



## Character Types: This Will Help You Remember the Difference!

June 6, 2019 by Emma

Within a narrative, there are four character types that you'll meet time and time again — flat, round, static and dynamic. And no, flat and static characters are not the same thing, just as round and dynamic aren't either. Thoroughly confused? Read on and I'll help you out.

Writers reveal characterization through narration, clothing, direct speech, showing what the character is feeling, and most importantly, through the actions we see the character take.

## FLAT VS. ROUND CHARACTERS

**The terms “flat” and “round” refer to a character’s personality. Asking how well you know the character is an easy way of finding out whether the character is flat or round.**

## STATIC VS. DYNAMIC CHARACTERS

**The terms “static” and “dynamic” refer to a character’s growth. Asking whether the character has changed or not is an easy way of working out whether a character is static or dynamic.**

The shape of a character isn’t something that a writer necessarily chooses when they are writing. In fact, it’s probable that Shakespeare had no idea that Hamlet was a round character. It’s also probable that Douglas Adams couldn’t give a monkey’s bottom about whether Zaphod Beeblebrox was flat, dynamic, or anything in between.

So why does it matter what shape a character is? Well, it matters if you’ve written a book and even your closest friends have trouble reading it. It matters if your agent says, “I can’t connect with these characters,” and it especially matters if your teacher is asking you to do an assignment about character shapes.

To make it easy to explain, I’m going to focus on three stories that most of us know pretty well — William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, George Lucas’s *Star Wars IV – A New Hope*, and J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. Ready? Alright, let’s begin.

## Flat Characters

**Flat characters do not change throughout a story** ([source](#)). Whether it’s a deliberate or unplanned choice, flat characters have not been well-developed by the author. As a consequence, the reader

learns very little about them throughout the narrative and may find it difficult to connect with them.

In his book, *Aspects of the Novel*, E.M. Forster talks about flat characters being defined by one single idea or quality and failing to deviate from that definition. The character's lack of complexity means that we often know little or nothing about their past, and the character fails to surprise us.

Flat characters may have good or bad intentions and can be the villain or the comic relief. Too serious, E.M. Forster warns, and they could be boring — like Mr. Collins in Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice*.

“For we must admit that flat people are not in themselves as big achievements as round ones, and also that they are best when they are comic. A serious or tragic flat character is apt to be a bore.” – E.M. Forster

Don't confuse flat characters with static characters, there is a key difference. Static means that the character doesn't go through a change. **Flat refers to the character's personality — one dimensional.**

## CHARACTERISTICS OF A FLAT CHARACTER:

- Is not integral to the plot
- Is one dimensional
- Is easily recognizable as a stereotype
- Only experiences external change throughout the telling of a story
- Never experiences internal conflict
- Doesn't surprise the reader.

## EXAMPLES OF A FLAT CHARACTER:

In *Hamlet*, Polonius is a flat character who can be easily summed up in a few words. He is a sneaky, and foolish old man who doesn't change from the moment we meet him to the moment he dies. While he speaks in cliches, Polonius is a concerned father who offers sound advice to his children.

Although he is far from perfect, Polonius contributes to the plot by acting as a contrast to Hamlet's family, both before (caring deeply for his children) and after his death (being swiftly avenged by his son). Played by the right actor, he also provides a form of comic relief by lightening up long speeches with his blissful lack of self-awareness.

In *Star Wars IV – A New Hope*, [Han Solo](#) is a flat character. He remains the same sarcastic, opportunistic scoundrel from the beginning of the film to its end. Although Solo provides transport for Luke Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi and helps rescue Princess Leia, his character isn't actually integral to the plot. We could technically remove him from the action without interfering too much with the storyline.

The fact that Han Solo is flat could be the reason why the 2018 film *Solo* bombed at the box office. Unlike Obi-Wan, there aren't enough [mystery boxes](#) about Han Solo for the audience to want answers to them. Developing a character enough to be interesting as a protagonist with little to go on is a difficult task in a prequel.

In *Harry Potter*, [Crabbe and Goyle](#) are flat characters, acting as henchmen to Draco Malfoy. Virtually indistinguishable, they are slow and dim-witted and are both described as having long, ape-like arms. Partly, these bullies are present as a force of antagonism, and partly they're there for comic effect. If we were to remove Crabbe and Goyle from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (or for that matter, any of the *Harry Potter* books), the overall narrative would not change.

## CAN A MAJOR CHARACTER BE A FLAT CHARACTER?

Technically, yes. We see a lot of flat characters everywhere, particularly in short-form narratives. But just because a character is flat doesn't mean that he or she is poorly written. One such example is James Bond, who rarely changes from the beginning to the end of a story. Of course, Bond has his exceptions, and it's clear that in modern Bond films, the writers go out of the way to give Daniel Craig's Bond more of a personality.

We also could accuse Sherlock Holmes or Batman of being flat, because they are untouchable. But again, watch Benedict Cumberbatch and Christian Bale in these roles and you'll find more personality on the screen than you might on the page.

Today, most writers would go out of their way to create at least one multi-dimensional character in a story (particularly if writing a novel, where there is more room for character exploration). Why? Well, because rounded characters make for much more interesting stories – and of course sequels – and who doesn't want to write a best-selling series?

## WHY DO AUTHORS USE FLAT CHARACTERS?

- Flat characters support the protagonist and help to move the plot along, providing exposition about characters or events.
- Where dynamic characters surprise the reader, the flat character is there to provide stability.
- Authors don't need to flesh out flat characters because they would steer the reader away from the plot.
- Flat characters often appear in the narrative to provide contrast to or act as a mirror for the protagonist. If a flat character is weak, for example, they might show the reader that the protagonist is strong.
- Flat characters might also act as a mirror for a cultural stereotype (often the case in sketch comedy).

## COMMON TYPES OF FLAT CHARACTERS

- Villains and their henchmen (Voldemort, Darth Vader)
- Characters that appear in a series of books (Bella Swan in *Twilight* or Jon Snow in *Game of Thrones*).
- Stock characters that appear to help the hero with their quest. (Polonius, Professor McGonagall).

## HOW TO FIX A FLAT CHARACTER

- Flesh out their character traits by creating a character diamond. Understand the character's primary trait (their north star), secondary trait (their counter star), their non-negotiable (the thing they are prepared to die on a hill for) and their weakness or fatal flaw.
- Consider the character's backstory; where has he or she come from, and how does that influence him or her? A backstory is an excellent way of adding character depth. As soon as we learn more about [Luke Skywalker's history](#) in *Return of the Jedi*, he becomes exponentially more enjoyable to watch.
- Do some character development exercises. Take your character [out to lunch](#), [tell lies about them](#), or get them to [write a letter](#) to their biggest enemy.

## Rounded Characters:

**When we talk about rounded characters, we often mean complicated, like a real human. These characters are fully fleshed out and have backgrounds, goals, and personalities ([source](#)).**

E.M. Forster was the first person to use the terms “flat” and “round” characters in his book, *The Aspects of the Novel*, published in 1927. By Forster's definition, round characters must be surprising and convincing. He believed that a writer needed at least one rounded character in each story to capture the audience's interest and attention.

*“The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat.”*

E.M. Forster

As a reader, it is easier to connect with a round character because we learn a lot about them throughout a story. They often have complicated lives, may harbor dark secrets, and their actions may surprise us.

Most heroes are rounded characters, with some exceptions such as Agatha Christie's Poirot or Dickens' Oliver Twist. When a hero has a multi-dimensional personality, it makes it possible for the reader to relate to and feel empathy towards them.

A rounded character isn't necessarily a good character. Take Henry Winter in Donna Tartt's *Secret History* or Patrick Bateman in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*. Both characters are psychopaths, and both are exceedingly well fleshed out.

Creating a rounded character takes time and effort. You'll want to give your character a backstory, recognizable character traits, clear likes and dislikes, a complex motivation, and internal conflict. Use dialog and description to reveal this information to the reader and read other works of fiction to learn how to do it well.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF A ROUND CHARACTER:

- Is important to the plot
- Experiences conflict (internal or external)
- Experiences external change throughout the telling of a story
- Is Multi-Dimensional
- Wants something
- Is capable of surprising the reader.

## EXAMPLES OF A ROUNDED CHARACTER:

Characters don't have to be positive to be round. In *Hamlet*, the antagonist, King Claudius is a well-rounded character. Our first impression of Claudius is that he is a charming and capable leader. On the surface, he is calculating and ambitious and is driven by a lust for power and his sexual appetite. What makes him a rounded character are the moments where he demonstrates humanity. Claudius shows remorse for killing his brother (praying for forgiveness) and expresses genuine affection for his wife, Queen Gertrude — and it's these moments where he displays humanity that make it much harder for Hamlet to enact his revenge.



In *Star Wars IV – A New Hope*, [Princess Leia](#) is a round character. She is essential to the plot because she is the catalyst that spurs Luke to action. She experiences external change — going from a damsel in distress to empowered Rebel leader — surprising the viewer by refusing to play to stereotype and instead, picking up a gun and joining the battle. She demonstrates braveness by stealing the plans and by standing up to Darth Vader. and she proves herself as a worthy leader, in her role at the Command Center as the rebels attack the Death Star

In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, J.K. Rowling introduces [Hermione Granger](#) and [Ron Weasley](#) as rounded, yet differentiated characters — going way beyond the core of their wands! Hermione is confident, intelligent, and brave. Ron is funny, stubborn, and insecure. They have different likes and dislikes — Hermione likes cats, books, and learning, and dislikes rats, flying and divination; Ron likes rats, quidditch and eating, and hates cats, homework, and spiders. Hermione is a very talented, booksmart witch, whereas Ron doesn't seem to have any specific talents other than his common sense, and drive to prove himself.

What brings the two characters together are their overlapping character traits. Both are loyal to their friends, Dumbledore, and Hogwarts, and both are impressively brave.

## CAN A MINOR CHARACTER BE A ROUND CHARACTER?

Absolutely. If a writer has spent time developing a minor character and giving them a multi-dimensional personality, a minor character can be round, even if they only spend a short amount of time in the spotlight. They may change because they are on the same journey as the protagonist, or their transformation may be to mirror or contrast what the protagonist is going through.

## WHY DO AUTHORS USE ROUND CHARACTERS?

- Round characters are much more interesting to readers. They engage a reader's imagination and often surprise and delight with their actions.
- Like real people, round characters are complicated. Providing the reader information about their motives and their actions lends the story more credibility.
- Round characters can help authors create a feeling of suspense and the urge to find out what happens next.



*“Every character should want something, even if it’s only a glass of water.”*

Kurt Vonnegut

## COMMON TYPES OF ROUND CHARACTER

- Protagonists (Hamlet, Luke Skywalker, Harry Potter)
- Deuteragonists (a secondary character, like Leia Organa, Hermione Granger or Ron Weasley)
- Confidants/aides (like Dumbledore or Obi-Wan Kenobi).

## HOW TO WRITE A ROUNDED CHARACTER

1. Consider what the character wants. Whether or not the character changes in the story, they should all want something, no matter how small.
2. Think about their past and give them a backstory. Whether or not you use it, the backstory can influence how the character behaves towards new people, whether or not they’re comfortable taking the lead, or even impact how they spend their money.
3. Put yourself in your character’s shoes and ask them questions. What’s their favorite color? If they were an animal, what animal would they be?
4. Compare your character to other literary figures. Who are they most like and why?
5. Consider your character’s fears. What would be the worst thing they could imagine doing and why?
6. Give your character flaws to make them more human. Think about how these flaws come into play when interacting with others.
7. Explore your character’s inner conflict. Adding a gritty dilemma of consciousness adds depth to the character and makes achieving their desire more interesting.

## Static Characters

Static refers to movement, and static characters go nowhere, that is to say, that they don't develop. **Static characters stay the same from the beginning to the end of the story** ([source](#)) — sometimes out of arrogance or pride, or sometimes for the simple reason that they think that everything is fine just the way it is.

There may be several static characters in a narrative — and just because they're static, doesn't necessarily mean that they're flat or boring. Rounded characters can also be static.

Not all characters in a story need to change. If they did, the reader would have a tough time keeping up with them and following the plot. Imagine watching *Star Wars IV – A New Hope*, and trying to simultaneously follow the character development of Luke, Leia, R2D2, Darth Vader, Chewbacca, and Han Solo. It wouldn't be an easy watch.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF A STATIC CHARACTER:

- Supports a leading role, either providing assistance or conflict
- Remains the same from the beginning to the end of a story
- Rarely faces internal (mental) conflict
- Has only one aspect to their personality (e.g., they are only seen as very happy or very sad).

## EXAMPLE OF A STATIC CHARACTER:

Ophelia is one of *Hamlet's* static characters, but she's not (as some might claim), flat. Hamlet's love interest is interesting in her own right, with a complex personality. Ophelia's role is to provide a moral contrast to the Queen, Gertrude. Ophelia appears to be impeccable, but (judgment clouded by his mother's behavior), Hamlet accuses her of hiding her true nature.

Ophelia finds herself wrestling between two worlds — her overprotective father and brother are convinced that Hamlet will use her for sex and never marry her — but in her heart, she is confident that the prince once loved her, although he denies it. If Ophelia were the heroine of the play, she would choose between her family and the man she loves and move on from her fixed emotional state. But, rather than taking action, she remains static and declines into a tragic madness.

In *Star Wars IV – A New Hope*, [Obi-Wan Kenobi](#) is a static character, serving the mentor archetype. He's there to teach Luke Skywalker how to harness the Force. Obi-Wan is a round character with an intriguing past. We know that he served Leia Organa's father in the Clone Wars, and we know that he was good friends with Luke's father, but we don't really know why he's living as a hermit on Tatooine, why he is no longer a Jedi Knight, or why he has been going by a different name. He doesn't grow in *A New Hope*, but his personal sacrifice serves as a catalyst for Luke to take action against Darth Vader.

[Draco Malfoy](#) is one of several static characters in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. His role is to act as a foil to Harry. In dramatic contrast to our hero, Draco is both selfish and snobbish, but also more cowardly than he would like to be known and it's this cowardice that makes him a static rather than a flat character. Rather than growing, he remains consistent in personality throughout the first in the *Harry Potter* series, and it's only much later on in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, that he becomes more dynamic.

## CAN A PROTAGONIST BE A STATIC CHARACTER?

Well, technically, yes. It can be done, but it's so very rarely done well. Take *Twilight's* Bella Swan, for example, an often criticized protagonist who shows little character development and spends so much of her time sulking about a sparkly vampire.

Where you'll see static protagonists are cop shows like *CSI*, superhero stories like *Batman*, and long-running TV shows, like *Dr. Who*. In these instances, character development would effectively end the series – imagine *Batman* getting over his parents' death and stopping fighting crime.

## WHY DO AUTHORS USE STATIC CHARACTERS?

- Static characters provide a marked contrast to dynamic characters and are often used to demonstrate to the protagonist (and the reader) what would happen if they refused to change.
- They push the plot along, providing exposition about characters or events.

- They can add humor to a storyline, whether for comic relief in a tragedy or for laughs in a sitcom.
- Static characters provide a mirror to the protagonist — they may represent a particular belief or society as a whole.
- They are often used as a device for delivering the “you’ve changed” speech, recognizing the development the hero has gone through.

## COMMON TYPES OF STATIC CHARACTERS

- Villains and their henchmen (Voldemort, Darth Vader)
- Superheroes (Batman, Thor)
- Detectives and policemen in long-running dramas (Poirot, Sherlock Holmes, anyone in CSI)
- Stock characters that appear to help the hero with their quest. (R2D2, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern).

## Dynamic Characters

**Where dynamic characters differ from static characters is their ability to change their outlook or personality throughout the story ([source](#)).** A central character, often the protagonist, the dynamic character can learn a lesson from their experiences. That change can either be good or bad.

Speaking of experiences, a dynamic character doesn’t just have to be influenced by an external event. They may also experience and overcome internal conflict. Think of the way characters speak to others, how much they reveal about themselves, and how they experience anger or love — all these are good indicators of how a character experiences internal discord.

**Dynamic characters can also be rounded characters, and you’ll often find that the most compelling stories have protagonists who are both rounded and dynamic.** The reason we love dynamic and rounded characters is because they are so engaging and relatable that we not only

empathize with that character, we can also imagine what we would do if we were put in the same situations.

Character-driven stories are universal. To name a few, Hamlet, Harry Potter, Luke Skywalker, John McClane, Ebenezer Scrooge, Iron Man, Shrek... the list goes on.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF A DYNAMIC CHARACTER:

- Is a central character or plays the leading role
- Experiences internal change throughout the telling of a story
- Has more than one aspect to their personality (e.g. they appear outwardly happy, but on the inside, they are terrified of everything)
- Surprises and delights the reader.

## EXAMPLES OF A DYNAMIC CHARACTER:

It comes as no surprise that the most dynamic character in *Hamlet* is the prince himself (after all, the full title of the play is, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*). Arguably one of Shakespeare's more complicated and mysterious characters, Hamlet wrestles with duty and depression. When his father is murdered, and his throne usurped, Hamlet doesn't immediately spring to take vengeance.

And that's understandable, given the fact his father has come back from the dead to tell him how awful it is. It's Hamlet's fascination with death and his contemplative nature that delays his decision to enact revenge. It's only when he visits the graveyard and finds Yorick's skull that he comes to accept its inevitability. Hamlet goes through a metamorphosis from helpless to determined, yet his lack of timely action ultimately leads to his tragic end.

Luke Skywalker begins *Star Wars IV – A New Hope* as a bit of a wet blanket. Unlike many of the other characters (Han Solo, Leah, even RD2D) he is reluctant to take action and spends a lot of time in the film complaining about having to do things (see [Luke Skywalker's Complain Count](#)). It's only under Obi-Wan's tutorage, that he goes through a personal transformation. Once he starts believing he

begins to take decisive action, accepting his fate, demonstrating his understanding of the Force, and destroying the Death Star to restore freedom to the galaxy.

Another excellent example of a dynamic character is [Harry Potter](#). We see him at the start of the story as a young boy, who is small and skinny for his age and lives in a cupboard under the stairs with his aunt and uncle, who don't much like him. By the end of the first book, he gains enough courage to lead his classmates on a mission to find the Sorcerer's Stone before the evil Lord Voldemort obtains it, and helps win the house cup for Gryffindor. His transformation from an unloved nephew to popular schoolboy is an enormous personal leap.

## CAN A MINOR CHARACTER BE A DYNAMIC CHARACTER?

If a character changes or develops within a narrative, they are a dynamic character regardless of whether or not they are in a major role. In the *Harry Potter* series, Dobby the House Elf is a minor character who goes through a dramatic personal transformation when he is freed. Now under no obligation to serve the Malfoys, he can help Harry and demonstrates that he is capable of acts of extreme bravery.

## WHY DO AUTHORS USE DYNAMIC CHARACTERS?

- Authors use dynamic characters to create realistic stories.
- Through their decisions and actions, dynamic characters move the plot forward.
- Dynamic characters can add flavor to a narrative and the element of surprise.
- Whether their change is positive or negative, the dynamic character becomes the center of attention and makes a story interesting to read.
- Used in fiction, dynamic characters can inspire the reader to make positive changes themselves.

## COMMON TYPES OF DYNAMIC CHARACTERS

- Protagonists (Hamlet, Harry Potter, Luke Skywalker)
- Deuteragonists (a secondary character, like Leia Organa, Hermione Granger or Ron Weasley)
- Confidants/aides (like Dumbledore or Obi-Wan Kenobi).

# HOW TO WRITE A DYNAMIC CHARACTER

- Consider what your character wants, then brainstorm all the things they would do to achieve that goal and all the potential costs.
- Put your character into situations where they need to make difficult decisions. Consider the repercussions of their actions.
- Think about your character's flaws. In what ways are they not perfect? How will they have to change in order to grow?
- Map out your character's growth. Write down all the moments in your story where the character experiences a major event and consider how that event impacts them. Consider how that brings them closer to or further away from their goal.

## Final Thoughts

If there's one thing you take away from this article, **remember that flat and round refer to personality and static and dynamic refer to growth.** Flat = predictable, round = interesting, static = still, dynamic = changing.

It is possible for a character to be both static and flat or static and round. But if you want to create the most compelling protagonist possible, make sure he or she is both round and dynamic.

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