

# Understanding Character



**COMMUNITY LINK:** Tonya wants to try a book-on-tape. She stops at the local library and chooses a mystery novel. The back of the box says that the novel offers “colorful characters in a wild urban setting.”

## Understanding Character Development

Stories involve people. The people in prose fiction such as those in Tonya’s book-on-tape are not real; they are invented by writers’ imaginations. We learn about them through description, **dialogue** (spoken words), and action.

**Characters** are the people we learn about in prose fiction. The main character is the **protagonist**.

As you read this, ask yourself, “What do I learn about this character—and how do I learn it?”

Every morning, Frank rises at 5:00 A.M. After showering and dressing, he goes downstairs. He feeds his dog, Brutus, and pours himself a bowl of whole wheat cereal with skim milk and fresh blueberries. While he eats, he reads the paper and summarizes the articles for Brutus. “They’re talking about raising taxes again,” he tells the poodle, “and they’re going to widen Briggs Street.” When Frank speaks, Brutus wags his tail, appearing to listen carefully to every word.

► Based on the paragraph, check the statements that are true of Frank.

- He cares about his health.
- He likes to be informed.
- He is a person of habit.
- He cares for his dog.
- He is five years old.

If you checked all but the last sentence, you’re right. Notice that you learned all about this fictional character based on his routine (getting up at 5:00 A.M. every day, getting ready, feeding the dog, reading the newspaper), what he eats (a healthy breakfast), and how he treats his dog.

## Identifying the Narrator

When you read prose fiction, you “hear” a voice telling the story. Fiction writers create particular voices to tell stories. The voice can be a character in the story or a voice that does not take part in the story.

The person—or voice—who tells a prose fiction story is the narrator.

For example, look what happens when a different narrator tells Frank’s story.

## Understanding Theme



**FAMILY LINK:** When Maura’s aunt was diagnosed with cancer, Maura remembered a story she’d read months before. She couldn’t remember the characters or exactly what had happened—but she did remember the hope the story gave her. She remembered that the family in the story supported each other and how that made a difference.

## Defining Theme

Like Maura, after you read a good story, its meaning takes shape in your mind. As you read prose fiction, you “add up” the elements of plot, character, and setting. Then, as you think about the whole story—and even discuss it with someone else—the *idea* begins to emerge.

The **theme** of a work of prose fiction is the idea about life it conveys.

Another way to think about theme is to consider what characters learn. Usually in prose fiction, characters achieve knowledge or wisdom because of what they experience. What the characters learn is what the reader “learns,” too; it is the theme.

### WHAT DOES ELISHA LEARN?

Elisha picked up a tiny bear from the dusty shelf. It was just a worthless trinket, made of cheap ceramic, poorly painted, the tongue a gaudy pink blotch at the end of the snout. It had belonged to her great-grandmother, a woman she had only met once, when she was a child. She remembered the old woman picking tomatoes in her garden and handing her a small one. It had tasted sweet as it ran over her chin and fingers. Her great-grandmother’s last name, Durso, meant “bear.” Elisha ran her fingers over the tiny bear’s smooth surface as she remembered. She slipped the thing into her pocket.

▶▶ Check the sentence that best expresses the theme of the passage above.

- Animals can be better friends than people.
- Simple things can become treasures.
- Most people fear what they do not understand.
- We don’t appreciate people until they are gone.

If you checked **Simple things can become treasures**, you’re right. The writer never writes this sentence, but a good reader will “add up” the details to understand this general idea. In this story, the simple thing is the ceramic bear. Because it triggers memories of her great-grandmother, the statue changes from “worthless” at the beginning of the paragraph to something Elisha will keep and value. On the literal level of plot, the story is about a girl and a trinket. On the more abstract level of theme, it is about memories and value.

## Understanding Theme



**FAMILY LINK:** When Maura’s aunt was diagnosed with cancer, Maura remembered a story she’d read months before. She couldn’t remember the characters or exactly what had happened—but she did remember the hope the story gave her. She remembered that the family in the story supported each other and how that made a difference.

## Defining Theme

Like Maura, after you read a good story, its meaning takes shape in your mind. As you read prose fiction, you “add up” the elements of plot, character, and setting. Then, as you think about the whole story—and even discuss it with someone else—the *idea* begins to emerge.

The **theme** of a work of prose fiction is the idea about life it conveys.

Another way to think about theme is to consider what characters learn. Usually in prose fiction, characters achieve knowledge or wisdom because of what they experience. What the characters learn is what the reader “learns,” too; it is the theme.

### WHAT DOES ELISHA LEARN?

Elisha picked up a tiny bear from the dusty shelf. It was just a worthless trinket, made of cheap ceramic, poorly painted, the tongue a gaudy pink blotch at the end of the snout. It had belonged to her great-grandmother, a woman she had only met once, when she was a child. She remembered the old woman picking tomatoes in her garden and handing her a small one. It had tasted sweet as it ran over her chin and fingers. Her great-grandmother’s last name, Durso, meant “bear.” Elisha ran her fingers over the tiny bear’s smooth surface as she remembered. She slipped the thing into her pocket.

▶▶ Check the sentence that best expresses the theme of the passage above.

- Animals can be better friends than people.
- Simple things can become treasures.
- Most people fear what they do not understand.
- We don’t appreciate people until they are gone.

If you checked **Simple things can become treasures**, you’re right. The writer never writes this sentence, but a good reader will “add up” the details to understand this general idea. In this story, the simple thing is the ceramic bear. Because it triggers memories of her great-grandmother, the statue changes from “worthless” at the beginning of the paragraph to something Elisha will keep and value. On the literal level of plot, the story is about a girl and a trinket. On the more abstract level of theme, it is about memories and value.