Useful Phrases: Characterising a Literary Character

How a characterisation works:

A characterisation **describes what a character is like** and explains how the text shows it. Every statement you make needs **evidence** from the text (a quotation or a line reference).
Write in the **simple present** and avoid retelling the plot.

Structure:

1. **Introduction** – name, role in the story, first impression.
2. **Main part** – appearance and background, character traits, behaviour, relationships, development.
3. **Conclusion** – overall assessment and the character's function in the text.

1. Introducing the character

- In the short story / novel / extract (title) by (author), published in (year), ... is the main character / a minor character.
- ... is the protagonist / narrator / antagonist of the story.
- The story is told from ...'s point of view, so the reader learns a lot about his/her thoughts and feelings.
- At first sight, ... seems to be a(n) ... person.
- The reader's first impression of ... is that he/she is ...
- ... plays an important role in the text because ...

2. Appearance and background

- ... is about ... years old / in his/her teens / middle-aged.
- He/She is described as tall / slim / well-dressed / scruffy ...
- His/Her appearance suggests that he/she is ...
- The way ... dresses shows that he/she ...
- ... lives in ... with his/her ...
- ... comes from a wealthy / working-class / immigrant family.
- He/She works as ... / goes to ... school.
- His/Her background helps to explain why he/she ...

3. Character traits and behaviour

Describing traits:

- … is a(n) … person. / One of …'s main traits is his/her …
- On the one hand, … is …; on the other hand, he/she can also be …
- He/She tends to … / He/She often …
- … appears to be … but in fact he/she is …
- Although … pretends to be …, he/she is actually …

Explaining behaviour, thoughts and feelings:

- … reacts … when …, which shows that …
- When …, he/she … . This suggests that he/she is …
- His/Her thoughts reveal that he/she feels …
- The way … speaks (e.g. short sentences, slang, polite language) indicates that …
- … seems to be afraid of / worried about / proud of …

… is motivated by … / What drives … is his/her wish to …

Word bank: adjectives for character traits:

Positive	Negative	Neutral / depends on context
caring, considerate,	selfish, self-centred	ambitious
brave, courageous	cowardly	cautious
honest, sincere	dishonest, deceitful	reserved
reliable, responsible	unreliable, irresponsible	independent
self-confident	arrogant, big-headed	determined, stubborn,
open-minded, tolerant	narrow-minded,	sensitive
generous	mean	rebellious
cheerful, optimistic	moody, pessimistic	quiet, introverted
hard-working	lazy	competitive
loyal	jealous, envious	naive
patient	impatient, short-tempered	emotional
mature	childish, immature	insecure
resilient, resourceful	controlling, bossy	realistic



Tip: Avoid *nice, good and bad* as the only description – choose a more precise word. Use adverbs to make your judgement more exact: rather, quite, extremely, a bit, not very.

Direct vs indirect characterisation

Direct characterisation – the narrator or another character TELLS us what ... is like:

- "The narrator describes ... as ..."
- "Another character calls ... '...'"
- "... is directly characterised as ..."

Indirect characterisation – we have to WORK IT OUT from what ... says, does, thinks or how others react:

- "...'s behaviour shows / reveals that he/she is ..."
- "The fact that ... implies that he/she is ..."
- "From ...'s words / actions we can conclude that ..."

4. Relationships with other characters

- ... has a close / difficult / tense relationship with ...
- ... gets on well with ... / doesn't get on with ...
- ... admires / looks up to / depends on ...
- ... feels misunderstood by / is jealous of / is in conflict with ...
- The way ... treats ... shows that he/she is ...
- Other characters see ... as ... / In ...'s eyes, ... is ...
- Compared to ..., ... is much more ...
- In contrast to ..., ... is ...

5. Development of the character

- At the beginning of the story, ... is ..., but by the end he/she has become ...
- In the course of the story, ... changes from ... to ...
- The turning point for ... is when ...
- After ..., ... realises that ...
- ... learns that ... / This experience teaches ... that ...
- ... is a static character: he/she does not change throughout the story.
- ... is a dynamic / round character because he/she develops.

6. Conclusion

- All in all, ... can be described as a(n) ... person.
- To sum up, ... is a character who ...
- The most important aspect of ...'s personality is ...
- ... is a believable / complex / likeable character because ...
- The narrator uses ... to show / criticise / warn the reader that ...

6. Using evidence from the text
the PEEL pattern: Point – Evidence – Explanation – Link

- This is shown when … says: "…" (l. 12).
- In line 23, the narrator mentions that …
- …'s words "…" (ll. 30–31) make clear that …
- This quotation shows / proves / suggests that …
- This is underlined by the fact that … (cf. l. 45).
- The adjective / verb "…" emphasises …



Example: Tom is insecure. When the teacher asks him a question, he "stare[s] at the floor" (l. 14). This shows that he lacks confidence in front of others.

Remember: l. = line, ll. = lines, cf. = compare.

Keep quotations short and mark any changes with square brackets […].





Checklist before you hand in

□ I **introduced** the character (name, role, first impression) without repeating author, title, year of publication, text type and topic – ***these are given in Task 1 (summary)***.

□ Every trait is supported by a **quotation** or a line reference.

□ I **explained** what the evidence shows instead of retelling the plot.

□ I used PEEL paragraphs (Point – Evidence – Explanation – Link).

□ I wrote in the **simple present**.

□ I used precise **adjectives** (avoiding *good, bad, nice*).

□ I used **linking words** (however, furthermore, in contrast).

□ My **conclusion** gives an overall assessment.