

Writing the Character Paragraph?

Wie beschreibt Lawrence Wright Personen? Diese Frage untersucht [Roy Peter Clark](#). Clark ist Vizepräsident und „Director of the Writing Center“ am [Poynter Institute](#) in St. Petersburg, USA.

Von Roy Peter Clark

I've been reading thick books recently, most about the war in the Middle East. These books have hundreds of characters in them, some major players, and some who make cameo appearances. How to introduce new characters to the reader, and how to distinguish among them? One simple strategy is the development of what I'll call the "character paragraph," a short passage that tries to capture character in a nutshell.

Because these paragraphs appear in books, they can be much longer than we would tolerate in the slim columns of a newspaper page. Still, all writers can learn something from these narrative excursions into characterization.

Let's begin with an example from Rajiv Chandrasekaran in his book "Imperial Life in the Emerald City," a look at the war from inside the U.S.-controlled Green Zone. Here we meet 1st Sgt. Jerry Swope, who leads his platoon on a mission to spread goodwill among the Iraqi people:

„On the morning of April 4, 2004, that goodwill mission fell to Swope and his men. At thirty-three, Swope was the oldest and most experienced soldier in the platoon. He was solid but not stocky, with close-cropped hair and a tattoo of three interlinked skulls on his right wrist. He hung out with the battalion's older noncommissioned officers and smoked Marlboro Reds. Swope had been in the army for fifteen years, serving in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, Bosnia, and Macedonia. A native of Richmond, Mo., he referred to the septic tankers as a Southerner would, calling them "honeydew trucks."“

Pretty efficient: I learn distinctive elements of physical description. His history in the Army. His habits. The brand name of a product he favors. A bit of colloquial slang.

My next example comes from "The Looming Tower" by Lawrence Wright, a description of one of the main characters, FBI agent John O'Neill:

„For many of the agents in the room, O'Neill was an unfamiliar face, and no doubt it was odd to be suddenly taking orders from a man they have never met before. But most had heard of him. In a culture that favors discreet anonymity, O'Neill cut a memorable figure. Darkly handsome, with slicked-back hair, winking black eyes, and a big round jaw, O'Neill talked tough in a New Jersey accent that many loved to imitate. He had entered the bureau in the J. Edgar Hoover era, and throughout his career he had something of the old-time G-man about him. He wore a thick pinky ring and carried a 9-mm automatic strapped to his ankle. He favored Chivas Regal and water with a twist, along with a fine cigar. His manner was bluff

and profane, but his nails were buffed and he was always immaculately, even fussily, dressed: black double-breasted suits, semitransparent black socks, and shiny loafers as supple as ballet slippers -- "a nightclub wardrobe," as one of his colleagues labeled it."

O'Neill is such an important character that Wright expends a couple of more such paragraphs of introduction. But this one takes me along way. I get physical description, dress, jewelry, weapon of choice, speech patterns, and, again, that brand name: Chivas Regal.

If you struggle with descriptions of character, use these two paragraphs as models and practice by trying to describe people you know well in one meaty paragraph.

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