

Tools for Instruction

Understand Characters

Understanding characters is central to understanding a literary text. Students need to know why characters are in the story and how their words, actions, and choices affect the development of the plot. However, the leap from describing characters to making inferences about them can be challenging for students who may not think about characters as relatable people. To help students take this important step toward thinking critically about characters, teach them to use what characters say, do, and think as a bridge to inferring judgments about them.

Step by Step 20–30 minutes

1 Introduce and explain understanding characters.

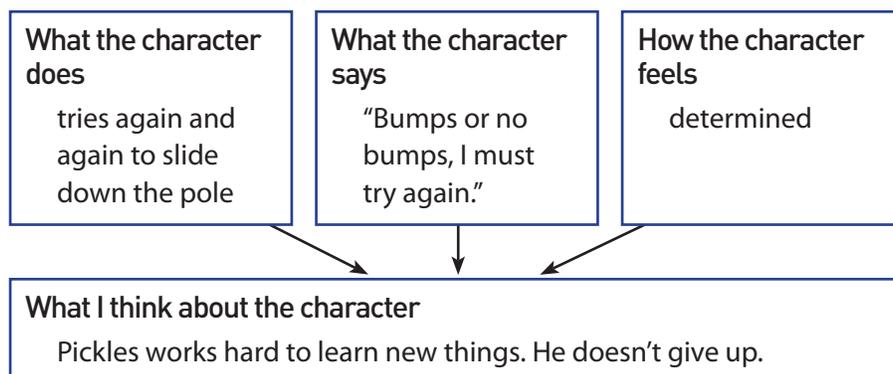
- Ask, *If you hear someone say “please” and “thank you,” and you see him share his toys with others, what is something you can tell about him? (He has good manners.)*
- Say, *Even if no one tells us that this boy has good manners, we can decide for ourselves that he does by thinking about what we see him say and do. This is also true for characters that we read about. Just like with people in real life, one of the ways we understand characters is by listening to what they say and watching what they do.*
- Use familiar stories or films to illustrate this point. For example, say, *In Beauty and the Beast, we see Belle offer to take her father’s place in the dungeon so that he can go free. We also hear her say that she loves him. These things tell us that Belle is a kind and loving person.*
- Invite students to share additional observations about characters in the same story.

2 Teach and model understanding characters.

- Select an on-level read aloud such as *The Fire Cat*, by Esther Averill, and display **Character Chart** (page 3).
- Say, *Good readers make sure they understand the characters they read about. As I read this story, I will stop from time to time to think about what certain characters say and do. This chart will help me organize my thoughts.*
- As you read aloud, pause to think about what a character says or does, and model how to make an inference based on those details.

Pickles tries to slide down the pole like the firemen, but it’s not easy. When Pickles says, “Bumps or no bumps, I must try again,” it reminds me of how hard it can be to learn something new. But Pickles doesn’t give up! I think this shows that he is a determined cat. He wants to learn everything he can about living in the firehouse.

- Record the details on the character chart.



- Then think aloud about why it is important to understand this about the character. Say, *It is important to know that Pickles doesn't give up. This information helps us understand that Pickles will do whatever it takes to become the Fire Cat, which is his main goal in the story.*

3 Provide guided practice with understanding characters.

- Choose another character from the text, and select an event in which that character appears. Have students use the prompts in the chart to share their observations, and record them on the class chart.
- Guide students to make an inference about the character, based on their observations. Help them point to text or illustrations that support their observations.
- Then guide a brief discussion on how understanding the character in this way helps readers to better understand the story.
- Repeat for the remaining number of characters in the story.

Connect to Writing Distribute a copy of the character chart to each student. Have them complete the chart in their own words as you complete it with the group.

4 Provide independent practice with understanding characters.

- Have small groups of students practice understanding characters in a different story. Choose a story that is familiar, and provide the following questions to guide students in thinking about a character's words and actions. You might wish to assign one group member to be in charge of asking the question prompts.

Why do you think [character] did _____?

Why do you think [character] said _____?

If you were [character], how would you feel when _____ happened?

How would you describe [character] to someone who has not read this story? Why?

- Listen in on group discussions and provide support as needed.

Check for Understanding

If you observe...	Then try...
difficulty seeing characters, especially animals, as relatable people	taking a picture walk, using a story in which the characters are animals. Take turns with students pointing out details that make a character seem like a real person, such as wearing clothes or doing chores.
difficulty using details to support inferences about characters	rereading a passage and stating an inference based on a character's words or actions. Have the student point to details in the text that support the inference.

Name _____

Character Chart

What the character does	What the character says	How the character feels
What I think about the character		

What the character does	What the character says	How the character feels
What I think about the character		