

Minnesota Writing Project

---Demonstration Lesson---

Title of lesson: The Limits of Dialect in Characterization

Suggested grade/age: 8th+/13+

Approximate time needed to complete lesson: 50 minutes

Learning objective(s) and significance of lesson

To build both their understanding of indirect characterization and to build their cultural competency. I want them to look beyond superficial traits to “read” character in literature and life, as well as to understand that, although their manner of speech may be common in many settings, theirs is not a “norm” & they too speak in a dialect(s). I want them to be able to see that dialect may tell them about the geographical place of their character or possibly the age or ethnic group they identify with, but not necessarily. They will need to look at character’s actions and ideas to begin to know them and push beyond initial reactions, assumptions, or stereotypes.

The lesson incorporates best practice of engaging with reading, listening to text and voices, as well as discussions and writing reflection. It also asks students to apply the ideas to life as well as to literature.

Brief summary/outline of lesson

The lesson occurs early in the school year (Sept), following a study of theme and moving into short stories and study of conflict and characterization. It also follows work we do regarding our ground rules for having safe, courageous classroom conversations. It precedes other stories and novels where characters speak in dialects unfamiliar to many of the students and around which they may have assumptions or stereotypes (e.g. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Amy Tan’s “Rules of the Game,” and others). There is formative assessment through journals, discussion observations, and vocabulary work (“accent,” “dialect,” “assumption,” “stereotype,” and “discrimination” are all included on vocabulary list during this time). An essay on the author’s characterization of a character of their choice from one of the *Leaving Home* anthology’s stories is used as a summative assessment.

Related Resources

- “Do You Speak American?” Public Broadcasting System www.pbs.org/speak/ 2005.
- “Sound Effects” Teaching Tolerance: A Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center. <http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-43-spring-2013/sound-effects-2013>.
- Fair Housing Public Service Announcement www.youtube.com/watch?v=zup2qlFuCD

Possible extensions or adaptations for different purposes/student needs

- The lesson could easily be divided across multiple class periods
- The definitions and examples could be simplified or conversely added to/complicated.
- Use the IDEA website (International Dialects of English Archive).