

char — Characteristics

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Description

The dataset itself and each variable within the dataset have associated with them a set of characteristics. Characteristics are named and referred to as *varname*[*charname*], where *varname* is the name of a variable or `_dta`. The characteristics contain text. Characteristics are stored with the dataset in the Stata-format `.dta` dataset, so they are recalled whenever the dataset is loaded.

Characteristics are sometimes used in Stata programs to store additional metadata for variables. See [\[U\] 12.8 Characteristics](#) for more details.

Syntax

Define characteristics

```
char [define] evaname[charname] [ [" ]text[" ] ]
```

List characteristics

```
char list [evaname[charname]] ]
```

Rename characteristics

```
char rename oldvar newvar [, replace]
```

Also related is

```
{local | global} mname: char evaname[charname]]
```

evaname is a variable name or `_dta` and *charname* is a characteristic name. In the syntax diagrams, distinguish carefully between `[]`, which you type, and `[]`, which indicates that the element is optional.

Option

replace (for use only with `char rename`) specifies that if characteristics of the same name already exist, they are to be replaced. **replace** is a seldom-used, low-level, programmer's option.

`char rename oldvar newvar` moves all characteristics of *oldvar* to *newvar*, leaving *oldvar* with none and *newvar* with all the characteristics *oldvar* previously had. `char rename oldvar newvar` moves the characteristics, but only if *newvar* has no characteristics with the same name. Otherwise, `char rename` produces the error message that *newvar*[*whatever*] already exists.

Remarks and examples

We begin by showing how the commands work mechanically and then continue to demonstrate the commands in more realistic situations.

`char define` sets and clears characteristics, although there is no reason to type `define`:

```
. char _dta[one] this is char named one of _dta
. char _dta[two] this is char named two of _dta
. char mpg[one]  this is char named  one   of mpg
. char mpg[two] "this is char named  two   of mpg"
. char mpg[three] "this is char named three of mpg"
```

Whether we include the double quotes does not matter. You clear a characteristic by defining it to be nothing:

```
. char mpg[three]
```

`char list` is used to list existing characteristics; it is typically used for debugging:

```
. char list
   _dta[two]      : this is char named two of _dta
   _dta[one]      : this is char named one of _dta
   mpg[two]       : this is char named  two   of mpg
   mpg[one]       : this is char named  one   of mpg
. char list _dta[]
   _dta[two]      : this is char named two of _dta
   _dta[one]      : this is char named one of _dta
. char list mpg[]
   mpg[two]       : this is char named  two   of mpg
   mpg[one]       : this is char named  one   of mpg
. char list mpg[one]
   mpg[one]       : this is char named  one   of mpg
```

The order may surprise you—it is the way it is because of how Stata's memory-management routines work—but it does not matter.

`char rename` moves all the characteristics associated with *oldvar* to *newvar*:

```
. char rename mpg weight
. char list
   _dta[two]      : this is char named two of _dta
   _dta[one]      : this is char named one of _dta
   weight[two]    : this is char named  two   of mpg
   weight[one]    : this is char named  one   of mpg
. char rename weight mpg           // put it back
```

The contents of specific characteristics may be obtained in the same way as local macros by referring to the characteristic name between left and right single quotes; see [\[U\] 12.8 Characteristics](#).

```
. display "'mpg[one]'"
this is char named  one   of mpg
. display "'_dta[]'"
two one
```

Referring to a nonexisting characteristic returns a null string:

```
. display "the value is |'mpg[three]'"
the value is ||
```

How to program with characteristics

► Example 1

You are writing a program that requires the value of the variable recording “instance” (first time, second time, etc.). You want your command to have an option `ins(varname)`, but after the user has specified the variable once, you want your program to remember it in the future, even across sessions. An outline of your program is

```
program ...
  version 18.0
  syntax ... [, ... ins(varname) ... ]
  ...
  if "`ins'"==" " {
    local ins "`_dta[Instance]'"
  }
  confirm variable `ins'
  char _dta[Instance] : `ins'
  ...
end
```

◀

► Example 2

You write a program, and among other things, it changes the contents of one of the variables in the user’s data. You worry about the user pressing *Break* while the program is in the midst of the change, so you correctly decide to construct the replaced values in a temporary variable and, only at the conclusion, drop the user’s original variable and replace it with the new one. In this example, macro ‘`uservar`’ contains the name of the user’s original variable. Macro ‘`newvar`’ contains the name of the temporary variable that will ultimately replace it.

The following issues arise when you duplicate the original variable: you want the new variable to have the same variable label, the same value label, the same format, and the same characteristics.

```
program ...
  version 18.0
  ...
  tempvar newvar
  ...
  (code creating 'newvar')
  ...
  local varlab : variable label `uservar'
  local vallab : value label `uservar'
  local format : format `uservar'
  label var `newvar' "`varlab'"
  label values `newvar' `vallab'
  format `newvar' `format'
  char rename `uservar' `newvar'
  drop `uservar'
  rename `newvar' `uservar'
end
```

You are supposed to notice the `char rename` command included to move the characteristics originally attached to ‘`uservar`’ to ‘`newvar`’. See [P] [macro](#), [D] [label](#), and [D] [format](#) for information on the commands preceding the `char rename` command.

This code is almost perfect, but if you are really concerned about the user pressing *Break*, there is a potential problem. What happens if the user presses *Break* between the `char rename` and the final `rename`? The last three lines would be better written as

```
nobreak {  
    char rename 'uservar' 'newvar'  
    drop 'uservar'  
    rename 'newvar' 'uservar'  
}
```

Now even if the user presses *Break* during these last three lines, it will be ignored; see [\[P\] break](#).

◀

Also see

[\[P\] macro](#) — Macro definition and manipulation

[\[D\] notes](#) — Place notes in data

[\[U\] 12.8 Characteristics](#)

[\[U\] 18.3.6 Macro functions](#)

[\[U\] 18.3.13 Referring to characteristics](#)

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