

## Creative Characterization

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**Grade:** 6th-12th, with modification could be used in a wide variety of ways

**Approximate length:** This activity is usually used as one aspect in larger three or four week unit on a novel.

### Summary of Exercise: Creative Characterization

While reading a novel or story students write a character description journal in which they take on the voice of one of the character's made-up friends or relatives. They then write a sketch of that character from the friend or relative's point of view. The students need to adhere to any description or information in the text, but can get as creative as they like in explaining their relationship to the character. The students leave their journal in their notebooks until we finish the novel. After we complete the book and the final class discussions, I ask students to revisit their character descriptions. Their assignment then is to revise the rough draft, adding new information and readjusting their view of previous actions because of any new understanding of the character. Finally, the students peer-edit each other's papers, checking for character accuracy and general editing.

### Texts I have used in this exercise:

- *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou
- *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey
- *Sula* by Toni Morrison
- *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald

### Reasoning:

By having the students create a relationship with a character in the text, they are more able to see them as real people. They are able to make inferences about character motivation and decision-making more easily, which helps them understand and discuss the text more readily. Allowing students to get creative about a character's actions or events outside the realm of the plot takes some pressure off them to write a formal literary essay—but still shows their in-depth understanding of a character and his/her role in the text.

### Process:

#### A. Before Reading

- Call on student's previous knowledge
  - When you first meet someone how do you gain information about him or her?
  - After first impressions what else might give you an idea about this person?

- Introduce terms
  - **Characterization:** refers to the techniques a writer uses to create and develop a character. A writer reveals a character through physical description; through the character's actions, words, and feelings; through a narrator's direct comments about the character; and through the actions, words, and feelings of other characters.
  - Character Motivation:** moving force behind a character's actions. To understand motivation, the reader must look at psychological and cultural factors and circumstances surrounding the character.

#### A. While Reading

- Create a character list
  - Name and role of character
  - Physical characteristics
  - Personality traits
  - General impressions, stock character or realistic
- Character list explanation
  - How did you come to know this information about the character?
  - Reference specific quotations or descriptions.
  - Explain what led you to infer meaning.
- Write a character description journal
  - Choose a character from the text that you feel very comfortable and knowledgeable about. Imagine that you can take that person from the text we are reading and put them in a different situation. In first person perspective write a situation in which you are in relationship with this character. Based on what you know about them how would they act? What would they say? How would they respond to the characters you create?
  - Discuss options and give examples
- Share journals and discuss how the students have maintained character integrity.

#### A. After Reading

- Update character list and explanation
- Revisit and revise character description journal
  - What new information did you learn that might affect your writing?
  - Is your portrayal of the character still accurate?
- Peer edit, checking for character accuracy and general editing.
- Final class discussion using what we have learned about the characters to help interpret the author's message.

**Modification:** There are times that I use only aspects of this exercise depending on the objectives of the overall unit. For example, I may only have the students write the initial journal and share to engage students in discussion.

