

## Characters

Characters breathe life into literature. Characters change mere words on paper into livable, believable, memorable personalities who can touch and influence our lives. Because of characters and their actions, we become emotionally involved with the stories we read. We gain insights into the lives of imagined characters as their personalities become so real through an author's creation that we feel as if they are people we know or people we could know.

The characters I meet in literature can become close friends even if they are people I wouldn't want to associate with in real life. Through their stories I'm able to gain a viewpoint of life that is different than my own perspective. A favorite line from the song "Colors of the Wind" in Disney's *Pocahontas* reads, "If you walk in the footsteps of a stranger, you'll learn things you never knew you never knew." Literature has taught me things I never knew I never knew. For instance, these last few years my reading interests have temporarily shifted to contemporary world multicultural literature--stories written from around the world rather than stories written by American or British authors. I'm recognizing commonalities among these diverse characters, I'm recognizing individuals who have touched my life in meaningful ways.

Authors may use various approaches to introduce characters, but most often, these approaches closely resemble how we meet and get to know the people in our own lives. Think of meeting a character in the same way you meet a new co-worker, a new neighbor, or a new church member. The first three aspects we notice about a new person are how she appears, what she reveals about her background, and what she says.

We'll continue to use Nephi to demonstrate how authors can develop characters. Of course, Nephi is an actual individual, but the same principles also apply to fictitious literary characters.

**Physical description** allows an author to create the image of a human being. Although many of us do rely on Arnold Freiberg paintings to visualize Nephi's physical appearance, Nephi does tell us part of his own physical appearance: "I, Nephi, being a man large in stature, and also having received much strength in the Lord" (1 Nephi 4:31). It's now easier for us to see the well-built Nephi holding Zoram so he couldn't run away. We see Nephi as an individual.

**Biographical background** allows an author to give characters a history, a past. We know immediately, that Nephi was "born of goodly parents" (1 Nephi 1:1) whose names are Lehi and Sariah. That he has three older brothers (Laman, Lemuel, and Sam), two younger brothers (Jacob and Joseph), and sisters. Nephi is literate and well-educated. He comes from a family of wealth and prestige, and he grew up in Jerusalem. We eventually learn that he will have a wife and children.

**Characters' words** allow an author the means to reveal characters to others through dialogue. Without a doubt, the most revealing words Nephi utters about his faith and his character when he declares: "I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that

they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them” (I Nephi 3:7). Through this statement we learn of his dedication, determination, and integrity.

**Characters' actions** allow the author to show what a character does within a particular situation. Yes, Nephi claims he will “go and do,” but we also have concrete examples of when he does “do”—his actions also speak for him. He does return to Jerusalem twice to obtain the brass plates and then to escort Ishmael’s family into the wilderness. He does go the top of a mountain to pray and receive visions. He does make a bow out of wood and an arrow out of a straight stick to obtain food for his family. He does go to his father for counsel. He does follow the Liahona’s directions. He does build a ship of “curious workmanship.” He does build a temple. Much of what we learn about Nephi’s character, we learn by observing what he does—his actions.

**Characters' thoughts** allow an author to give a character more depth. We’re in a unique circumstance because Nephi shares his thoughts with us as he records his history. We acknowledge the struggles he experiences over a lifetime, but specifically in 2 Nephi 4, Nephi opens his heart to us by lamenting, “O wretched man that I am! Yea, my heart sorroweth because of my flesh; my soul grieveth because of mine iniquities. I am encompassed about, because of the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me” (2 Nephi 4:17-18). Nephi exclaims, “Awake, my soul! No longer droop in sin. Rejoice, O my heart, and give place no more for the enemy of my soul” (2 Nephi 4:28). He then bears strong and bold testimony of his trust in God.

**Other people's words and actions toward a character** allow an author to illustrate a character's personality through interpersonal relationships. Most obviously, we witness Laman’s and Lemuel’s angry words and actions towards their brother Nephi. We see them challenge, beat, bind, and threaten to kill Nephi. In fact, only through divine intervention of angels and tempests is Nephi saved from his brothers.

However, less obvious, we recognize that actions of others towards Nephi who believe in God. His people follow him as he leads with his father through the wilderness, across the sea, and into a promised land. We learn that his younger brothers, particularly Jacob, emulate Nephi, and that Nephi’s descendants name subsequent kings after Nephi. And significantly, an entire people choose to name themselves Nephites after their leader Nephi.

Authors then develop characters through physical description, biographical background, characters’ words, characters’ actions, characters’ thoughts, and other people’s words and actions towards a character.