

# Teaching about Character



Key Stage 1 children are able to identify that a character in literature is whoever appears in that story. In order to write a story, children obviously have to have someone to write about. However, there is so much more to this concept which is beneficial for children to get to grips with.

I usually start by doing a character study linked to a book which we have been reading in class. Look at external and internal characteristics. Make a list of them. Too often, children focus on what a character looks like but don't think about personality aspects, and this is what makes stories interesting. Take this even further! Talk about how in stories there are often *goodies* and *baddies*, but in real life, it doesn't actually work like that. We all have traits that we should be proud of and things that we have to work on. That's because people are not perfect! For example, look at *Jack and the Beanstalk*.



### **Jack's characteristics:**

External: Boy, brown hair, athletic, blue eyes.

Internal: Brave (he climbed the beanstalk).

Loving (he wants to take care of his mother).

Clever (he tricked the giant).

Untrustworthy (he ran off with the harp).

Mean streak (he chopped down the beanstalk after stealing the giant's money. *Killing the giant!*)

Yes, Jack had his reasons for his behaviour. We will look at character motives later on.

## **Character study and character generation**

I follow up this teaching input by asking children to do two character studies.

The first is of themselves: give them a photograph of themselves and ask them to create a mind map which lists all of their external characteristics, as well as their likes and dislikes. In completing this activity, children will really start to get a feel for the complexities of character creation. Next, get them to complete a character study from a character in a picture book that the class has shared.

Follow this up by asking children to create their own character. Ask your child, who is going to be in the story? How do they want their readers to feel about each character? Draw the character on paper and add character traits, focusing on both internal and external characteristics and also thinking about less desirable traits as well as endearing ones.

You could make a table for them to help them categorise their thoughts, with these headlines:

- Name of character
- Relationship to other characters
- What s/he looks like (external)
- Behaviour (internal)

Once pupils have thought about these characters I ask them to write a monologue beginning with the line, 'It's the middle of the night and I cannot fall asleep and all because ... ' What is this new character anxious about, or perhaps, looking forward to? What have they done that led to them feeling this way or what will they have to do? Children always engage with this task and it produces energised and encouraging writing.

Generating a convincing character is one of the most demanding challenges in writing a piece of fiction. There are plenty of stories in which the characters are boring, or replicas of the same characters we've met in lots of stories previously.

Readers want characters who are as distinctive and multifaceted as real people. Children are more than capable of understanding this concept. Not only does it make creating a character a lot more interesting but it also helps them to think about personal and social aspects of their

own selves. Children at this age are still developing their personalities and it is a way to help them recognise traits that they possess and to have ownership.

## Characterisation and Character Writing Exercise

Create a character together as a class.

Choose a name and then ask for ideas about the appearance of this character.

How old are they?

What is their occupation?

Once you have covered the internal and external characteristics, talk to pupils about how character profiles can lead to plot development.

Ask them:

- \* What challenges does this character face?
- \* What does this character desire more than anything else?
  - \* What obstacles are in the way of this character's desire?
    - \* What situation might cause the character to react in an interesting way?

### **Goals**

This is a good time to introduce children to the concept that a character must always want something. Without that, there is no story. They may, or may not, obtain their desire in the story, but they need to try to get it. This is something for children to bear in mind as they go on to craft their own stories as they progress through school. It is a sophisticated concept, but in being aware of it, children are better able to consider this when they're plotting stories.

A protagonist can have a simple goal, like going to the park after school to play with friends, or it could be a significant goal, like saving the world from a supervillain. Almost every story involves a goal at the heart of the plot. This is a core element of storytelling and so, in enabling children to become familiar with this concept, you are teaching them the fundamentals of how stories work.

As you share books with your class during carpet sessions or end of day story time and as you listen to children read individually, begin to discuss the characters in the book. Think about their characteristics and their goals. The more adept that children become at identifying these, the more they will start to bring these concepts into their own stories.

#### **Tips to help children create characters:**

- Ask children to think of all the people in their lives, or whom they have seen on TV. Take their firmest and most attention-grabbing qualities and behaviours and assign them to characters.
- Talk to the children about what they want to be when they grow up? Pilot or actress or doctor? Use these as inspiration for their characters.
- Think about details. What do they wear? How do they do their hair? Does he wear a leather jacket or a suit? Does she sing in the car or is she always looking worried? These are the things which make a character really interesting.
- What about the character's hobbies? Even if a character's interests aren't linked immediately to the plot, they will enhance it and make the character more believable.

Mannerisms and gestures are always great to include. Encourage children to assign to his or her characters their own distinctive physical behaviours, such as biting their nails or clicking their tongue.

### **Character strengths, skills and assets**

Characters need to possess strengths, skills and assets so that they're able to endure the different challenges that a story inevitably throws at them. These can be personal strengths, like resilience or trustworthiness, or they can be abilities, like karate. Material assets, such as owning a bicycle or a computer, might come in useful in the story. Talk to children about this concept. As you read stories to the class, talk about character flaws and strengths as you progress through the book. This will help children become used to analysing stories and then, in turn, using this information to generate their own work.

### **Character flaws and weaknesses**

A character should also have imperfections and weaknesses because nobody is perfect and that would be boring. These make characters relatable. Flaws and weaknesses interfere with the characters' progress toward their goals and provide setbacks for the plot. Readers want to see characters succeed, but if it comes after a few failures, caused by the characters' own flaws and weaknesses, this makes the character more endearing. Talk to children about this notion and explain why it is important that a character has a balance of flaws and weaknesses.

## Exercise

Watch the movie, Peter Pan.

As a class, make a list of the strengths, skills and assets of Tinkerbell, the fairy.

- she's clever
- pretty
- knows magic



Now list her flaws and weaknesses.

- she's jealous (of Wendy)
- prone to sulking
- she can't talk (but as an audience we still love her)

Now ask the children to create their own fairy character.  
Come up with a list of flaws, weaknesses as well as their skills, assets and strengths.

## **External conflict**

It's only interesting to read about characters' working toward a goal if attaining it takes great effort.

External conflicts make it complicated for the characters to accomplish their goals. The external conflict might be the cause of the goal (a bad witch wants to turn everyone into frogs, so we must defeat her). However, external conflict can also interfere with the goal (the protagonist wants a wand and her best friend wants the same one. They spend so much time arguing over this that the witch gets away).

## Conflict Exercise

Read 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarves'  
with your class.

Have a discussion and list all the external conflicts in the story.

- The Queen wants to kill Snow White because the mirror tells her that Snow White (and not the Queen) is the fairest person in the land.
- The Queen finds out that Snow White has not been killed, so she decides to kill her herself.
  - Snow White sleeps for a long time.

Now, do a shared class write. Ask the children to pick one of the dwarves. Create a story about the dwarf. He must have a goal and something must initially get in the way of him obtaining that goal – the conflict. After you have completed this exercise as a class, ask the children to work in groups to create their own stories and act them out. Then go and write them.

### **Internal conflict**

Internal struggles compel characters to make complicated choices. They often must choose from bad, or worse, options and the right choice almost always involves a significant sacrifice.

## Conflict Exercise

Create a character with your class about a boy who owns a dog. The dog is pining for a lost ball. The boy suddenly remembers that the dog buried it in the garden last summer. But now his mother's sunflowers are growing over that spot and she is so proud of them. He wants to make his dog happy again, but he doesn't want to upset his mother by digging up the plants.

What does he do?

Ask the children to write their own ending to the story.

## Conflict Exercises

Conflict is what makes a story compelling and it can be created in the most unexciting situations.

List some of these normal situations on the whiteboard and discuss with your class how a character can deal with both internal and/or external conflict if placed in the situation.

Character placing an order at McDonald's – Perhaps the character has forgotten their purse and can't pay. Maybe someone cuts in line. Maybe they have forgotten what the person they came with wanted and order the wrong thing. What if they're too shy to talk to the person taking the order? What if they do not want cheese on their burger but can't pluck up the courage to tell the cook?

Character doing the washing up – Maybe they have run out of washing-up liquid, or the water isn't warm enough. Do they drop a plate and break it and then feel too worried to tell the person they live with? What if one person wants to do the washing-up but always gets stuck drying?

The purpose of this exercise is to show that conflict is possible in run-of-the-mill life and it can be used to create an interesting and compelling story out of any occasion. Now you have generated the ideas, let the children go and write a story.

## Character Exercises and Story Starters

**Missing person** Put an extra chair in your classroom and then add a name of a child not in your class to the register, let's say 'Sarah'. Ask the children where Sarah is today. Point to her empty chair. Insist that they tell you where she is. Arrange for a teaching assistant to make up a reason why Sarah isn't in school. Disagree with her and claim that you heard differently. Ask if anyone knows anything else. Ask who was the last person to see Sarah. Children will soon realise this is a game. Agree that Sarah is missing. Make a list on the whiteboard of her external and internal characteristics. Then think about why she might not be in school. Conflict! Make some 'missing' posters for Sarah and then ask children to write a story about where she is today.

**Crazy scientist** This person has just come up with a new invention which will change the world. What is it? What will they do with it? Tell us about the scientist.

**Confused Connie** What is she so confused about? Tell us about her personality and then tell us how she stops being confused.

**What do you want to be when you grow up and why?** Ask children to pretend that they're that person already and write about a day that they just spent as that future person. Concentrate on goals.

**Seven left** Tell us about this cat. Who is she and why has she only got 7 out of her 9 lives left?

