

Discovering Our Potential...

An Introduction to Character Types

Päivi Helminen (1999)
AV3F English Public Speaking
Department of Translation Studies, University of Tampere

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to our mini-seminar on character types. The character type theory that I'm going to present to you is over 2000 years old. Many historians say that it was Hippocrates, the Greek physician and "father of medicine," who first described the four main types of characters.

I'm sure you've all heard the adjectives sanguine, melancholic, choleric and phlegmatic. And you all know that sanguine means happy, melancholic sad, choleric angry and phlegmatic calm. But did you know that these words can actually mean much more? You can also call them character or temperament types. According to this theory people are born with a certain temperament type. They inherit it from their parents. All of our character features are inherited just as arbitrarily as our body build, or the color of our eyes, hair or skin.

I'm soon going to describe to you what these four character types are basically like, but before that, it's important to note that no one is purely just one type. Usually people are a mixture of two or more types. There are various tests you can take to find out your own type. I, for example, am a pretty even mixture of the melancholic, sanguine and phlegmatic types. In some people one type can be extremely dominant, but usually everyone has a secondary type that also effects their behavior.

Of course, our character type is not the only thing that matters. Our childhood experiences, our upbringing, education and our personal goals are of a certain importance, but our character type is the thing that influences us most when it comes to how we are and how we act. We are born with a certain temperament, and we die with that same temperament. We are basically the same from cradle to grave.

Now, let's take a few examples of how these different character types behave. It's said that you can tell a person's character type just by watching him in different situations.

First let's take the classic example of the flat hat. It's exaggerated, but it gives you an idea of the basic attitude these character types have towards

life. Imagine that a sanguine person walks into a park and sits on a bench. He puts his hat down beside him and turns to read his paper. Meanwhile, someone comes and sits on his hat and the hat goes flat. When the sanguine person turns back and sees what has happened, he starts laughing. To him the hat looks so funny.

What happens if the same thing happens to a melancholic person? He sees his flat hat and he starts crying. "Oh, my beautiful hat, it's ruined. I got it from my grandfather, it had great sentimental value." Nothing the other person says or does can make things right anymore.

What about the choleric person? He sees his hat and is filled with rage. He turns red in his face and starts yelling: "Now look what you've done! What kind of an idiot are you? Do you know how much this hat cost? You're going to have to pay for it, you know." The choleric person will calm down only after he has been promised full compensation for the damage.

A phlegmatic person's reaction is quite different from the others. He waits until the other person has left. He takes his flat hat and puts it calmly on his head and walks away - whistling.

You can tell a person's character type by watching him drive a car. A sanguine person drives unpredictably. Sometimes he speeds and the next minute he slows down and soon speeds up again. And no one knows why. He likes talking and if he has company in the car he has trouble concentrating on driving. He likes to look people in the eye, even those who are sitting in the back seat. Sanguine persons are the ones with the most accidents.

Melancholic people are careful drivers. They drive according to speed limits and all other traffic regulations. They keep a driving diary. They study road maps in advance. They are the ones who always know the best route from place A to place B.

Choleric people are brave drivers. Some might even say too daring. They want to get from place to place FAST. They are always speeding. What could be a better way to save time, they think.

Phlegmatic people are Sunday drivers seven days a week. They are SLOW. They take their time enjoying the scenery. Sometimes they are so slow that they are a danger to other drivers.

You can tell a person's character type by watching the way he takes care of his garden. A sanguine person wakes up early Saturday morning full of energy. He's going to get a lot done today, he thinks. He gathers all his equipment and tools (he has a lot of tools because he can't resist buying them) and starts to work. But before long out comes his neighbor and they start chatting. They can talk for hours and before the sanguine person notices the day has gone and he didn't get anything done. He packs his stuff and says he'll do the weeding next week. He is a master at postponing things.

A melancholic person's garden is the most beautiful in the neighborhood. It's like a work of art. No weeds, and a lot of beautiful flowers. Melancholic people love their gardens and that you can really tell!

A choleric person hates working in the garden. But things have to be done, so he does them quickly and effectively. He doesn't have an eye for beauty; he wants things to be practical. You can usually tell it's a choleric person's garden by the extremely short-cut grass, bushes and trees.

The lawns of phlegmatic people look shabby. Well, it's no wonder. On Saturday mornings when all the others have already been working in their gardens for hours, the phlegmatic person is still in bed or sipping his 3rd cup of coffee. He has an amazing gift to rest. Some might even call him lazy.

Of these examples you have noticed that all the character types have both good and bad sides. Let's make a short summery of the most typical features connected with each character type:

1. A sanguine person is happy, friendly, warm, eager and has an ability to sympathize with others. He has lots of friends and everyone thinks he is fun company. But he is often very self-centered and he lacks self-control. He has a tendency to exaggerate and he is emotionally unstable.
2. A melancholic person is often extremely talented. He can analyze things very deeply. He has an eye for beauty. He is disciplined and diligent. But he has a whole load of dark sides. He is often pessimistic, and is depressed easily. He is too critical of himself and of others. He is revengeful and easily offended.
3. Choleric people are definitely leaders. They have a strong will. They are independent, practical, efficient and productive. When they get something in their mind nothing can stop them. Unfortunately, choleric people have to spend a lot of their time alone, as their social side is so poorly developed. They scare people away with their

coldness and their angry and cruel words. They are insensitive and overly dominating.

4. It's easiest to get along with a phlegmatic person. He is calm and easygoing. His carefree attitude and good sense of humor attract people. He is stable and reliable and very diplomatic. But he is not perfect either. He is often irritatingly slow and unable to make up his mind. He is selfish and stingy. Sometimes he is totally indifferent to everything around him. All he's interested in is his daydreams.

Maybe you found yourself in some of these descriptions. Maybe you found your family members, relatives, friends, neighbors. These were descriptions of all of us. That is why I think it is so important to learn about these character types. It helps us understand each other better. It helps us understand ourselves better. Maybe you think this is a depressing theory because I said in the beginning that "we are the type that we are and we can't change it." That's true, but once we become aware of our temperaments we can learn how to deal with our weaknesses and learn how to use our strong sides to the full.

This is just what this short introduction has been all about: Making ourselves aware. Learning about this theory has helped me a lot personally. If you decide to dig into it more deeply, I'm sure you won't be disappointed either. It's all about discovering our potential.

[Top Page](#)