

pre-skills for narrative writing

Before writing a narrative students should be able to:

- identify different aspects of characters and plot line (beginning, setting, problem, solution)
- identify and discuss characterization (find physical description, dialogue, and specific action that lets the reader better understand a character)
- identify and imitate descriptive language (painting with adjectives, specific nouns, active verbs, etc.)
- identify and discuss author use of specific action, inner thoughts, dialogue
- produce descriptive sentences and paragraphs, perhaps of setting or character, perhaps to invoke a mood or set a tone, in preparation for telling a story about them

To practice these skills:

- Look at many sample narratives and identify (in groups, on the overhead, etc.) setting, dialogue, problem, solution, main characters, etc. This should be done throughout the year within stories, read-alouds, etc.
- Hold contests where students re-write a published piece to make it more descriptive.
- Ask everyone in the class to write his or her name on a piece of paper. Ball them up and toss them into the center of the room. Students then pick a paper and write, describing the person they pick for five minutes. They cannot use the person's name or what they are wearing. This is practice for characterization. Teachers should model good examples first and also warn students against embarrassing their subjects.
- List some well-known movies on the board. Ask students (individually or in groups) to create story maps for a movie proving they understand the different aspects of the plot line.
- Encourage students to keep a writer's notebook of good sentences, images, ideas, that they may be able to use later.
- Encourage students to write descriptive paragraphs in the present tense. This helps them avoid *telling* when they mean to *show*.
- Think of writing as painting, and paint from life (thank you, Harry Noden.) Give students visual help via photographs and objects. Describe real cookies, shells, stones, etc. Put together outfits of clothing and ask students to describe their owners. Fill paper bags or cast-off backpacks with interesting objects and then ask students to describe the setting in which they were found, the person to whom the collection belongs, or to write brief narratives about their history. Ask students to bring objects of importance to them and to describe them, possibly in first person ("I am a rad bat.")
- You write too. Join the dialogue.

Show or Tell?

Telling

1. Stating directly what the character or setting is like:

"Vu Tran was the fastest runner on the team."

"My room was very messy."

Showing

2. Describing the appearance of a character or setting:

"Bo's diaper, sagging and limp, clung to his belly by a shred of tape."

"I could just see the top of John's head poking out from behind a pile of clothing, dishes, food wrappers, cats, and general grunge. It was his room, all right."

3. Showing the character in action:

"Cami glanced at Mrs. North, then tossed the note to Julia and glared at Juan."

4. Allowing the reader to hear the character speak:

"I'll be your best friend," wheedled Brad, eyeing Craig's bag of popcorn.

5. Revealing the character's thoughts and feelings:

"Rafe wanted to go to the party more than anything, but he didn't feel right about it when Sam was still on restriction for something they both had done. Why did Sam's parents have to be so strict?"

6. Showing how others react to the character:

"Invite Erica?" puzzled Brenda. "Well, OK, but you'd better plan some fun or she won't stick around."

Is There a Problem?

What's the problem? Is there a solution? Most stories answer these two questions. In fact, the problem often *makes* the story happen. Find the problem in the selection below.

Her hands trembled and her heartbeat quickened, for she was frightened, not so much of the wolves, who were shy and many harpoon-shots away, but because of her desperate predicament. Miyax was lost. She had been lost without food for many sleeps on the North Slope of Alaska. The barren slope stretches for three hundred miles from the Brooks Range to the Arctic Ocean, and for more than eight hundred miles from the Chukchi to the Beaufort Sea. No roads cross it; ponds and lakes freckle its immensity. Winds scream across it, and the view in every direction is exactly the same. Somewhere in this cosmos was Miyax; and the very life in her body, its spark and warmth, depended upon these wolves for survival. And she was not so sure they would help.

Miyax stared hard at the regal black wolf, hoping to catch his eye. She must somehow tell him that she was starving and ask him for food. This could be done, she knew, for her father, an Eskimo hunter, had done so. One year he had camped near a wolf den while on a hunt. When a month had passed and her father had seen no game, he told the leader of the wolves that he was hungry and needed food. The next night the wolf called him from far away and her father went to him and found a freshly killed caribou. Unfortunately, Miyax's father never explained to her how he had told the wolf of his needs....

From *Julie of the Wolves* by Jean Craighead George

Did you find the problem? Underline that sentence.

How does the narrator hope to solve this problem? This solution looks like it may create more problems for the narrator than it solves. But then, that is what makes for a good story, yes?

Setting

All narratives have to happen *somewhere*, and this somewhere is called the **setting**. Authors often use setting to give the reader important information. Read the following example from *The Landry News* by Andrew Clements. As you read, look for clues about the characters and about possible problems that may develop between them. Underline the clues that you find:

Even though Mr. Larson had not done much day-to-day teaching for a number of years, quite a bit of learning happened in room 145 anyway. The room itself had a lot to do with that. Room 145 was like a giant educational glacier, with layer upon layer of accumulated materials. Mr. Larson read constantly, and every magazine he had subscribed to or purchased during the past twenty years had ended up in his classroom. Heaps of them filled the room and cluttered the corners. Newspapers, too, were stacked in front of the windows; recent ones were piled next to Mr. Larson's chair. This stack was almost level with his desktop, and it made a convenient place to rest his coffee cup.

Each square inch of wall space and a good portion of the ceiling were covered with maps, old report covers, newspaper clippings, diagrammed sentences, cartoons, Halloween decorations, a cursive handwriting chart, quotations from the Gettysburg Address and the Declaration of Independence, and the complete Bill of Rights -- a dizzying assortment of historical, grammatical, and literary information.

The bulletin boards were like huge paper time warps --shaggy, colorful collages. Whenever Mr. Larson happened to find an article or a poster or an illustration that looked interesting, he would staple it up, and he always invited kids to do the same. But for the past eight or ten years, Mr. Larson had not bothered to take down the old papers -- he just wallpapered over them with the new ones. Every few months -- especially when it was hot and humid -- the weight of the built-up paper would become too much for the staples, and a slow avalanche of clippings would lean forward and whisper to the floor. When that happened, the student repair committee would grab some staplers from the supply cabinet, and the room would shake as they pounded flat pieces of history back onto the wall.

Freestanding racks of books were scattered all around room 145. There were racks loaded with mysteries, Newberry winners, historical fiction, biographies, and short stories. There were racks of almanacs, nature books, world records books, old encyclopedias, and dictionaries. There was even a rack of well-worn picture books for those days when fifth-graders felt like looking back at books they grew up on.

The reading corner was jammed with pillows and was sheltered by half an old cardboard geodesic dome. The dome had won first prize at a school fair about fifteen years ago. Each triangle of the dome had been painted blue or yellow or green and was designed by kids to teach something -- like the flags of African nations or the presidents of the United States or the last ten Indianapolis 500 winners -- dozens and dozens of different minilessons. The dome was missing half its top and looked a little like an igloo after a week of warm weather. Still, every period there would be a scramble to see what small group of friends would take possession of the dome.

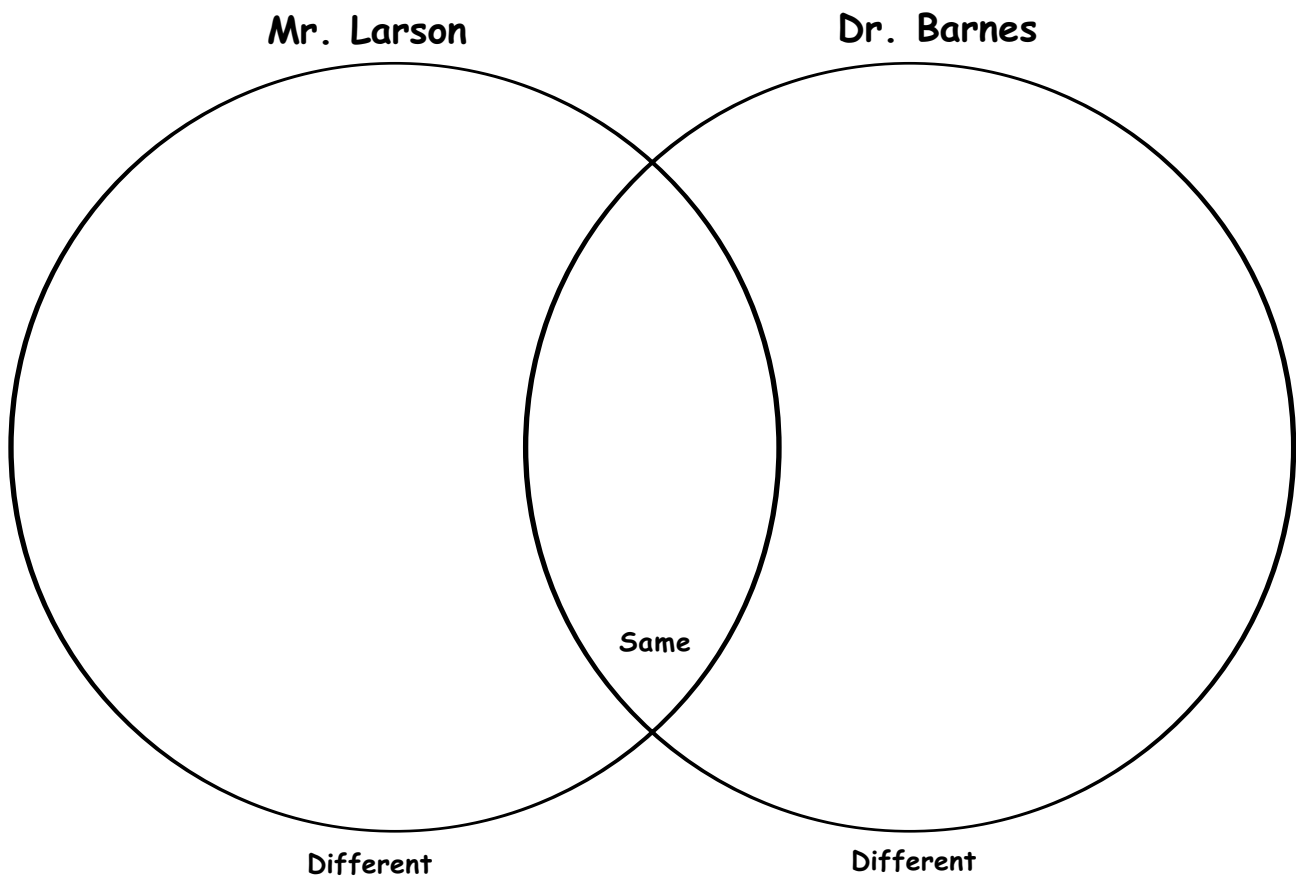
The principal didn't approve of Mr. Larson's room one bit. It gave him the creeps. Dr. Barnes liked things to be spotless and orderly, like his own office -- a place for everything, and everything in its place.

Name _____

Setting continued

In the example on the previous page, Andrew Clements uses **setting** -- *Room 145* -- to tell you something about the teacher who created it. In the last paragraph, he also uses the setting to introduce a problem.

Complete the Venn diagram below. On one side, write what you know about Mr. Larson. On the other side, write what you know about Dr. Barnes. In the space where the two circles intersect, write anything that the two characters have in common. Finally, predict what problem could arise between these two characters:



Predict. A problem that may arise between these two characters could be:

This problem seems likely because _____

Name _____

Conflict

All narratives require a **conflict**, some *problem* that the characters must try to solve. Without conflict, nothing happens, and you know what to call a story where nothing happens, don't you? Booooooooooring, that's what!

In literary terms (also called English teacher terms), this conflict between Mr. Larson and Dr. Barnes would be described as:

person versus person
(Mr. Larson against Dr. Barnes)

Other examples of this kind of conflict can be found in soccer games (team versus team), disagreements (friend versus friends), or even wars (country versus country). Whether it is a group of persons or just one, the conflict is called person versus person.

On the lines below, describe some person versus person conflicts you have experienced or that you remember from books you have read.

A second kind of conflict is when a person has a difficult choice or decision to make. You know all about this one. You want to watch your favorite show on T.V. You should study for tomorrow's spelling test in order to get the good grade you want to have. There isn't time to do both. Which will you choose? Whichever you choose, this kind of conflict is described as:

person versus self
(I *want* against I *should*)

On the lines below, describe some person versus self conflicts you have experienced or that you remember from books you have read.

When you are finished, share your ideas with your group. You may want to add some of their ideas to your own.

Name _____

Conflict continued

The example from *Julie of the Wolves* shows a third kind of conflict. Miyax is caught in the Arctic winter, where there is little food to be found, and she is starving. She must learn to communicate with and to be accepted by wolves in order to survive. She must also avoid illness or injury. This kind of conflict is called:

person versus nature
(Miyax against the Arctic)

Miyaux is in conflict with nature in the form of the weather, terrain, animals, and even illness or injury. For this kind of conflict, **setting** plays an important role. In a different setting, Miyaux would face very different problems.

On the lines below, describe the kinds of problems with nature that a character might encounter in each **setting**.

In the Arctic, a character would have to cope with _____

In the Sahara Desert, a character would have to cope with _____

During an earthquake in a big city, a character would have to cope with _____

During a drought on a farm, a character would have to cope with _____

When you are finished, share your ideas with your group. You may want to add some of their ideas to your own.

Name _____

Description

Setting and **conflict** are both important parts of **description**. Description is there to help the reader see a "big" idea in a story. You can use it to give clues about a "big" idea, too.

PLAN: Use Andrew Clements' setting to practice. Think of a place you know well, such as a classroom, library, house, office, store, or a bedroom. It can be yours or someone else's. What does this place say about its owner?

My place is _____. It belongs to _____.

When I go in there, I see _____
_____.

The "big" idea I want to show about the owner is _____
_____.

PRACTICE: Now use some of Andrew Clements' sentence starters to describe your setting. Fill in the blanks below:

_____ is like a giant _____, with layer upon layer
of _____. Heaps of _____ fill the room. Every square
inch of _____ and a good portion of _____ is covered
with _____, _____, _____,
and _____. _____ are scattered all around, loaded with
_____, _____, _____, and even some
_____. The _____ is jammed with _____
_____.

When you are finished, share your practice description with a member of your group. Ask your reader to tell you about the owner of the place you just described. You may want to make some additions based on what your reader can tell you.

Description continued

Writers often describe a setting through *sights*:

She pressed her nose against the living-room window, watching the ceaseless rain pelting down as bare black branches clawed at the electric wires in front of the house.

From *Ramona Quimby, Age 8* by Beverly Cleary

We had a stretch of perfect weather, here in the healthiest climate in Illinois. Little red blushes showed down in Grandma's strawberry plants. The hollyhocks were every color. Trees leafed out overnight, and the streets were like tunnels with bright countryside at either end. One magic morning the whole town was scented with lilac.

From *A Year Down Yonder* by Richard Peck

Or *sounds*:

It was a low sound, a low roaring sound that came from wind. Low, almost alive, almost from a throat somehow, the sound, the noise was a roar, a far-off roar but coming at him ... A mystery sound. A spirit sound. A bad sound. The sound was coming for him, was coming just for him, and he had to get ready. The sound wanted him. It was wind, wind like the sound of a train, with the low roar of a train. It was a tornado.

From *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen

...Ramona dozed off, faintly aware that her family was moving quietly so they would not disturb her. One tiny corner of her mind was pleased by this consideration. She heard breakfast sounds, and then she must have fallen completely asleep, because the next thing she knew she was awake and the house was silent. Had they all gone off and left her? No, someone was moving quietly in the kitchen.

From *Ramona Quimby, Age 8* by Beverly Cleary

And far away in the distance, in the heart of the great factory, came a muffled roar of energy as though some monstrous gigantic machine were spinning its wheels at breakneck speed.

From *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl

Description continued

Writers can also describe a setting through its **scents**:

Ramona and Howie took window seats on opposite sides of the bus, which had a reassuring new smell. Ramona always dreaded the people-and-fumes smell of the big city buses.

From *Ramona Quimby, Age 8* by Beverly Cleary

The most wonderful smells seemed to be mixed up in the air around them -- the smell of roasting coffee and burnt sugar and melting chocolate and mint and violets and crushed hazelnuts and apple blossom and caramel and lemon peel....

From *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl

Or through the **physical sensations** the setting causes in a character:

The wind gusted; Miyax scrambled through the low door and slid into her sleeping skin. The silken softness of the rabbit fur embraced her and she pulled the hood around her face so that only her nose was exposed. The fur captured her warm breath, held it against her face, and she became her own radiant stove.

From *Julie of the Wolves* by Jean Craighead George

Ramona bit into her hamburger. Bliss. Warm, soft, juicy, tart with relish. The french fries--crisp on the outside, mealy on the inside--tasted better than anything Ramona had ever eaten.

From *Ramona Quimby, Age 8* by Beverly Cleary

His heart pounded.
His hands shook.
And his mind raced....
He was trapped.
He was cold.
And nobody knew where he was.

From *The Janitor's Boy* by Andrew Clements

Name _____

Description continued

PRACTICE: Use your ideas fill in the blanks using the authors' sentence forms:

Sights:

We had a stretch of _____ weather, here in the _____ climate in California. The _____ were every color. Trees _____ overnight, and the streets were like _____ with _____. One _____ morning the whole town was _____ with _____.

Sounds:

It was a _____ sound, a _____, _____-ing sound that came from _____.

Scents:

I always dreaded the _____ smell of the big _____.

Physical Sensations:

I bite into my _____. Bliss. _____, _____, _____ with _____. The _____, so _____ on the outside, _____ on the inside, taste better than anything I have ever eaten.

Name _____

Describe a Setting

VISUALIZE: Think of a place you know well and enjoy, perhaps classroom, bedroom, store, zoo, amusement park, library, or office. When you are there, what do you see, hear, smell, and feel? Draw what you remember of this setting in the box below.



Briefly explain your drawing on the lines below.

Name _____

Describe a Setting continued

CREATING A NARRATIVE SETTING: Now describe the scene you just illustrated as though you are seeing it for the first time. Briefly **show** the details of this setting:

Where are you?

Describe the things you see. Use *specific* language and *proper* nouns if appropriate.

What do you hear?

What do you smell?

What are your physical sensations?

What are your thoughts, questions, or ideas about this place? Why do you remember it?

When you have finished, you are ready to write your descriptive paragraph. You may wish to look back at your model sentences. You may wish to find some examples in a favorite book or story to use as models. You may wish to use the model sentences on the following page. Whatever you do, be sure to include sensory details to **show** your reader this place.

Name _____

Now **practice** using showing details to write your descriptive paragraph:

I walk in and I cannot believe my eyes!

Everywhere I look, there are _____ , _____ , and _____ .

If I take a deep breath, I get a mixture of scents: _____ and _____ ,
_____ and _____ , and most of all _____ .

If I close my eyes, the sounds of _____ and _____ make
me feel _____ .

Being here? It's like being in a _____ because
_____ .

I want to _____ and _____ and _____ .

I love to _____ .

I can't wait to _____
_____ .

I can best explain this place by comparing it to _____
_____ .

I know I'll never forget this place. It is _____
_____ .

Descriptive Paragraph -- Student Model

Good writers combine the kinds of description they use. Look at the example below. It was written by someone about your age. This is not a first draft, but a finished, revised piece. The writer worked hard to *show* this place. Underline the *showing* strategies you find, and make comments in the right hand column. What do you know about how this writer feels about the owner of this place? How do you know it?

As I look in the dark black sky, all I see are the stars and blackness all around me. Suddenly a straight stream of flickering lights dashes through the sky. Its broad, gleaming, sparkling, colorful sparks gracefully fall to the earth, like the sun's rays as it sets in the evening. As two more fireworks go soaring through the dark black sky, the night becomes a little brighter now. The darkness that used to surround us is now a shining, shimmering sensation shared across the nation! I know that eyes like mine are enjoying this sight, "from sea to shining sea."

There is a misty, salty smell lingering in the air brought to us by the sea. Can you feel the warmth of the bonfire? The soft sand squishing between your toes? The salty dew resting upon your shoulders?

The aroma of food roasting over all the different fire pits makes my mouth water! As the wind blows, I can smell the scent of cinnamon from a baker on the pier. MMM Cotton candy melts in my mouth. Ice cream feels cool and wet as it glides down my throat. A yummy hot dog cooks over an open flame--that's the best! There is potato salad and gelatin, picnic chips and pickles, all the wonderful tastes that say celebrate! It's summer! You are free.

The sounds of happiness, love, laughter and excitement echo in my ears. Little kids run in crazy circles with sparklers in their hands, dancing and flying over the ground like beneficial angels. Old couples sit hand in hand, watching their families and smiling, smiling. Everyone is happy in our beautiful country. Everyone stops to appreciate our freedom.

Fourth of July is the best holiday of the year.

Name _____

Improving the First Draft: Showing a Setting

Here are some sentences written by students your age. Can you help them *show* instead of *tell*? The original sentence comes first. Then we have given you a start on revising the sentence. You can use our sentence starter or ignore it, but fill in the blanks with some *showing* descriptions.

How a setting *looks*:

The sun was bright and shining on the snow.

This day was perfect! The sun was shining so brightly when I stepped outside that I

_____. *There were people everywhere*

_____ -ing and _____ -ing and even _____ -ing.

How a setting *sounds*:

The wind went softly through the trees.

I couldn't see the wind, but I could hear it, _____ -ing through the trees like a _____.

But that wasn't the only sound. I could also hear _____, _____, and all the other sounds people make when they're having fun, like _____, _____, and _____.

How a setting *smells*:

It smells really good.

Our town in winter smells like no other place. First, there is the scent of the cold air,

which is a little _____ and also _____. Mix that up with the

_____ trees, which smell _____ but also _____. But

best of all is the _____ scent of hot _____ waiting when I come

inside: _____, _____, and _____.

Character Description

Narratives require characters. (Things have to happen to *someone*.) Read the examples below and underline sections that describe:

How a character *looks*:

Cara Landry ... dressed in a brown plaid skirt and a clean white blouse every day, dependable as the tile pattern on the classroom floor. Average height, skinny arms and legs, white socks, black shoes. Her light brown hair was always pulled back into a thin ponytail, and her pale blue eyes hardly ever connected with anyone else's.

From *The Landry News* by Andrew Clements

How a character *sounds*:

When Picky-picky ate dry cat food, he ground and crunched so noisily she could hear him from any room in the house

From *Ramona Quimby, Age 8* by Beverly Cleary

Ramona discovered her new sandals squeaked. *Squeak, creak, squeak.*
Ramona giggled, and so did the rest of the class. *Squeak, creak, squeak.*

From *Ramona Quimby, Age 8* by Beverly Cleary

What a character *does*:

Picky-picky strolled into the living room and stared at Ramona as if he felt she did not belong on the couch. With an arthritic leap, he jumped up beside her on the blanket, washed himself from his ears to the tip of his tail, kneaded the blanket, and, purring, curled up beside Ramona, who lay very still so he would not go away. When he was asleep, she petted him gently. Picky-picky usually avoided her because she was noisy, or so her mother said.

From *Ramona Quimby, Age 8* by Beverly Cleary

Every day, as he came near [the chocolate factory], Charlie would lift his small pointed nose high in the air and sniff the wonderful sweet smell of melting chocolate. Sometimes he would stand motionless outside the gates for several minutes on end, taking deep swallowing breaths as though he were trying to *eat* the smell itself.

From *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl

Character Description continued

What a character *says*:

" ... you got to remember, you can't always judge people by the things they done. You got to judge them by what they are doing now. You judge Otis by the pretty music he plays and how kind he is to them animals, because that's all you know about him right now. All right?"

From *Because of Winn-Dixie* by Kate Di Camillo

What a character *thinks* and *feels*:

Ramona thought a moment, and suddenly, filled with inspiration, she went to work. She knew exactly what she wanted to do and set about doing it. She worked with paper, crayons, tape, and rubber bands. She worked so hard and with such pleasure that her cheeks grew pink. Nothing in the world felt as good as being able to make something from a sudden idea.

From *Ramona Quimby, Age 8* by Beverly Cleary

What *others think* or *say* about a character:

"Charlie Bucket? He must be that skinny little shrimp standing beside the old fellow who looks like a skeleton."

"Why hasn't he got a coat on in this cold weather?"

"Don't ask me. Maybe he can't afford to buy one."

"Jeepers! He must be freezing!"

From *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl

And, most often, a little of *this* and a little of *that*:

Then very slowly, with a slow and marvelous grin, Grandpa Joe lifted his head and looked straight at Charlie. The color was rushing to his cheeks, and his eyes were wide open, shining with joy, and in the center of each eye, right in the very center, in the black pupil, a little spark of wild excitement was slowly dancing. Then the old man took a deep breath, and suddenly, with no warning whatsoever, an explosion seemed to take place inside him. He threw up his arms and yelled, "Yippeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!" And at the same time, his big bony body rose up out of the bed and his bowl of soup went flying into the face of Grandma Josephine, and in one fantastic leap, this old fellow of ninety-six and a half, who hadn't been out of bed these last twenty years, jumped onto the floor and started doing a dance of victory in his pajamas.

From *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl

Character Description continued

Good writers combine the descriptive examples to create interesting characters. Look at the examples below. In the right column, make notes about the *showing* strategies this author uses. What do these strategies tell you about the character?

Mr. Wonka was standing all alone just inside the open gates of the factory.

And what an extraordinary little man he was!

He had a black top hat on his head.

He wore a tail coat of beautiful plum-colored velvet.

His trousers were bottle green.

His gloves were pearly gray.

And in one hand, he carried a gold-topped walking cane.

Covering his chin, there was a small neat pointed black beard -- a goatee. And his eyes -- his eyes were most marvelously bright. They seemed to be sparkling and twinkling at you all the time. The whole face, in fact, was alight with fun and laughter. And oh, how clever he looked! How quick and sharp and full of life! He kept making quick jerky little movements with his head, cocking it this way and that, and taking everything in with those bright twinkling eyes. He was like a squirrel in the quickness of his movements, like a quick clever old squirrel from the park.

Suddenly he did a funny little skipping dance in the snow, and he spread his arms wide, and he smiled at the five children who were clustered near the gates, and he called out, "Welcome, my little friends! Welcome to the factory!"

His voice was high and flutey... "My dear Veruca! How *do* you do? What a pleasure this is! You *do* have an interesting name, don't you? I always thought veruca was a sort of wart that you got on the sole of your foot! But I must be wrong, mustn't I? How pretty you look in that lovely mink coat! Dear me, this is going to be *such* an exciting day! I *do* hope you enjoy it. I'm sure you *will*. I *know* you will!

From *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl

Character Description continued. Below you will find a longer description of a character. Can you spot the author's use of description? Underline sections as you read, then discuss them with your group. What do you know about this boy? About the dog? How do you know it? What strategies has the author used?

...This particular afternoon I'm about halfway up the road along the river when I see something out of the corner of my eye. Something moves. I look, and about fifteen yards off, there's this shorthaired dog -- white with brown and black spots --not making any kind of noise, just slinking along with his head down, watching me, tail between his legs like he's hardly got the right to breathe. A beagle, maybe a year or two old.

I stop and the dog stops. Looks like he's been caught doing something awful, when I can tell all he really wants to do is to follow along beside me.

"Here boy," I say, slapping my thigh.

Dog goes down on his stomach, groveling about in the grass. I laugh and start over toward him. He's got an old worn-out collar on, probably older than he is. Bet it belonged to another dog before him. "C'mon boy," I say, putting out my hand.

The dog gets up and backs off. He don't even whimper, like he's lost his bark.

Something really hurts inside when you see a dog cringe like that. You know somebody's been kicking at him.

"It's okay, boy," I say, coming in a little closer, but still he backs off.

Every so often I look over my shoulder and there he is, the beagle. I stop; he stops. I can see his ribs -- not real bad -- but he isn't plumped out or anything. Finally I sit on a log ... Back down the road, the dog sits too. Sits right in the middle of it, head on his paws.

"Here boy!" I say again, and pat my knee.

He wiggles just a little, but he don't come.

I decide to wait the dog out, but after three or four minutes on the log, it gets boring and I start off again. And then hardly thinking on it, I whistle.

It's like pressing a magic button. The beagle comes barreling toward me, legs going lickety-split, long ears flopping, tail sticking up like a flagpole. This time, when I put out my hand, he licks all my fingers and jumps up against my leg, making little yelps in his throat. He can't get enough of me, like I'd been saying no all along and now I'd said yes, he could come. It's a he-dog like I'd thought.

"Hey boy! You're really somethin' now, ain't you?" I'm laughing as the beagle makes circles around me. I squat down and the dog licks my face, my neck. Where'd he learn to come if you whistle, to hang back if you didn't?

Each place we pass I figure he'll stop -- somebody come out and whistle, maybe. But nobody comes out and the dog don't stop. Even starts to cross the bridge, tail going like a propeller. He licks my hand every so often to make sure I'm still there -- mouth open like he's smiling. He *is* smiling.

We were never allowed to have pets. If you can't afford to feed 'em and take 'em to the vet when they're sick, then you've no right taking 'em in, Ma says, which is true enough.

I don't say a word to the beagle the rest of the way home, hoping he'll turn at some point and go back. The dog keeps coming.

I get to the front stoop and say, "Go home, boy." And then I feel my heart squeeze up the way he stops smiling, sticks his tail between his legs again, and slinks off. He goes as far as the sycamore tree, lies down on the wet grass, head on his paws.

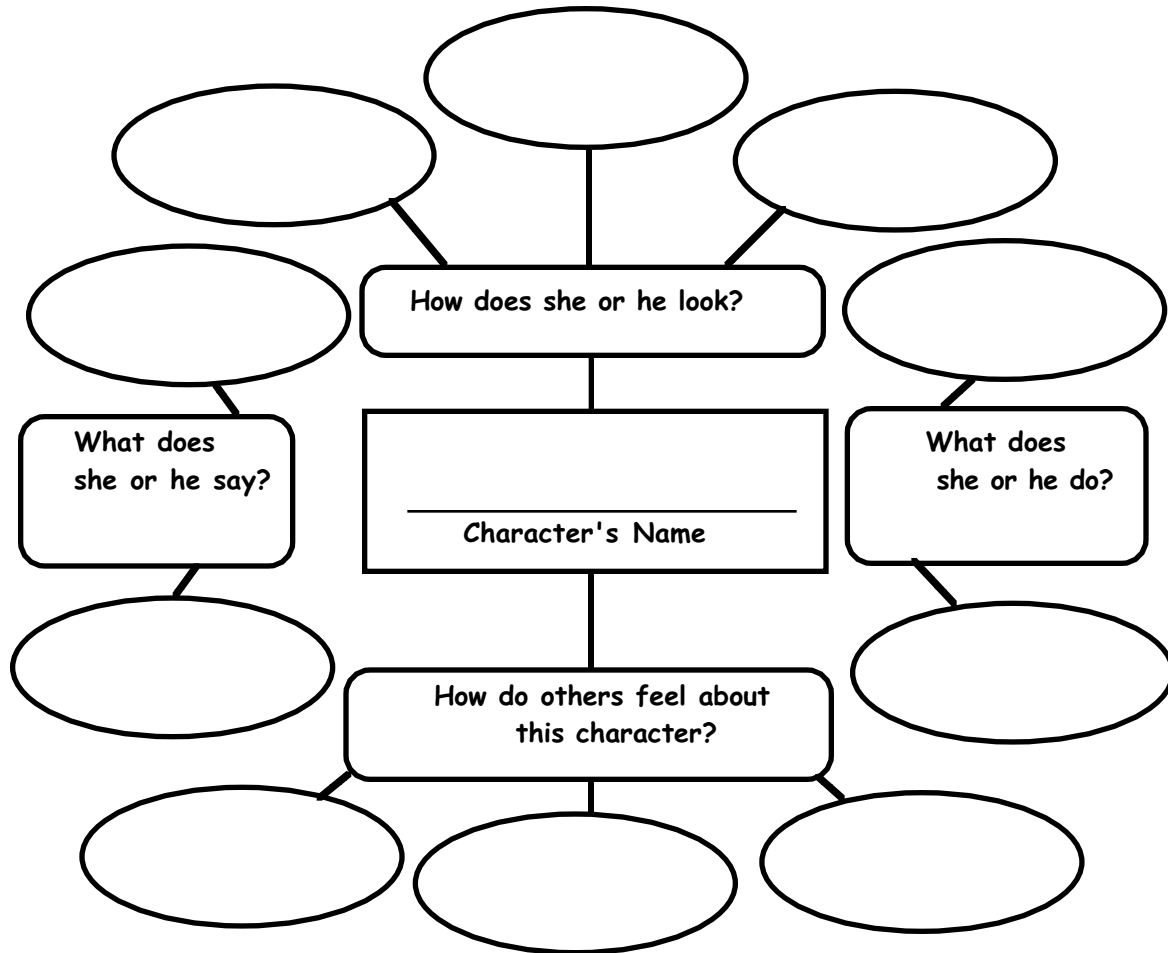
From *Shiloh* by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor

Name _____

DESCRIBE A CHARACTER: All good writers introduce their characters by describing their actions, their speech, their appearance, as well as sharing what other characters think about them.

Even though the characters in books and stories are not real, most writers base their characters at least partly on people they have known. For the purposes of writing a rich, descriptive narrative, think of someone you have known well.

Think about the specific details you remember about this person. Jot your thoughts below.



Use the lines below to jot any further comments or ideas:

Name _____

Describe a Character

VISUALIZE: Everyone has met someone unforgettable, someone who is different from anyone else in the world. It may be a family member, friend, teacher, coach, or someone else in your life. Think carefully about that person: his or her appearance, actions, words, and the way you respond to being with him or her.

Draw this person or an important scene involving this person. Include as many details as you can. You may use stick figures if you like; it is not necessary to be a good artist to draw a successful representation.



Briefly explain your drawing on the lines below.

Name _____

DESCRIBE A CHARACTER. Now describe the person you just illustrated as though you were creating a character. Briefly **show** this person by describing his/her appearance, actions, words, and your thoughts, opinions, and ideas about him/her.

Setting: Describe the surroundings. Where do you usually see him or her?

How does he or she look?

What does he or she do?

What does he or she say? (Choose quotations that show his or her personality.)

What do others say about him or her?

When you have finished, you are ready to begin a first draft of your descriptive paragraph. You may wish to look back at your model sentences. You may wish to find some examples in a favorite book or story to use as models. You may wish to use the model sentences on the following page. Whatever you do, be sure to include sensory details to **show** your reader this person as if you were creating a character for a story or book.

Name _____

Improving the First Draft: Showing a Character

Here are some sentences written by students your age. Can you help them *show* instead of *tell*? The original sentence comes first. We have given you a start on revising the sentence. You can use our sentence starter or ignore it, but fill in the blanks with some *showing* descriptions.

How a character *looks*:

My friend has brown hair that she parts in the middle and wears in braids.

My friend's braids are like two _____ , all _____
_____ and _____ and _____ .

When she tosses her head, she looks like _____ .

What a character *says*:

Joaquin says, "Hi, Alli."

I say, "Hi."

I look up and see Joaquin heading for our bench. He is smiling a b-i-g- smiley smile.

I squint up at him and say, _____

What a character *does*:

My friend's mom is always glad to see me.

I knock on Mario's door, and his mom answers. She smiles a real smile, the kind that says

_____ and then she _____

Character Description -- Student Model

Good writers combine descriptions to create interesting characters. Look at the example below. It was written by someone about your age. This is not a first draft, but a finished, revised piece. The writer worked hard to show this character. Do you believe that the writer really knows Red? Why or why not? Underline the *showing* strategies you find, and make comments in the right hand column.

My best friend Red is a lot smaller than I am, but that doesn't matter. My dad says his heart is as big as our house. I think it's bigger. You can see us together every day after school, and I'm not exaggerating when I say that's the best part of the day for both of us. We usually like to take a good long run -- or he does, that is. I'm the one on the bike. When he's had enough running he just stops -- and almost jerks me off my bike at the same time! I want to get mad when he does that, but he looks at me with a silly grin and his tongue hanging out, and I always start laughing instead.

He isn't much of a talker, but he listens to everything I have to say with a look in his eyes that is part understanding, part laughing, part happy to be alive. Talking with him always makes me feel good. And seeing how happy he is to see me always makes me feel like the best person in the world. My friend has that effect on people.

His longish red-brown hair stands up in spikes when it's wet and needs a lot of combing when it's tangled, which it usually is. I can't honestly say he smells all that good either, most of the time. I have to grab him and drag him into the shower once a week, or he'd never wash at all! Just in case you think that's disgusting, well, let me ask you how often you wash *your* dog.