

Glossary: Character Terms

Here are terms to help you discuss and keep track of fiction characters, as well as elements of fiction:

ANTAGONIST: the character in the story whose chief goal is to oppose the protagonist and force him to change in ways he most needs to change. An antagonist is an adversary, an opponent whose job it is to thwart the protagonist, perhaps by competition, perhaps by dangling something that he desires or needs to overcome.

ANTI-HERO (or *bastard*): the main character in a story who usually lacks the traditional traits and qualities of a hero, such as bravery, honesty, or grace. Often, an anti-hero is unorthodox, breaking the law or acting in ways contrary to society's standards. At times, an anti-hero reflects society's confusions and ambivalence about morality. An anti-hero will always have the reader's sympathies, will sometimes be redeemed by the story's events, and will have a starring role in the story similar to a protagonist or hero, but his means of achieving his goals will set him apart from more traditional protagonists and heroes.

ARCHETYPE: a universally recognizable character, image, situation, or theme that recurs in life, drama, and fiction. Archetypes have been used since the beginning of storytelling and stem from cultures around the world because they evoke a deep response in the reader and shed light and meaning on basic human experiences.

BAD BOY: a type of male anti-hero most known for his sexuality, rebelliousness, and masculinity. Typically an alpha male, there

is something in a bad boy's character makeup that is unrestrained and primal, which brings extra tension to the story.

BITCH: a nontraditional female character who can be an unlikeable protagonist, anti-hero, antagonist, or villain. She somehow defies traditional gender expectations, roles, and sensibilities to increase tension and introduce intriguing themes. She is often empowered by anger, a need to survive, or self-fulfillment. She is typically dangerous to at least one vulnerable character in the story, and she can also be self-destructive.

CARICATURE: a character with a single dominating and exaggerated trait, such as a class clown or gossip. A caricature is often exaggerated for comic relief or satire.

CHARACTER: a story person who is brought to life via action, attitudes, dialogue, description, reactions of fellow characters, and, in the case of viewpoint characters, thoughts and impressions. A character is also revealed through comments from the narrator, the setting, and choices and decisions of the character himself.

CHARACTER ARC: the changes, evolution, or degradation that happen to a character over the course of the story or series. This transformation takes fiction beyond a mere series of events. The arc will often be based on lessons learned and reveal changes in behaviors, views, beliefs, understanding, and motivation.

CONFIDANT: a secondary character who is close to the protagonist, such as a spouse, therapist, or best friend. The confidant offers the protagonist a chance to speak his thoughts and reveal vulnerabilities.

DARK HERO: a complex, dangerous alpha male character who is attractive in a high-testosterone, beastly sort of way. A dark hero is most often found in comic books, fantasy, romance, and Gothic novels. He is often brooding, and he often harbors a secret and deep emotional scars. His emotional circuitry is often miswired, and he doesn't respond in predictable ways to love or affection. Because he's usually unpredictable and not likeable, he causes a lot of tension in a story.

DYNAMIC CHARACTER: a character who changes as the result of events in the story, or, in the case of series fiction, changes over the course

of the series. The key to a dynamic character is his *need* to change. This change usually affects his worldview, beliefs, attitudes, or understanding.

FLAT CHARACTER: a character who is not developed or complex, or who is depicted as a stereotype. Typically, the reader will learn little about a flat character's backstory or inner life. He usually has a single trait that delineates him, such as being gossipy, high-strung, or loyal.

FOIL: a secondary character who is used to reveal qualities in the protagonist by having the opposite qualities. By contrasting with the character traits of the protagonist, a foil helps the protagonist's traits be better understood.

HERO/HEROINE: the protagonist in the story, particularly in genre fiction, equipped with exceptional qualities such as honor, courage, and determination. A hero has the strength of his convictions and the wisdom to follow his heart instead of his head (or vice versa, depending on the needs of the story). Often, his role in the story is to sacrifice for others.

INTERNAL CONFLICT: emotional, psychological, intellectual, or moral conflict that forces your character to worry, doubt, make difficult choices, take risks, and often ultimately to change. In fiction, it can be the basis for the storyline or can distract a character from dealing with external conflict. It's used to create complications and reader empathy.

MINOR CHARACTER: a flat character who typically appears once in the story, such as a cab driver or waiter. Some minor characters might appear more than once, such as family members or babysitters. Minor characters lend concreteness, color, and believability to the story and can be used to deliver information, such as a witness in a suspense novel, but they typically don't drive the plot.

NARRATOR: the voice and implied speaker who tells the story. This is not the writer. The narrator can be an insider in the story, such as a major character, a first-person character, or a minor character. The narrator can also be an outsider and be a limited, objective, communal (we), or omniscient presence. An external narrator stands outside the world of the story and comments on the story being told.

PROTAGONIST: the main character who will be most changed and affected by the events of the story.

ROUND CHARACTER: a character who is developed so the reader comes to understand him and his worldview. Typically, the reader knows something about a round character's past, his desires, his values, his psychological makeup, and his dominant traits. A round character will respond to the story's events in individual and complex ways, may cause things to happen in the story, and will have an agenda in the story. Protagonists and antagonists are always round characters.

SECONDARY CHARACTER: a character who is part of the supporting cast in fiction, which helps develop the plot, subplots, and major characters. Secondary characters know or come into contact with the protagonist and can be flat or round, or somewhat in between, and can also serve to contrast with the protagonist and antagonist. The reader should be aware of their appearances, emotional expressions, personalities, and possible relationships to the protagonist or agenda in the story.

STATIC CHARACTER: a character who remains unchanged throughout the story.

STEREOTYPE: a character with one trait exaggerated, such as having a hot temper or being hopelessly romantic. While the stereotype is instantly recognizable, there is also some truth to it.

STOCK CHARACTER: a minor character who is easily recognized and occupies a traditional role, such as the nosy neighbor, sassy waitress, or cynical cop.

UNLIKEABLE PROTAGONIST: a character with traits, values, and sometimes appearances that the reader and other characters in the story react negatively to or don't find sympathetic. An unlikeable protagonist often gives in to aberrant behaviors and can serve as a stand-in for a society gone awry. He is usually a character the reader has a hard time empathizing with, even if he comes to understand him. Typically, he is extremely complex and is either redeemable or unredeemable.

UNRELIABLE NARRATOR: a narrator who intentionally or unintentionally misleads the reader. Sometimes he has a hidden agenda, secret, or

specific reason for misleading the reader. In some stories, the unreliable narrator for some reason is not able to accept or know the truth of the fictional world.

VILLAIN: an antagonist who is in conflict with the protagonist and opposes the protagonist for personal gain. Most of the villain's dominant traits are negative. He operates from a perverse morality and has baser motives, such as greed, power, or domination.