her weakness is that her dream is not to have high ideals, but rather to have a life of ease and wealth. Her strength is her willingness to work to keep her dreams of honor. De Maupassant shows her qualities in the introduction, the coverup, and the poverty she endures.

In the early part of the story Mathilde is a young housewife dreaming about wealth. She thinks money is everything and her highest aim is ease and luxury, which she thinks that she was somehow born to have. Her husband, a lower-rank clerk, can afford only a small household. Mathilde gets angry at this gap between her dream and the reality of her life. The result is that she is not able to like anything that she has. She does not treat her husband with love and respect, but whines at him instead about their condition. Her borrowing of the necklace for the big party is, in a way, her attempt to escape her drab life and live out her dream, if only for a night.

The cover-up of the loss of the necklace brings out the worst in Mathilde. She believes more strongly in the real value of the jewels than in her friendship with Jeanne Forrester. If she had told the truth to Jeanne, she would never have had the trouble she faced. But her character is too weak to permit her to endure the embarrassment that the truth would bring out. Thus, by covering up, she loses friendship, truth, and financial future all at the same time.

But her life of poverty and sacrifice to pay back the moneylenders bring out her strengths. She pitches in to work. She gives up her servant, her good address, and everything else connected with her dreams of good living. Although her character is excellent in this respect, her hard work makes her loud and coarse, just the opposite of the wealthy, refined person she dreamed of becoming.

Thus Mathilde is a character whose dream life keeps her from seeing the truth until the truth hits her with a vengeance. It is this weakness, not her bad luck, that gives her all her pain. It is this same weakness that brings out her best quality of sharing the work to preserve her honor and good name. She may be dreamy, unlucky, and foolish, but she is not bad. On balance, she comes out looking good, getting a life that is much worse than she deserves.

Extracts taken from: Roberts, Edgar V., Writing Themes About Literature, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1983