

Static Character



DEFINITION

What is a static character? Here's a quick and simple definition:

A character is said to be "static" if they do not undergo any substantial internal changes as a result of the story's major plot developments. [Antagonists](#) are often static characters, but *any* character in a story can be static. For instance, in [Romeo and Juliet](#), it can be argued that Romeo is a static character: he's defined by his impulsiveness and emotional volatility, and rather than changing these traits, he ultimately dies because of them.

Some additional key details about static characters:

- The opposite of a static character is a [dynamic character](#): one who *does* undergo internal changes over the course of a story.
- Static characters can be protagonists, antagonists, or other minor characters, and a narrative can have more than one static character.
- Just because a character is static does not mean that they are "bad" or overly simplistic. On the contrary, many static characters—like Romeo, for instance—are quite complex. Many of literature's most lifelike and memorable characters are static.

How to Pronounce Static Character

Here's how to pronounce static character: **stat-ik kar-ik-ter**

Static Characters in Depth

Most stories contain more static characters than [dynamic characters](#). A novel that has fifteen characters, for instance, probably won't focus on the arc of each character's development—and it probably *shouldn't*: not only would it be a huge undertaking, but in most cases the main events of a story simply don't impact every character in a way that changes them substantially. This is especially true for minor characters: if a character only appears once, or in brief scenes, it's difficult for a writer to establish who the character is and what they stand for, let alone to show how that might be changing. Instead, stories that have dynamic characters—and not all stories do—usually focus on showing how one, or a handful, of the story's characters undergo a significant change, while the rest of the characters in the story are static.

Static Character vs. Dynamic Character

Learning to spot a static character is much easier when you understand its opposite, dynamic character:

- A [dynamic character](#) undergoes substantial internal changes as a result of one or more plot developments. The dynamic character's change can be extreme or subtle, as long as his or her development is important to the book's plot or themes. Unlike a static character, a dynamic character is a different person at the end of the story relative to who they were when the story began. But because these changes are typically implied by the character's actions or thoughts rather than being stated outright, spotting them often depends on close reading and careful analysis of the text.

Dynamic characters are widely thought to be a key ingredient in crafting compelling narratives, because they make the audience more invested—not only in the arc of the storyline, but in the arc of a character's development. However, calling a character dynamic does *not* necessarily mean that they are compelling or complex (the term for that is "[round character](#)"); it simply means that they undergo a change.

How to Spot a Static Character

Here are few things to look for when trying to determine if a story contains a static character:

1. **What is the character like at the story's beginning and its end?** Think about what defined each character when you first encountered them in the story. Take stock of their values, personality traits, goals, motivations, and beliefs. By the end of the story, has something happened to change any of these things for the character? If not, they're probably a static character.
2. **What is the character's ambition?** Often, static characters have an unwavering sense of who they are and what they want. Take the western film *High Noon* as an example: the antagonist, Frank Miller, is driven by an obsessive desire to take revenge on another character—a desire which is unwavering throughout the story. His goal does not change as the plot develops, which makes him a static character.
3. **How do others react to this character?** The film *The Big Lebowski* centers around a character referred to simply as "the Dude," a lovable slacker with a laid-back attitude who is assaulted by robbers who break into his house and leave it in shambles. The Dude enlists his two best friends (Walter and Donnie) to help him track down the robbers. Their various foibles annoy each other, but never really threaten their friendship, and never cause any of them to re-assess themselves or change (other than the fact that one of them dies). Gauging the way others treat him over the course of the film is one clue that the Dude is a static character. It also shows that Walter and Donnie are static characters, too. (In fact, *every* character in *The Big Lebowski* is static, which in now way reduces its greatness as a movie.)

4. **Is the character's environment shaping him or her?** In Lewis Carroll's [Alice's Adventures in Wonderland](#), Alice falls through a rabbit hole and spends most of the novel wandering around Wonderland and encountering zany characters. While Alice reacts to her environment (she cries, becomes insulted, is afraid, and even physically grows and shrinks), she isn't fundamentally altered by her adventures. This makes her a good example of a static character. At the end of the story, Alice wakes up and resumes life just as she left it.

Static Character vs. Flat Character

In his book *Aspects of the Novel*, E. M. Forster coined the term "flat character," which is now widely used to describe one-dimensional characters who lack nuance and emotional depth. The term flat character is often used interchangeably with static character, but this is a mistake. In fact, the term "flat" describes a completely different aspect of a character than the term "static" does:

- **"Flat" refers to a character's complexity:** The term "flat character" is given to characters who are simple. They are "flat" because they have no depth. They are one-dimensional.
- **"Static" refers to whether a character changes:** The term "static character" refers not to how deep or not deep a character is, but rather to whether a character changes. It *is* true that flat characters tend not to change much over the course of a story, but that's because they usually don't have much of a personality or worldview established in the first place.

So rather than saying that a simple character who doesn't change is flat *or* static, it would be more accurate to say that the character is flat *and* static. Now, because most flat characters won't change much in a story (because flat characters are usually minor characters who rarely appear in the story often enough to change), many people may just assume that flat characters are also static. But it's still helpful to understand that the two terms are not describing the same aspects of a character.



EXAMPLES

The best way to better understand static characters is to look at a few examples from literature. Static characters are often antagonists or minor characters—but of course, this isn't always the case, as you'll see in the examples below.

Static Character in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*

Charles Dickens' novel [Great Expectations](#) centers around a [dynamic character](#), but one of the most important secondary characters is static, and serves an important role in helping the reader recognize the dynamic character's transformation. The novel begins with Pip, a young orphan who is sent to live with his sister and her husband, Joe. Pip's sister treats him cruelly, but Joe is kind. Through a series of

strokes of good fortune, Pip finds his way out of poverty, but Joe (who is himself a poor blacksmith) continues to pay Pip visits—a fact which embarrasses Pip, who wants to leave his life of poverty behind. As Pip grows into more of a "gentleman," he increasingly avoids Joe, who is, by contrast, unwavering in his friendship and kindness. (For instance, when Pip falls ill, Joe nurses him back to health, and when Pip finds himself with a large debt to pay, Joe pays it.)

Over the course of the book, Pip undergoes a total transformation of character, becoming more and more despicable as he ascends in the ranks of society. Joe is an unchanging character by comparison: until the very end of the book, he remains the kind and generous blacksmith Pip knew as a child, and therefore also serves as a stable point of reference to help readers gauge the extent of Pip's transformation. Pip is a dynamic character, while Joe is static.

Static Character in Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*

Jackson's [We Have Always Lived in the Castle](#) tells the story of Merricat Blackwood and her older sister, Constance, who live with their Uncle Julian in an old mansion on a large property just outside of a small village. Years ago, Merricat's mother, father, and other family members were all poisoned while eating dinner, and the villagers believe it was Constance who poisoned and killed them—because she cooked all of the meals. Therefore, when Merricat goes into town, the villagers taunt her, calling her a witch and her sister a murderer. As the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that there's more to the story of the fateful dinner, but the reader can't be entirely sure who actually poisoned the family, because Merricat is an unreliable narrator: she has an innocent, childish sensibility that enables her to live in a fantasy world of her own creation (for instance, she hides objects and nails them to trees with the belief that her "magic" protects Constance and Uncle Julian from the villagers.) One evening their old house catches on fire, but instead of helping extinguish the fire, the villagers seize the opportunity to loot and destroy the home. At the conclusion of the book, the sisters make a shelter out of their ruined home, and the ending implies that they'll always live there—and that the villagers will always fear them.

Merricat's character is consistent. Even after she watches the destruction of all of her prized possessions, she maintains her fanciful ideas about the world. It's important that Merricat is a static character in this novel because the primary theme and focus of this book isn't the main character's psychological development. Instead, Jackson wants readers to consider how people who are seen as different are routinely persecuted, and how easily fear turns to hatred, which leads to violence.

Static Character in Chinua Achebe's "Vengeful Creditor"

Achebe's short story, titled "Vengeful Creditor," is set in an unnamed African country, where the government is undertaking a new initiative to make primary education free for everyone. The story's main character is a vain and materialistic woman named Mrs. Emenike,

who hates the government initiative because it has caused three of her servants to quit in order to attend school. When the initiative is eventually halted, a ten-year-old girl named Veronica is crestfallen that she can't attend school. Young, innocent, and desperate to earn an education however she can, Veronica agrees to work for Mrs. Emenike, who has casually suggested that she might consider sending Veronica to college one day if she does a good job. But after Veronica arrives at the house, it becomes increasingly clear that the family has no intention of sending her to school. She begins to act out in small but increasingly noticeable ways, until one of her acts of defiance puts Mrs. Emenike's child in harm's way—at which point Veronica is beaten and sent back to live in her village.

By the end of the story, there is no indication that Mrs. Emenike has changed her cruel ways or learned anything about the injustice suffered by young women as a result of wealth inequality and government corruption, making her a static (and deeply unsympathetic) character.



WHY WRITERS USE IT

There are variety of reasons a writer might include a static character in a story. Here are a few of the most common ones:

- When a static character is shown in close proximity to a [dynamic character](#), their lack of change can help readers take notice of changes undergone by the dynamic character. In this way, they support the progress of [characterization](#) and plot development.
- Most minor characters (which the leading characters interact with only briefly) are static characters simply by default, since it's difficult to flesh out a character or show their development in so little time.
- A static character might have the same experiences or face the same challenges as a dynamic character but remain unchanged by them, which can be a way of showing an audience how some people have habits and personality traits that are resistant to change.

- A static character's inability to change can be comedic or tragic, depending on the context. In [Romeo and Juliet](#), Romeo's lack of change is tragic. But in many sitcoms, for instance, the humor depends on the main characters being static, such that with each new episode they continually find themselves in another goofy or puzzling situation.
- A static character can provide an example of moral strength, or otherwise hold up a mirror that contrasts or reveals the society around them. For instance, Atticus Finch in [To Kill a Mockingbird](#) is a static character. His own moral strength or positions never waver, and in standing firm he offers a contrast to the racist society around him.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Dictionary Definition for Static Character](#): A very brief definition of the term
- [The Wikipedia Page for Character](#): One, very brief section in this entry compares dynamic and static characters.
- [Static Characters on YouTube](#): This video explains the difference between static and dynamic characters.

HOW TO CITE

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