

DUTCHESS COMMUNITY COLLEGE—WRITING CENTER CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Character Analysis vs. Character Sketch:

Before you begin writing your character analysis, be sure you understand the difference between ANALYZING a literary character (as found in a character analysis) and merely DESCRIBING one (as found in a character sketch). **Description** focuses on the physical or external qualities of a character, whereas **analysis** focuses on the internal workings of a character- motivation, personality, and how these factors shape/determine the events and ultimate outcome of the work. To some extent, analysis means treating the characters as if they are real people who think, act, and feel as we do. It is important, however, when analyzing literary characters, to limit ourselves to what can be supported (i.e.—we can only cite as evidence **WHAT IS WRITTEN IN THE TEXT**). Just as in class, when a question arises about an idea or issue expressed in the work, say to yourself "Go to the text!"

Round and Flat, Dynamic and Static:

One of the most basic distinctions made when evaluating literary characters is the difference between ROUND and FLAT or STATIC and DYNAMIC characters. STATIC characters are those whose personalities do not significantly change throughout the course of the piece; DYNAMIC characters are those who either learn from or are otherwise transformed by what they have experienced. In Shakespeare's Hamlet, for example, the character of Hamlet is dynamic because his attitudes and actions at the end of the play stand in direct contrast to those at the play's beginning; in the same work, Polonius is static because his character is consistent and does not change. Dynamic characters provide the most material for a character analysis. The circumstances and events surrounding them push and pull them in different directions, and (as readers and analysts) we are able to comment on how the character is affected, and the process of how and why they change.

The terms "round" and "flat" relate to the amount of substance a character is given. In this way, flat characters are Picasso-like two-dimensional figures, and round characters are figures which are able to jump from the canvas into the real world, vividly three-dimensional, and ultimately more "real." Though Polonius is static and Hamlet dynamic, for example, both are arguably fully realized, complex, and therefore "round" characters.

Two important notes to remember:

1. Simply proving a character's "roundness" is not enough for an analysis—it is merely the starting point of determining whether or not a character is even worth analyzing.
2. If your character is a "stock" or "stereotyped" character who is flat or static (unchanging) rather than round or dynamic (changing), you will probably not find enough substance for analysis.

Ways in Which Character is Disclosed:

Round (and flat) characters alike reveal personality through thought, speech, and action, or lack thereof. Personality is therefore disclosed by:

- What a character *says*
- What a character *does*
- What a character *fails to say*
- What a character *fails to do*
- What *others say about a character*

Remember to pay attention to ALL the ways that a character is disclosed. Delve into the text, and explore what you know of the character's history. All of these (or as many as possible) should be examined to arrive at a fully developed character analysis. Examine what is said, but also pay attention to that what is unsaid—that which reverberates silently through the text, relying on description of non-verbal communication and action rather than dialogue.

Character in Relation to Other Literary Elements:

Be able to make competent reference to the elements of fiction when they contribute to your analysis of character. Mainly, **language** is created in part through character dialogue or reflection, **point of view** is influenced by a switch from character to character, **setting** influences the formation of character, a character may undergo **conflict** (causing change), and the **theme** of the work may be brought to light through the actions of a character. In this way, all of the elements of fiction are intertwined. Remember, however, that CHARACTER is your concern, not plot. A character analysis is not merely a recapitulation of plot details. You may mention plot elements when necessary, but do not structure the entire essay around the retelling of the story.

Questions to Ask Yourself:

If plot is the "what and the what" of a story, then character analysis is the "how" and the "why." While jotting your rough work, ask yourself such questions as: HOW does this character evolve? What CAUSES this evolution? What do other characters say about this character? Can we trust their opinions? How does this character treat others? The opposite sex? How do they view themselves in relation to others? Are they an outsiders? Part of a group? Is this character a reliable narrator or an unreliable one? What motivates *Ms* character to change? How do other elements of the piece impact the way that characterization is revealed/perceived? What motivates this character to tell us the story, if the narrator? What is the character's dominant personality trait? What does the character love most? Fear most? Overall, attempt to answer the question *what makes this character tick? Build a character biography.* Envision the character sprawled on an analyst's couch. Consider that you are the analyst, and the character is your patient. Ask questions and take notes during the conversation.

Another useful set of questions is drawn from Uta Hagen's book Respect for Acting, a standard text for beginning actors. When delivered in the voice of the particular literary character under consideration, the answers can be revealing:

1. *Who am I?*
2. *Where am I? (Setting)*
3. *What do I want?*
4. *What am I willing to do to get what I want?*

Is the character's self-identity consistent with what others think, or does the character experience delusions of grandeur or feelings of insecurity? What motivates the character, and how ruthless and entitled or how fearful of action are they?

Focus, Focus, Focus:

In your analysis, be sure to adopt one particular "angle" by which the character may be analyzed. Use this as the guiding focus of the paper and the substance of your thesis. Without it, your essay will be a collection of loosely-strung-together observations, rather than a cohesive analysis. If necessary, fill in the blanks in the following equation: "X can be analyzed in terms of Y."

For Amadeus by Peter Shaffer:

- Salieri's anger as an expression of sibling rivalry- Mozart as the "little brother" who gets everything, and God as the "unfair parent"
-Mozart as the product of an overprotective parent. He "acts out" in protest, and responds to Salieri as he might respond to a father, after Leopold's death.

So, Salieri might be analyzed in *terms of his tendency to engage in sibling rivalry*, and Mozart might be analyzed *in terms of his tendency to "act out" in reaction to parental oppression*.

*You might also want to begin work on your analysis by identifying *one defining adjective* about the character: jealous, insecure, controlling, entitled, condescending, driven, curious, disappointed, or loyal, for example.

Title:

As with any essay, titles are important. Your title should be a snappy, actively-worded suggestion of what is to come. Don't merely call the essay "character analysis." How about:

"All But Sloth: Salieri's Six Deadly Sins" or "The Two Faces of Salieri" or "Us and Them: Division and Derision in Billy's War"

Sample Character Analysis Thesis Statements:

Write out a topic/purpose/thesis after listing a few defining adjectives about your character and selecting the best. The thesis statement sets forth your understanding of the inner workings of character, and evidence (from primary and secondary sources) works to support this statement.

Topic: The general subject matter of your essay

Purpose: "To" followed by an active verb (analyze, argue, explain, compare & contrast) and what you intend to do/why you are writing the essay.

Thesis: A statement of what you wish to prove in the course of the essay

Ex:

Topic: Salieri in Amadeus

Purpose: To analyze Salieri in terms of his perceived betrayal by God.

Thesis: In Peter Shaffer's Amadeus, the motivating force behind Salieri's actions is his perceived betrayal by God. His evil-doing is not an expression of a sadistic personality, but rather an exasperated and indignant reaction to what he feels is a broken bargain.

Here's another:

Topic: Salieri in Amadeus

Purpose: To analyze Salieri's identity and actions in terms of his love/hate relationship with Mozart's identity and actions

Thesis: Mozart represents all of Salieri's musical desires, in terms of ability and affirmation by God, yet exemplifies all of the behaviors that he rejects, in terms of social graces, reverence, and humility. Salieri's own identity and actions are therefore shaped by his rejection of and aspiration toward all that Mozart is.

Final reminders: Treat the character as a human being, and explore not only WHAT the character does, but WHY the character does it. Choose dynamic characters who are round in their rendering, and adopt ONE means by which the character may be analyzed. Consider this as the lens that colors everything you see about the character. Support all claims with textual evidence.