

Building a character

When you create characters for a story, you need to think about the following:

- 1 Their actions
- 2 Their opinions
- 3 Their appearance
- 4 Their lifestyle
- 5 Their age
- 6 Their background
- 7 Anything unusual about them

You also need to work out what has happened to these people in the past to make them as they are now.

Read this paragraph from *The Middle of Nowhere* by Geraldine McCaughrean and notice what a lot we learn about this eccentric man:

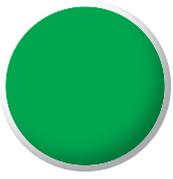
Quartz Hogg carried a crystal-topped cane and wore spats, gloves and mutton-chop whiskers. His waistcoat was yellow tartan and his trousers and jacket green twill. He reeked of cologne. His luggage included a lady's riding crop, ten shirts, a corset, evening suit, cashbox, sugar, a pistol, an army rifle, cravats, and (apparently) two giant bedsprings. All this luggage lay ranged along the verandah now, like a well-stocked jumble sale. Recognizing the shape of a piano, Mr. Hogg threw back the sheet, pulled up a chair and began to play, pumping the loud pedal like the treadle of a sewing machine.

From *The Middle of Nowhere* by Geraldine McCaughrean (2013)

Your turn to write

Now imagine you meet an interesting elderly man or woman in a coffee shop and get chatting. As you talk, you form impressions about this person – from what you see and hear. Perhaps she or he was bombed out of London in the Blitz, danced with Elvis Presley in the 1950s, flew Concorde – or anything else you like. It can be a very dramatic background or something more homely such as marriage, five children and widow(er)hood if you prefer. You – and your imagination – are in charge.

Make notes under the seven headings listed above and then write a description of your character in as much lively detail as you can.



Writing dialogue in stories

There are several ways of setting down what people say and various reasons for doing it. Here, we are thinking of characters speaking to each other in fiction.

Here are some tips for making it interesting:

- 1 Vary the shapes of your sentences by moving the words that tell the reader who is speaking. For example, you could write any of the following:
 - 'We're going to be late' said Jack.
 - Jack said, 'We're going to be late.'
 - 'We're going,' said Jack, 'to be late.'
- 2 Use alternatives to *said*, such as *shouted*, *whispered*, *wondered*, *declared* and *laughed*. There are many options.
- 3 Remember that quite often, especially if only two characters are involved, you don't need to tell the reader who is speaking.
- 4 Dialogue can be realistic and lively if you, the narrator, add other information alongside what people are saying.
- 5 Make the characters say things that show what they're like as people.

Look carefully at this piece of dialogue from *Stay Where You Are And Then Leave* by John Boyne. It illustrates all five of the points above. Notice too how the passage is punctuated.

'Mum!' said Alfie, tugging at her sleeve. 'Where's Dad?'

'He's away at the war, isn't he?' she snapped, turning on him now, her voice growing cold. 'He's away at this blessed war.'

'He never writes any more.'

'He can't at the moment.'

'Why can't he?'

'Because he's fighting.'

'Then how do we know?'

'How do we know what?'

'How do we know that he's all right?'

'Of course he's all right, Alfie. Why wouldn't he be all right?'

'Maybe he's dead.'

And then a terrible thing happened. Margie threw down her sewing, jumped out of her seat and slapped Alfie, hard, across the face.

From *Stay Where You Are And Then Leave* by John Boyne (2013)

Remember that *good punctuation makes your writing clearer.*



Writing an accurate description

Sometimes you need to describe something with accuracy rather than imagination and colour.

Look at these two examples.

I am returning this cardigan to you because I am not satisfied with it. I bought it in your York branch on September 21, just six weeks ago. I have worn it five times and washed it once, following your washing instructions carefully. When you examine it you will notice that the seam beneath the left arm has come apart. There is now a ragged edge on both sleeves at the hand end, the whole fabric is bobbly and the garment has stretched. As this cardigan is clearly faulty goods I would like a full refund of the purchase price plus the postage charge for sending it back to you.

I left the classroom a minute or two before the end of the lesson (with Mr Thomas's permission) so it must have been about 10.58 when I stepped into the corridor. Josh Peters was lying on his back, apparently unconscious, outside the entrance to the gym. He was wearing PE shorts and a T-shirt. His face looked rather grey. I called out to him but he didn't respond so I ran back to fetch Mr Thomas as quickly as I could.

Notice that these writers:

- use clear simple language ('I am not satisfied with it', 'Josh Peters was lying on his back')
- pay attention to detail (the time the second writer found Josh)
- keep it brief (no unnecessary words or opinions).

Your turn to write

Imagine that you have witnessed some kind of incident – a road accident, a fight in school, a burglary from a shop or whatever you like.

Write an accurate description of exactly what you saw (heard, smelled, and so on too if it's relevant) for the police or whoever is investigating the incident.

Many writers carry a small notebook all the time so that they can jot down ideas whenever they think of them. Try it.

