Characters and Plots

**Feature Menu**

How Do Characters Affect Plot?

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How do characters affect plot?

Plot gives us the action of a story; characters are the ones doing the action.

Take away the characters, and the plot comes to a standstill.
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How do characters affect plot?
Change the characters, and the plot changes too.

Try changing the killer shark in the movie *Jaws* to a friendly dolphin!
How do characters affect plot?

To figure out how a character affects a plot, use the If—Then strategy.

Imagine what would have happened . . .

Lyn spent an hour that night practicing for the concert—and her first solo.

Lyn decided to skip practice and call Maggie instead. They talked for almost two hours.

if the character had behaved differently.
How do characters affect plot?

If a character seems to be fearless, then what would have happened if he were frightened?
How do characters affect plot?

If you think a character is cautious, then what would have happened if she were reckless?
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Why understand how characters affect plot?

When you understand how characters affect plot

• you can see what influence a specific character has on the plot

• you see how different elements of a story fit together

• you get some clues about the theme of the story—what the writer wants to say about life or people
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Why understand how characters affect plot?

Here’s an example.

In a story about two brothers who live in separate foster homes, the boys are faced with a decision: grow up in separate homes or run away and try to find relatives who will take them in.
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Why understand how characters affect plot?

If both of the boys are reckless enough to run away,

the plot will involve their attempts to survive on their own.
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Why understand how characters affect plot?

If one boy is more cautious—or wise—and decides not to run away, the plot may involve his internal conflict about deciding to stay.
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Why understand how characters affect plot?

The themes of these two stories would probably be quite different.

Sometimes you have to face a huge challenge to find happiness.

OR

Sometimes happiness is right where you are—if you would only see it.
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Why understand how characters affect plot?

Understanding how the boys’ character traits affect the plot would help you figure out the story’s theme.

Two devoted but reckless brothers

OR

One wise and cautious brother—one bold but reckless brother

[End of Section]
Maya watched her mother fold the same t-shirt three times.

“So when Abuelito Ruiz gets here,” her mother said, “I don’t want you to say anything about the doctor . . . or his heart, okay? We want this visit to be relaxing, right? He needs to get his mind off things.”

Maya sat down on the couch next to her mother’s laundry basket. “But, Mama, Abuelito’s not like that. He doesn’t like secrets.” Or silences, Maya thought.
Tips for Understanding Characters

Watch for descriptions of a character’s thoughts and feelings.

Why does the writer share Maya’s feelings here?

Maya was old enough to know it was pointless to argue with her mother about something like this.

She also understood why her mother wanted to avoid the topic of her grandfather’s health. It was about her mother’s fear—not her grandfather’s.

Still, Maya resented having to keep quiet. Her grandfather was the most open person Maya knew. He would never want her to pretend this wasn’t happening—that her grandfather wasn’t sick again.
The next morning Maya awoke to the sound of her grandfather’s booming laughter down in the kitchen. She lay in bed for a moment and listened as his voice filled the house. Then she thought about how quiet it would be if . . .

Maya jumped out of bed, dressed quickly, and headed for the kitchen. Then she stopped, rushed back into her room, and found the necklace her grandfather had given her when she turned seven. She hadn’t worn it in years—though her grandfather often asked about it.
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Tips for Understanding Characters

Notice how characters react to each other.

What does her grandfather’s reaction tell you about each of the characters?

When Maya entered the kitchen, her grandfather looked up from the table and grinned at her. Maya thought he looked more tired than usual, but his eyes still sparkled.

“Ha! It’s my Maya-papaya!” he teased.

Maya slipped past her mother and threw her arms around Abuelito, determined not to cry. Her grandfather pulled her arms away and touched the necklace he had given her. “Ah, Maya, you and I must talk today. Let’s go for a walk . . .”

[End of Section]
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Use the Strategy

As you read “Girls” from *How Angel Peterson Got His Name*, stop at each open-book sign and think about what you have just read.

Stop and think.

Answer the question.

After you read, think about how the story would have been different if the boy or girl had behaved differently.

[End of Section]
Use the Strategy

Here are some pairs of adjectives to keep in mind as you read any selection. Ask yourself, if the character is [one of these adjectives], then how does the plot change if he or she were [the other adjective] instead?

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<th>selfish</th>
<th>selfless</th>
<th>daring</th>
<th>cautious</th>
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<td>graceful</td>
<td>clumsy</td>
<td>caring</td>
<td>uncaring</td>
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In “Girls,” Gary Paulsen wants you to feel a young boy’s terror at asking a girl on a date. He doesn’t want you just to know the boy is afraid; he wants you to feel his fear and nervousness. How does Paulsen do this?

**Hint:** Take a look at the adjectives he chooses to describe the boy’s feelings.
What might have happened in this story if the boy had been more confident? If the girl had been more talkative?

From each pair of opposites below, choose the adjective that best describes the narrator or Eileen.

**shy/bold**       **scared/fearless**       **caring/uncaring**

Think about the events in the story. How would these events have changed if either the boy or the girl had shown the opposite characteristic?
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The End