What a Character!

In your head right now, try to picture your favorite fictional characters of all time. Are they boring? Are they poorly described with little or no information about their looks or demeanors? Do you just not know much about them? Of course not! The characters that stand out the most are ones with well thought-out, developed backgrounds. Nobody's favorite character is "that one tall guy briefly mentioned on page 53."

A character is a being or entity responsible for the thoughts and actions within a story, poem, or piece of literature. Most of us think of characters as just people, but a character could also be an animal or something in nature. Look at so many of those animated films we know and love. They are filled with characters like a talking deer and rabbit or even inanimate objects like a talking snowman. Even in more serious works of literature nature can be a character. Look no further than the poetry of Robert Frost or the intense novel *Into Thin Air* for examples of this.

Characterization is how an author develops his or her characters. It's a literary device that is used to highlight and explain details about a character in a story. Direct characterization is when the author or character makes direct statements that describe a character. Saying "she was 5 foot 6 with short red hair and freckles" is a pretty direct way of describing someone. It doesn't really beat around the bush. Indirect characterization is when the author reveals information about a character without explicitly stating it. This is when the author peppers in little bits about the character that you have to draw meaning from. It can be through a character's thoughts, words, actions, and reactions.

Most stories will contain a few round and several flat characters. So what is the difference between them and what purpose do they serve? Well, these flat characters have usually one or two predominant traits and may exist on the fringe of the main plot. They could be stock characters, which are highly recognizable types often repeated in literature. These characters are designed to represent recognizable forces or figures that round characters play off of. In contrast, a story may only contain one or two fully developed round characters. The dramatization of these characters develops them fully and reflects an array of recognizable traits.

Another element of characterization is the contrast between static and dynamic development. Static characters remain unchanged by the events of the story, but dynamic characters undergo significant changes as a result of the plot. These characters may often experience an epiphany, or a moment of spiritual insight.

Why is characterization so important? Well, think back to your favorite characters of all time that you were picturing earlier. You like them so much because you can feel for them. Effective characterization allows the reader to empathize with the protagonist through the various aspects of personality presented by the author. The best stories have characters that you will remember long after the end.