**Characterization Notes**

Characterization is an important element in almost every work of fiction, whether it is a short story, a novel, or anywhere in between. When it comes to characterization, a writer has two options:

**1. DIRECT CHARACTERIZATION** - the writer makes direct statements about a character's personality and tells what the character is like.

**2. INDIRECT CHARACTERIZATION** - the writer reveals information about a character and his personality through that character's thoughts, words, and actions, along with how other characters respond to that character, including what they think and say about him.

An alert writer might recognize that the two methods of characterization fall under the decision to “show” or to “tell”. Indirect characterization “shows” the reader. Direct characterization “tells” the reader.

As with most “show” versus “tell” decisions, “showing” is more interesting and engaging to the reader, and should be used in preference to “telling”. Does that relegate direct characterization to the prose trash heap? No. There are times when direct characterization is useful. Whereas indirect characterization is more likely to engage a reader’s imagination and paint more vivid images, direct characterization excels in brevity, lower word count, and moving the story forward. For example, a writer may want to reveal a minor facet of a character’s personality without distracting from the action in a scene. It is up to the writer to decide when each characterization method is appropriate.

To observe the difference between direct and indirect characterization, read the paired paragraphs below. Each is written to convey the same basic information. One of each pair demonstrates direct characterization while the other demonstrates indirect characterization. See if you can identify which method is being used.

**Paragraph Pair 1:**
**A.** Ed Johnson scratched his head in confusion as the sales rep explained Dralco’s newest engine performance diagnostic computer. The old mechanic hated modern electronics, preferring the old days when all he needed was a stack of manuals and a good set of tools.

**B.** “That Ed Johnson,” said Anderson, watching the old mechanic scratch his head in confusion as the sales rep explained Dralco’s newest engine performance diagnostic computer. “He hasn’t got a clue about modern electronics. Give him a good set of tools and a stack of yellowing manuals with a carburetor needing repair, and he’d be happy as a hungry frog in a fly-field.”

**Paragraph Pair 2:**
**A.** Julie owned a multitude of outfits and accessories, and it always took her forever to decide which combination might impress Trent. As usual, she called her sister several times for advice. After doing so, Julie decided to give the navy blue skirt with the white sweater a try.

**B.** Julie held up six different outfits in front of the mirror and pondered which would go best with her navy blue shoes, pastel eye shadow and the diamond earrings she’d already procured from her overflowing vanity. After ninety minutes of mixing and matching, and cell-phoning her sister three times for advice, Julie finally made up her mind. She’d give the navy blue skirt and white sweater a try, hoping Trent would love it.
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In both instances, Paragraph A illustrates an example of direct characterization (telling) while Paragraph B provides an example of indirect characterization (showing). While one might quibble with the quality of each paragraph (or Julie’s fashion sense), the direct characterization examples are shorter, leaving less imagination to the reader, while still getting the same basic information across. Which is most appropriate depends on the needs and concerns of the writer.

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