

Lesson 1

Writing

WRITE OUR TRUEST SELVES

PURPOSE

Students learn that fiction writers often begin by thinking about and developing characters.

LESSON INTENDED FOR

- Writing realistic fiction short stories
- Writing historical fiction short stories
- Writing fantasy short stories
- Writing fiction picture books
- Students at a wide range of levels

MATERIALS NEEDED

- A piece of chart paper or document camera
- Students' writing notebooks (optional)

LESSON STEPS

1. Tell a brief story about imaginative play and connect it to fiction writing.
2. Explain that many fiction writers begin their stories by developing characters.
3. Discuss how writers can use themselves as inspiration for characters.
4. Demonstrate crafting a character using your own personal traits.
5. Ask students to try studying themselves and others to begin creating possible characters.



What I Say to Students

When I was young, I used to love to play with characters. Sometimes these were dolls. But a lot of times these were anything I had available: salt and pepper shakers, pencils from my pencil box, even popsicle sticks. I would make them talk and walk and act and think, just like people did. And almost all of them were more than a little bit like me.

This got me to thinking about us creating fiction stories and how one of the ways authors like to begin fiction writing is by creating characters. And much like I did when I was little, creating characters out of pencils and popsicle sticks, writers often base characters, at least a few of them, on pieces of themselves and their personalities. Let me show you what I mean . . .

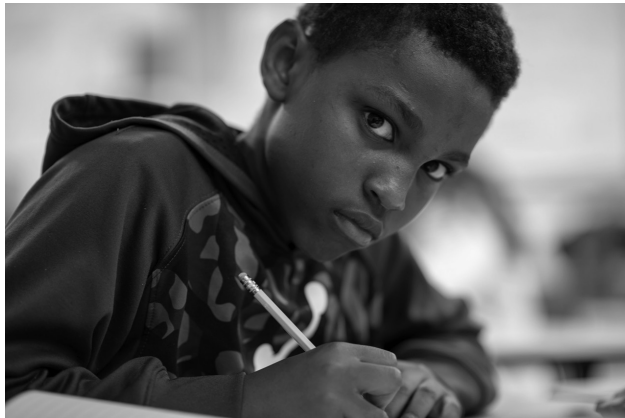
[Turn to your demonstration notebook and make it clear that you're about to write in front of the students. Think out loud as you write.]

I'm the kind of person who gets lost in my own world and would rather be by myself. Sometimes, because of that, I come off as sort of cold and not friendly. I could create a character like that. I could make her a really well-meaning person but one who prefers to be alone, and sometimes, when she's thinking, if someone interrupts her, she comes off as snotty . . .

When I was writing, I was thinking about one quality about myself—the way I like to be by myself. Then I started to think about the downsides of that, because I know the best stories involve good characters having at least a little trouble. Then I jotted down a few tricky situations the character could get into or a few problems she might have. I don't have a name or anything, but I feel like she is already very different from me.

Before you head off to write today, if you don't already have a character or story idea rolling around in your head, please take a minute to brainstorm with a partner about a possible character. You might decide to try thinking about yourself as a starting point and then try developing a character from there. You might make a T-chart where you put yourself on one side and then your imagined character on the other. Or you could make an identity web of yourself and then study it and make another one, inspired by your own, for your character. Or just write long like I did.

One last thought: don't stop at just one character or one story idea. Try to make today a brainstorming day. Try to get as many possible ideas as possible down in your notebook so you'll have a ton to choose from later.



Lesson 1

Reading

CHARACTERS OFFER CLUES TO AUTHORS' SELVES

PURPOSE

Students learn that sometimes book characters can give them insight about the author of the book.

LESSON INTENDED FOR

- Reading realistic fiction
- Reading genre fiction (e.g., historical, fantasy, mystery, science fiction)
- Reading short stories from an anthology
- Listening to a read-aloud
- Students reading at a guided reading Level L or above

MATERIALS NEEDED

- A screen to project author websites, or slides with quotes, or a chart with those quotes copied
- An excerpt from a familiar fiction book that features character description prominently.
Examples include the following:
 - www.jsworldwide.com (Click on the Books tab and scroll down to Jon Scieszka's book *Knucklehead*, where there is a short description explaining how the stories in the book are based on his childhood growing up with five brothers.)
 - www.gracelin.com (Click on the Books tab, click "Novels by Grace," and select "Where the Mountain Meets the Moon." At the beginning of the interview with Al Roker, Lin discusses how she didn't see much about Chinese culture in the books she read when she was a kid.)
 - www.allthewonders.com (In the post "Book Cover Premiere: *Not Quite Narwhal*," there is an interview with Jessie Sima, author of *Not Quite Narwhal*, which has a nice section on feeling like she did not fit in.)

- www.hollymcghee.com (In the post "The Story Behind *Come with Me*," McGhee explains how she came to write the picture book *Come with Me*, specifically about her experience on September 11 and a friend's gift.)
- A short bio on the author whose excerpt was read that highlights the character's similarity to the author
- Student fiction reading materials
- Student access to author biographies, either printed or electronic

LESSON STEPS

1. Tell about an interest in professional authors and noticing that they use the same strategy students use to create their characters.
2. Share quotes from authors explaining how they often base their characters on themselves.
3. Read a short biography of a familiar author.
4. Have students listen to an excerpt from that author's book, listening for character-to-author similarities.
5. Explain that knowing about an author can help deepen our understandings of characters and themes.
6. Encourage students to check out a bit of their current author's biographies and see if they get new perspectives on characters.

What I Say to Students

Some of you know I'm a bit of an author groupie. I love to read authors' books, of course. But I also like to read all about them as people. I love to listen to them talk about their writing process, their childhood, and even what their favorite foods are. I visit their websites and read interviews about them.

And because of that, I have noticed something that I think might help us as readers. Remember how earlier we were creating characters for our new fiction pieces in writing? Remember how we were thinking about our own lives and sort of basing our characters on our own best (and sometimes worst) selves? Well guess what, a lot of professional authors do that very same thing. Take a look at what I mean. Look at this quote from Jacqueline Woodson about her book *Visiting Day*:

[Project quotes and images from author websites and interviews onto the screen. In this lesson, I used the following "Why I Wrote It" blurb from author Jacqueline Woodson's website at www.jacquelinewoodson.com.]

Why I Wrote It

Because once a month when I was a little girl, I would go upstate and visit my favorite uncle. I remember those days well and wanted to write about them. This book isn't completely autobiographical but there is a lot of me in it.

Do you see how many authors use their own lives when creating the characters and situations in their books?

I'd like us to try looking specifically at one author and one character to see what new insights we can get by looking for the author in the character. I'm going to show you a part of an interview one of our favorite authors, James Howe, did about his character Howie from his *Tales from the House of Bunnacula* series:

Where did your inspiration for Howie come from? We love him!

I'm so glad you love Howie. I take that very personally because Howie is me! Sometimes people think that because of his name, but in fact I wasn't conscious of naming

him Howie because of my last name. I named him Howie because his father's name is Howard and Howard was named for one of my uncles. The character of Howie is very much like who I was as a boy with three older brothers who I was always trying to impress especially with jokes and puns.

I can see some of you nodding because you remember some things about Howie. But instead of just remembering, let's read a short excerpt from *It Came from Beneath the Bed*. I'd like you to read this, thinking about what James Howe said about the character Howie, who is the narrator of this book. See what similarities you notice, but more importantly, pay attention to the ideas you're getting about the character and the theme by noticing the connections between the author and his characters.

I don't want to write about real-life stuff the way Uncle Harold does, like Pop trying to kill Bunnacula because he thinks he's a vampire or the time we stayed at this boarding kennel and there were talking bones buried there, because if I stick to real stuff like that it'll just be boring and I'll never get to use my imagination. When I asked Uncle Harold what I could write about, he said it sometimes helps to start with something you know and see where it takes you.

Well, being a wirehaired dachshund and all, one thing I know about is the floor. I could write a story called [The Floor](#).

Or not.

Take a few minutes to chat with a partner. What do you notice about the character Howie? And how does it fit with what you know about James Howe? Does it give you any new ideas about the character of Howie? Any ideas about bigger messages?

[Allow 1–3 minutes for partner conversations, then come back to wrap up.]

As you go off to read today, you might want to take a few minutes to look up a few things about the author of the book you are reading. See if it gives you any new insights into the characters or deeper meanings. Just like you based your characters in your fiction stories on aspects of yourself, you might find some new insights into your authors or characters because of this different layer of thinking.

