

Character Motivation

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

motivation: the reason a character acts, feels, and thinks in a certain way

HERE'S HOW

Step 1: Find any stated reasons. To find the reasons, or motives, for a character's actions, ask yourself: Does this passage clearly spell out why the character behaves in a certain way? If the answer is yes, you've found the character's motivation.

Step 2: Look for clues in story details. To find the implied reasons behind each character's actions, look for clues such as the following:

- **Background.** Consider the character's age, description, home, etc.
- **Speech, Thoughts, and Actions.** Notice any actions the character takes; any dialogue the character speaks; or any thoughts the character has. Look for revealing expressions and gestures. Finally, notice adjectives and adverbs that describe the character's behavior.
- **Key Events.** Look for incidents in which characters interact. What motivates them in these decisive moments?

Step 3: Consider human nature. Combine story clues with your own knowledge of human behavior—such things as common human emotions.

Step 4: Infer the motives. Ask yourself, Why might this character behave this way? Then, combine all the information to get a logical answer.

EXAMPLE: CHARACTER MOTIVATION

Rumplestiltskin was an evil little woodland man. He helped a beautiful young woman spin straw into gold so that she could save her life and marry the king. In exchange for his help, Rumplestiltskin made a demand on the woman: "You will give me your first baby." The demand saddened the woman, but she felt she had no choice but to agree.

When the woman and the king had a child, little Rumplestiltskin allowed that she could keep her baby only if she could guess his secret woodland name. Then Rumplestiltskin made a mistake: he sang out his name in the forest, where someone heard him and reported the name to the queen. The queen told Rumplestiltskin his name, and he became so angry that he destroyed himself.

Background: The tale is about an evil little man and a beautiful young woman. The king has told the woman that she must spin straw into gold—or die.

Key Event: Rumplestiltskin saves the woman but gets a promise from her in return.

Human Nature: Rumplestiltskin understood that the woman wanted to live and would agree to his evil bargain. Later Rumplestiltskin fell into a trap: he was too sure of himself, becoming careless.

Motivation: Rumplestiltskin was motivated to help the woman in order to get what he wanted—a baby. But then, motivated by pride and greed, he lost what he wanted.