The design of a character – particularly if we’re talking about a short animation – can tell the audience a lot about that individual very fast. Like the establishing shot does for story, the first view of a character creates expectations for personality, occupation, age, and history. When they start to move, they will also communicate through expression, gesture, and posture.

**Proportions**
Proportions and posture change through life. These can be used to communicate physical (or mental) age.

And remember the nose grows throughout life; this is Geri from the Pixar short Geri’s Game.
Expressive features
These include ears and eyebrows. Minimize the distance between eye and eyebrow to make communication, expression, and emotion clearer.

In a short animation there is not much time to show a character’s nature by its actions. A useful shortcut is to employ conventional outlines and styling.

not much time to introduce character
have to use cultural shortcuts
also includes style
You may well recognize these Pixar characters just from their outlines.

**References to recognizable types**
There's a reason monsters and aliens often have a head, two arms, a face, two legs, and behave in a generally human-like manner when anything is possible in CG. In order to reliably communicate menace, fear, uncertainty, and confidence in a non-human character, even a feature film design team will employ human-like expressions, gestures, and postures.

... just change the proportions ...
In addition, using a combination of familiar animal elements (lobster claws, insect eyes, crab mouth with tentacles) will help the audience relate to an alien creature as one of the cast. When a director chooses not to go down this path, the results can be disorienting, as with the Pale Man character in Pan’s Labyrinth whose eyes are in his hands. All of the character’s elements are human, but the arrangement is not.

Other recognizable types – real or not – include the soldier, wizard, dragon, and elf.

Assets and posture
Just what your character is holding or how they are standing in the first frame can define them:

The cartoon above is by the Scots cartoonist Tom Gauld. Another good example of stick figure design is at [https://youtu.be/Qi2kaDzGh9A](https://youtu.be/Qi2kaDzGh9A). Compare the postures and movement of the four characters. Despite their simplicity, we know everything we need to about them.

Chris Yonge – 20170116