

How to Craft a Vivid Character?

S.T.E.A.L. - the five elements of indirect characterisation

Topic

You are taking a creative writing workshop and you have to submit the following assignment:

Imagine you are a university student living in a student hall. Your roommate has suddenly decided to leave.

Write a short story describing the events that led up to your roommate's sudden departure.

Writing topic taken from Paper 2 of the 2014 HKDSE English Language Examination ©HKEAA

The topic requires the first-person narrative, so you need to think from the narrator's perspective (i.e. "I") on the roommate.

Your roommate's profile

- Your roommate's name: _____ Gender: M/F
- Subject major: _____ Year Level: Y _____
- Family background: _____
- Personality (strengths/weaknesses): _____
- Hobbies/Traits/Habits: _____

Draw your roommate here!

Look in the past:

Recent look:

Notes:

- Before students draw, teachers can ask them:
 - How did your roommate look like when you first met him/her?
 - How did your roommate look like before he/she left the student hall?
- Remind students to draw the physical details.



Speech

- What did your roommate tell you when you last met him/her (e.g. problems/achievements/inspirations)?
- How did he/she speak?

- She stammered, "Could you pass the withdrawal letter to the school office for me tomorrow?" Her decision startled me.
- After getting an offer from a leading multinational consortium, he said arrogantly, "Maybe I can be the next Steve Jobs or Mark Zuckerberg, who never finished college!"
- "You'd better rethink your plan," the lecturer suggested in a sincere tone.

Expressions for introducing speech:

- Speech verbs
She stammered/yelled/grumbled, "I quit."
- Adverbs
"I got a job offer," he said calmly/cheerfully/proudly.
- Adjectives
She said in a sincere/miserable/disappointed tone/voice/manner.



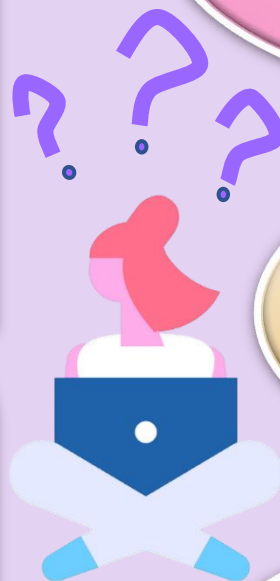
Thought

- What might have happened to your roommate lately?
- What were your guesses about his/her changes in attitude and behaviour?

- She cried uncontrollably after the phone conversation. I wondered if she had a bitter quarrel with her boyfriend.
- Did his family problems put him in distress? Did he experience something traumatic?
- I wish she would tell me her problems.
- If only I knew what he was struggling with.

Expressions for introducing thoughts:

- What happened ...?
- Did he/she experience...?
- I wondered why/if...
- I wish he/she would...
- If only I knew...



Effect on others

Recall and describe one memorable scene in which your roommate interacted with others (e.g. you/family/friend/lecturer/stranger) before his/her sudden departure?

- She returned to the student hall late at night, bringing a stinky stray dog with her. She refused to send it away though I told her I was allergic to dogs.
- She slammed the door and flung her personal belongings everywhere, waking me up with the banging sound. I couldn't stand it anymore and yelled at her.
- A loud screech from the pantry caught my attention, then I peeped into it. My roommate was staring fiercely at the security guard, holding a knife. He roared, "Get out or I'll leave!"



Action

- What did you see your roommate do most often?
- Did he/she have any strange behaviour before leaving the hall?

- He was lingering in front of the lecture theatre, murmuring to himself.
- She gave me a dirty look and criticised my fashion style.
- She avoided interaction and eye contact with us as much as possible.

Notes:

Give someone a dirty look:
To look at someone in a mean and nasty way.



Look

- How would you describe your roommate's usual look (e.g. eyes/face/hairstyle)?
- Did you observe any change in your roommate's appearance (e.g. make-up/hairstyle/fashion style)?

- He always hid his face behind a pair of thick glasses and wrapped himself with a baggy anorak, which was what he called "comfort outfit".
- She smelt fragrant and decorated herself with twinkling accessories. The rose red high heels seemed to heighten her confidence.
- The make-up turned her rough skin dewy. She even dyed her hair blonde. Her loose-fitting floral skirt made her look more mature than her age.