

WriteGuide.com's Letter Writing Program

Lesson Seven: *Personification*

Personification is a technique that involves **giving human qualities to things that are non-human**. That includes animals, objects, forces of nature, and even emotions. Let's take a quick look at it in action.

Dear Friend,

The other day there was a terrible storm. The wind screamed and howled, protesting as it rattled the windows and tossed fallen branches against the roof of the house. With all the wind I thought it was time to get the family into the basement.

The stairs complained loudly as we walked down them, creaking and groaning with every step. Outside the wind continued to threaten the strength of the windows.

There are three examples of **personification** in the sample letter. The first occurs in the sentence "The wind **screamed** and **howled, protesting** as it **rattled** the windows and **tossed** fallen branches against the roof of the house." Specifically, the **personification** takes place in the words "screamed," "howled," "protesting," "rattled," and "tossed." Although those five words might seem like ordinary actions for the wind to perform, the reality is that **you need a voice to scream, howl, or protest; and you need arms to rattle or toss something**. **Personification** comes so naturally to us that **it's become an essential part of our everyday language**. We use it without even trying to do so!

The second example of **personification** is a bit more clear: "The stairs **complained** loudly as we walked down them, creaking and **groaning** with every step." Stairs can certainly creak, but they'd need a voice to complain or groan, right? Likewise, the wind can't really "threaten" something, as in the sentence "Outside the wind continued to threaten the strength of the windows."

As you may have noticed, **personification is actually a form of imagery**. Why? Because when you use it you're adding **sensory details** to something. Most of the time **personification helps describe how things sound** (the stairs "complained" and "groaned"), but it can also be used to describe **things that we see** (the wind "tossed" branches on the roof).

There are two kinds of personification. One is called **direct personification**, and the other is called **indirect personification**. The sample letter up above contains

examples of **direct personification**. They're considered to be "direct" because they involve something that actually happened, even though it's being described in an unrealistic way. For example, the wind didn't really "toss" branches against the roof – but it definitely caused them to fall off trees and land on the house. Likewise, the stairs didn't really "complain" when the family was walking down them – but they definitely made some sort of noise.

Indirect personification involves our imagination. When you use it, instead of an object actually doing something, **the author imagines that the object is doing something**. Let's take a look at an example.

The door was stuck. It refused to budge, no matter how hard I pushed on it. I pulled and pulled, and finally the knob came off. It tumbled to the floor with a loud THUD and then just lay there as though it were bored and had nothing better to do.

The words "refused" is an example of **indirect personification** because the door **didn't perform any kind of action**. The author **imagined** that it "refused" to budge. Likewise, when the author says that the doorknob "just lay there, as though it were bored and had nothing to do," he's **imagining** that the doorknob can experience the emotion of boredom – which it most certainly cannot.

There are specific two phrases that will help you use **indirect personification**. They are "**as if**" and "**as though**." To use them, mention a non-human object or animal in a sentence, put in an action, put in "as if" or "as though," and then complete the sentence. Here are some examples:

- **The chair sat all alone against the wall, as if being accused.**
- **The flowers wavered back and forth in the breeze, as though they were filled with happiness.**
- **The lake sparkled, as if it held some sort of delightful secret.**

Direct personification tends to be more powerful than **indirect personification**. The reason is that **direct personification** involves real, physical action, while **indirect personification** involves action that is imagined. Actions that actually occur are much easier to visualize and comprehend than those that are imaginary.

Because **personification** works so well with **imagery**, you should use it whenever you have something important to describe. That means you can also use it when you're working with **symbolism**.

In your next letter you should include the following items:

1. **At least two examples of *imagery*.**

2. At least two examples of *internal dialogue* (direct or indirect – it doesn't matter which).
3. At least one *simile* or a *metaphor*.
4. At least one *flashback*, or one *flashback within a flashback*.
5. At least one example of *direct symbolism*, *indirect symbolism*, or *subtle symbolism*.
6. At least one example of *parallel structure*.
7. At least two examples of *direct personification*, and two examples of *indirect personification*.

Remember, most of these techniques are designed to overlap, so you should definitely try to combine some of them.
