Describe Characters

When students listen to or read a literary text, they follow the plot based on what characters think, say, and do throughout the story. Learning to relate characters and their actions to real people engages readers with the story and contributes to comprehension. However, early readers tend to make an artificial distinction between the way people think and act in real life versus the way characters think and act in literature, particularly when the characters are not human. To help students learn to identify and describe characters, model and provide practice recognizing characters and noticing details that tell more about them. Teach students to think about how characters in stories are like people in real life.

Step by Step   20–30 minutes

1 **Explain and discuss characters.**

- Hold up a familiar story, such as *Little Bear,* by Else Holmelund Minarik. Ask, *Who is this story about?* (Little Bear)

- Say, *Little Bear is a character in this story. A* character *is someone who is part of a story. Because the story is about Little Bear, we call him the main character. Can you think of another character in the book* Little Bear*?* (Mother Bear)

- Call attention to the bear characters in *Little Bear,* and point out that story characters can be people, animals, or even machines or objects, such as the little train engine in *The Little Engine that Could.* Explain that readers use their imaginations to think about how these characters behave like people in real life.

> *I can see that Little Bear is an animal, but he talks, and he asks his mother to make him something warm to wear. Plus, we can see in this picture that Mother Bear is wearing a dress. This makes me think that the characters in this story are like people in real life, because real bears don't talk or wear clothes.*

- Invite students to suggest additional ways that Little Bear and Mother Bear are like real people. Then continue the discussion with a second familiar text that has human characters. Discuss how the characters talk, think, and behave like people in everyday life.

2 **Teach and model describing characters.**

- Select a new read aloud, and take a picture walk to help students preview the characters.

- Say, *As I read, I'm going to stop to think about the characters in this story. First I'll think about how the characters are like people in real life.*

- As you read aloud, pause to identify characters and to think about what they say and do, as well as how they are like real people. The following example is based on *Chester's Way,* by Kevin Henkes.

> *In this story, Chester is a young mouse, but in a lot of ways, he reminds me of a real child. He likes peanut butter and rides a bike with training wheels. I can see that Chester has feelings like a real child, too. He gets excited to play with his best friend, Wilson.*

3 Provide guided practice with describing characters.

- As you continue reading, ask questions such as these to guide students in thinking about what characters say and do, and how they are like real people.

> *What are some of the things that [character] does?*
> *How is this the same or different from the things you or someone you know does?*
> *How does the character feel when _____? What does [character] say and do that tells you so?*
> *Can you think of a time when you or someone you know has felt that way?*

- Confirm students' observations about characters in the story by pointing to related text or illustrations.

4 Provide independent practice with describing characters.

Connect to Writing Have students choose one character from the lesson and draw a picture of him or her from any part of the story. Invite students to share their pictures with the class, using their drawing as a prompt to orally describe the character. Encourage classmates to point out specific elements of the picture that match the student's description.

Check for Understanding

If you observe…	Then try…
difficulty relating characters to people in real life	using role-play to give students another way to understand characters. Choose characters and, together, act out an event from the story. Ask students to reflect on their character's words and actions. Ask, *Was your character like anyone you know or have seen in real life? In what ways?*