Using Fictional Characters as Clients

Learning Support
INTRODUCTION

Writing about characters from books or movies presents several unique challenges. What do you do, for example, if an important piece of information you need for your assessment is missing from the book or movie?

This tutorial will cover common issues students may have when writing about book or movie characters

- Treating characters like clients
- Linking case description and analysis
- Avoiding summarizing
- Selecting the correct timeframe to write about
- Making assumptions based on evidence
Before even beginning your paper, it’s important to decide how you will refer to your character throughout the assignment.

It’s best to treat the characters you are going to write about as if they were real people. Although the book or movie will be your source of information, imagining that you have assessed this client in a social work agency may help focus your case description.

**Instead of writing:**
“The focus of this assessment is the character of Akeelah, from Akeelah and the Bee.”

**Try this:**
“Akeelah Anderson is an eleven-year-old African American female…”
Instead of pointing out specific parts of the film or book, such as:
“In one scene, Akeelah is bullied…”

Try to discuss that moment without mentioning the scene or chapter:
“Akeelah was previously bullied by other girls at her school.”

Remember to refer to your client as “the client” or by his or her name, rather than saying “the character” or “the protagonist.”

Treating the character like a real client right from the start will help you stay focused throughout the case description and may help you avoid just summarizing the events of the book or movie.
Remember that in academic papers, you are generally not allowed to use “I” unless you are writing a personal reflection or a paper discussing your own experiences.

When writing about film or book characters, rather than using phrases like:
   “I observed” or “I assume”

Attribute these actions to a social worker:
   “In this situation, a social worker may assume…”
If you write about the character as a client, however, where, or whether to mention and cite the movie/book can become complicated.

Typically, you are free to mention the movie or book in the introduction paragraph of your paper, before you begin the case description. You can also include the movie or book’s title in the title of your paper.

In general, you will not need to cite the events of the book or movie, as your professor already knows where you got that information, but you may want to cite if you directly quote any dialogue or lines from your source.
Before even beginning your paper, you must understand the purpose of the assignment.

Most MSW guidelines will directly and clearly state the purpose of each paper. Read closely over the early paragraphs of your assignment guidelines and make sure to identify the assignment’s overall purpose, which you can also consider the main point you will need to address in each paper.

If you do not fully understand the purpose listed on your assignment guidelines, speak with your professor, check out the “Using the Assignment Guidelines to Save Time” tutorial which can be found on our LibGuide page at: http://libguides.usc.edu/SOWKlearningsupport, or make an appointment early on with a content tutor or writing coach.
The case description and analysis sections do not exist in a vacuum. They should be considered two halves of a whole, and should always work together to help your readers better understand the person you are analyzing.

Following two important guidelines can help you create a single, coherent paper where all of your writing works together. These guidelines, which will be discussed in the coming slides, are:

- Identify and understand the purpose of your paper
- Match content between all sections
For most MSW papers involving fictional clients, the purpose of the assignment will be **to apply theory to a specific character’s case in order to help explain the client’s developmental history, current functioning, or identity formation process**.

The most important aspect of the above purpose is the idea of **applying theory to a case**. The content you describe in your case description should be closely related to the content you analyze in the analysis section.
The easiest way to make sure your case description and theoretical sections match is to avoid discussing anything in your theory section which you have not already brought up in your case description.

For example, if you mention in the theory section that your client is divorced, but in the case description you state that the client is married, your readers are going to be very confused. Which one is true? The sections of your paper will contradict each other.

If you state in the case description that the client’s presenting problems include depression and substance abuse, but in the theory section, you talk about attachment and the person’s troubled family life, the readers will feel uncertain about what the client’s real presenting problems are.
The opposite situation is also true. You should not spend a large amount of your case description talking about one topic, and then ignore that topic completely in your theory section. **Avoid dwelling on an issue or event in your case description that you aren’t going to use in your theory section.**

For example, if you spend a large portion of your case description talking about the client’s conflict with his or her family members, your readers will start to believe that conflict is the client’s most important issue. If those readers get to the theory section, and you’ve decided not to analyze the client’s family conflicts at all there, your readers will feel like they’ve been misled.
One important exception to this rule:

If your assignment guidelines state that you are to cover specific information in the case description that is not directly useful for most theories, like information about the client’s past developmental milestones, then you are expected to cover these topics in the case description section of your paper.

In this case, you should avoid spending so much time on these topics that they take over the case description. So long as a majority of your case description subsections—such as identifying information, current situation, and psychological or social functioning—match your theory section, you’ll be on the right track.
Summarizing generally happens when students begin to provide too much background information on the actual events the client has experienced.

Common words that indicate summarizing are “next,” “then,” and “before” or “after.”

For example:

“Next, Akeelah got on a bus and traveled to another school across town, so she could take part in a study group there. After that, she made friends with Javier, another boy in the study group. Then, she studied hard for the National Spelling Bee. But before that, she helped her spelling coach…”
It’s important to remember to treat the character like a client. If you were taking notes and summarizing a real client’s situation, you would probably not write “Then this happened, and then this…”

Instead, when discussing the client’s current situation, focus on the most important issues, and only describe the events of the film which relate to directly to those issues.

If you had a real client who was in conflict with a family member, for example, you wouldn’t write:

“In the beginning, this person had a run-in with a cop, who said… and then the client got in a fight with a neighbor, and that led to… Finally, the person had an argument with his father over his low grades.”
Instead, focus in on the important issue and provide us the background information that relates to that issue:

“The client is currently experiencing conflict with his father, based on his poor academic achievement. The client has recently begun skipping school and not turning in his assignments. Instead, he is spending time with a new group of friends who are encouraging him to take part in gang activity.”

The above provides all the needed information and explains what went on in the book or movie, without resorting to just summarizing the whole plot.

If a client has multiple issues or relationships you need to discuss, you can easily do the same thing for all major pieces of information:

“The client has also been fighting with neighbors and local police because he has been caught defacing community property.”

Keep your background information brief, focused, and the same as what you’d write for a real client.
Oftentimes, when providing an example from the client’s life, students will start summarizing the entire event which relates to their theory:

“When he was just born, the client’s mother was not there for him, because she was working three jobs including being a waitress and working at a hotel, and therefore she did not have time to spend with the client. She would leave him with her boyfriend who she had just met recently through her friends, and the boyfriend would ignore him to drink and use substances, so he was often left wandering the neighborhood by himself, which caused him to see a lot of violence and crimes…”

Many professors would consider the above summarizing, as there is too much information and too much going on.
Remember to keep your focus only on the issue immediately at hand (is it important to know right now that the client’s mother met her boyfriend through her friends?) and, most importantly, work the example and the theory material in together, so that they support each other, rather than feeling like two different topics.

**Try something like:**

“When he was an infant, the client’s mother worked long hours to support her family, and therefore she did not have time to spend with the client. This resulted in a failure to meet the client’s early needs for security and nurturing, which Ainsworth (1978) suggests may cause an avoidant attachment style. As his mother was not present to assist him when he was hungry or distressed, the client learned early that he could not rely on his mother for support. His mother also frequently left him with her boyfriend, who also did not meet for the client’s needs…”
Another very common problem students have when writing about book and movie characters is figuring out how to handle time.

In many books and movies, the flow of the story is not exactly chronological. There are often flashbacks, or multiple points of view, or multiple events happening at the same time to different people.

Figuring out what events are “current” and what verb tense (such as past, present, or future) to use for your paper can be very complicated.

In general, if you follow two basic steps, you shouldn’t have trouble:
• First, select a current moment
• Then, match your verb tenses to that moment
If you don’t select one moment to be your “present” and stick to that point of view, you will quickly lose your readers.

For example, if you state in your identifying information section that your character is married, but in your social functioning section, you tell us the character recently got a divorce, readers will not know what to think. Is the client still married, or not?

If you do not stick to one present moment, or the same “time point of view” throughout the whole paper, the events of the person’s life will seem out of order and incredibly confusing to your readers.
First, you’ll need to decide on what is going to be “current” in your story. That is, what moment from the book or movie is going to be the present moment, “right now.” You’ll need this so you can write your current situation section.

Many students are tempted to use the ending of the book or movie as the “current” moment, because the ending is typically the most recent time period from the movie or book.

However, endings sometimes do not make for good social work papers. Many movies and books have “happy endings,” where the character’s issues are all solved and all the conflicts have been worked out.

If you try to describe the presenting issues of a perfectly happy person, your paper will get complicated very quickly, because you’ll have to go backward in time to the beginning or middle of the movie/book to find a presenting issue to describe.
In general, the best way to select a “current” moment from the film is to brainstorm which theories and theory concepts you want to use ahead of time. The examples you need to support your theories will help you decide what your “current” moment from the film will be.

For example, you know you want to use Erik Erikson’s psychosocial stages, and you want to discuss the sixth stage, which occurs from age 19 to 40. In your book, the middle chapters cover the character’s thirties, while the ending of the book covers the character’s elderly years.

If you know you only need to discuss up to the sixth stage, or age 40, why would you make the ending of the book your “current” moment?

If you know you will need examples from the beginning and middle of the book/movie but not the ending, it makes sense for your current moment to come from the middle. However, if you know you need examples from the end of the book/movie, it makes sense for your current moment to be the ending.
Here’s a diagram of events in a person’s life to help simplify things:

\[ \text{Beginning} \quad \text{Middle} \quad \text{End} \]

- Event 1
- Event 2
- Event 3
- Event 4

If you know you need to use examples from Events 1, 2, and 3, but not Event 4 in your theory section, you should make Event 3 your present moment, and save yourself time by not discussing Event 4.

That means that Event 3 will be discussed in your current situation section, and you will discuss it like it is happening right now. Events 1 and 2, and other information from the beginning or middle of the book or movie will be background information, or past events, and will be discussed like they have already happened.
In order to distinguish between events that happened in the past and events that are happening right now, use the correlating verb tense.

Sections of character analysis papers which are typically in present tense are the identifying information section, the current situation section, and any time you mention the current situation or what is currently happening in the client’s life.

Sections of character analysis papers which are typically in past tense are biopsychosocial development sections, family or personal background sections, and any time you mention information from the book or movie which happened before your chosen current moment.
What happens if you don’t pay attention to verb tense?

You’ll end up with all kinds of confusing situations, like these:

**Example #1:**
“The client was a 36-year-old Vietnamese male who lived in Huntington Beach, California.”
   The client “was” a 36-year-old Vietnamese male? Is he not anymore? Has he died?

**Example #2:**
“The client misses his mother, because she takes good care of him and is always there. She died when he was six years old, but the client has still not gotten over her loss.”
   The client’s mother “takes” good care of him, even though she’s dead?
Most films and books will not cover every topic needed for social work papers, and you’ll often be left guessing on issues like early attachment, biological milestones, psychological history, and the like.

Any and every assumption you make about the character should be based, in some way, on events which you saw in the film/read about in the book.

You should not ever make anything up from scratch. Instead, take what you do know, and work from there. Consider what you observed from the book or film, and what those observations might be to help you understand about the client, both directly and indirectly.
For example:

If you’re asked to discuss the client’s developmental milestones, consider what you know the character can do. If the person is shown walking, talking, using fine motor skills, and smiling, you already know many of the development milestones the person has surpassed. The only thing you don’t know is when the client met those milestones.

Instead of completely skipping the milestones in your paper, provide the information you do have: “The client appears to have met normal biological developmental milestones, including the ability to smile, eat, walk, and maintain balance, and she currently demonstrates no physical developmental delays.”

Although you don’t have all the information in this case, you will still have satisfactorily covered that part of the assignment guidelines.
Although it is somewhat more rare, you might also need to make assumptions in the theoretical section to help make sense of the things you observed in the film or book.

For example, if you observe the client showing all the signs of anxious avoidant attachment, and you want to discuss attachment theory, it would be appropriate to suggest that the client has developed the anxious avoidant attachment style based on the evidence shown in the book or film.

Remember that when making an assumption, it is vital to provide evidence for your assumption:

“Based on the fact that she has continually avoided forming lasting relationships with others or relying on others for support, coupled with the fact that her mother was an inconsistent caregiver, the client likely formed an anxious avoidant attachment in infancy.”
RESOURCES

If you are having trouble with this type of paper, be sure to utilize all the resources available to you:

• Speak to your professor to address any lingering questions you might have about the assignment guidelines
• Check out the LibGuide at: http://libguides.usc.edu/SOWKlearningsupport
• Book an appointment with a Content Tutor to review the content of your paper.
• Book an appointment with a Writing Coach to review your paper.