

## Bringing Characters to Life Through Description

*Excerpted from [Word Painting: The Fine Art of Writing Descriptively](#)*

1. If one of your characters doesn't yet have a full name, give him one, including a last name and a middle name or initial. Try out different names to see which one best fits his personality and actions, or give him a completely inappropriate name, one which goes against expectations. Then give him a nickname and invent the story behind it; describe him, physically or otherwise, in terms of his nickname. Finally, give the character the name he secretly wishes he has, the one he's always dreamed of having, and describe in detail the fantasy he associates with the name.
2. Choose one physical feature of your character--hair, eyes, hands, etc.--and describe it metaphorically. If you wish to take the metaphor further, describe the feature in terms of a setting you associate with your character.
3. Write a long description of a character, or locate one in a story or essay you've written. Break the description into three sections and place each section in a different part of the story. You might wish to start with the most obvious details and save the more intimate or evocative details for later, so that the character is revealed a little at a time.
4. Describe a photograph or video of your character that reveals something about him that your story does not yet reveal. If the photograph was taken during a time period not covered in the story, your description might serve as a flashback.
5. Write a description of your character as he might appear in the future. The description could be from the character's own imagination ("Elaine saw herself years from today....") or from another character's viewpoint (see the passage from [Ingenious Pain](#) quoted in the chapter on character description)
6. Describe a character as a blind person might describe him; use every sense *except* sight.
7. Describe the same character in three different environments--say, the grocery store, a hockey game, and the locker room. Notice how the setting affects your character's appearance, posture, mannerisms, speech, and thoughts. In which place does your character seem most relaxed, youthful, worried, or lighthearted?
8. Write down a particular trait, emotion, or attitude your character possesses. Then list at least three "actable actions" that will reveal this quality. For instance, if you wish to show Darla's vanity, your list might include glancing at her reflection in storefronts, wearing turtlenecks and scarves to hide the wrinkles in her neck, undergoing liposuction on her thighs. Expand one of these actions into a full description that *reveals* Darla's vanity rather than merely *tells* the reader about it.
9. If you want to learn more about your characters' inner lives, write a

description of how each would react given the same situation. Choose a situation that will reveal the characters' values, attitudes, or other qualities of their inner landscape: being accosted by a panhandler, being given too much change by a cashier, being seduced by a beautiful stranger. Which of your characters would fail to report cash earnings to the I.R.S.? Which one would refuse to have an affair, even if his spouse couldn't possibly find out?

10. Write a description of a person, place, object, or event in the language of one of your characters. Use his vocabulary, his grammar and syntax, the rhythms of his sentences. (See the example from Praying for Sheetrock included in the chapter on character description.)