

Deepening students' reading and writing are the focus of this issue of *Classroom Notes Plus*. You'll find a lesson in which a picture book and collaboration help students analyze characters in a novel, a sequence of sentence combining exercises to adapt to your own students' needs, and tips for how to use worksheets strategically to support writing instruction.

Download this issue and related handouts from the August 2008 *Classroom Notes Plus* page at <http://www.ncte.org/pubs/journals/cnp>.

A Picture Book Helps Students "Read" Characters

by Alisa Fisher

This is a multi-step activity I developed after about three years of teaching middle and high school English students. It may be best suited to middle school students, but I have also found it effective with general-track tenth graders.

My goals were to get students to use their knowledge of people and their critical thinking skills to arrive at a more meaningful understanding of a novel's characters, as well as to provide review of and practice with adjectives. This activity requires close reading of the text, recording character details on a handout page, and collaborative group work. I schedule three days to complete it.

Having students record and support character details through close reading certainly isn't a new idea, but this variation includes a few twists, such as the use of a picture book about adjectives, that make it especially engaging and effective.

This activity is suitable for use with any novel, but I lean towards those novels with one or two main characters because the characters tend to be more thoroughly developed, or "round" vs "flat," and are thus easier for students to tackle. I find it works especially well in novels with two main characters, such as Paul Zindel's *The Pigman* and Robert C. O'Brien's *Z for Zachariah*, because it is easier for students to see how each character is unique or distinct when utilizing comparison. I have also used this activity successfully with Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes*.

I normally start this activity once we are far enough into the novel to have a grasp of the main characters, but not

IN THIS ISSUE

A Picture Book Helps Students "Read" Characters 1

by Alisa Fisher

A picture book gives a light-hearted lead-in to a reading and writing activity based in character study, close reading, and collaboration.

Sentence Combining: Building Skills through Reading and Writing 6

by Deborah Dean

Sentence combining can help student writers develop new strategies for expressing ideas and enhancing meaning. This lesson outlines exercises you can easily customize to your own students' needs.

To Worksheet or Not to Worksheet: Using Student Writing to Direct Instruction in Grammar and Mechanics 12

by Dave Ellison

These detailed tips give guidance on how an oft-misused tool—the worksheet—can lend itself to sound writing instruction and support individual student learning.

so far that the students see how the characters evolve in terms of the central conflicts of the plot.

I look at it as more of a getting-to-know you character activity. Completing the activity at this point also allows for some interesting discussions once the novel is finished in terms of dynamic and static characters. However, there is no reason why it couldn't be completed at the conclusion of the novel as a final character analysis.

Getting Started

I introduce the activity by discussing with students the methods of characterization that authors use to develop characters. I ask questions like, "How do we get to know characters in a new story or novel?" or "How do authors

help us get acquainted with their characters?" I use leading questions like these to get students thinking about details of characters' physical appearance, speech, thoughts and feelings, actions, and the opinions other characters have about them.

I also invite students to consider books and stories they have read, especially recently, because it's often easier for them to generate an answer if they have a specific character in mind. Typical student responses might include:

Ponyboy in *The Outsiders* looks a certain way. His slicked back hair, jeans, and leather jacket make him a part of the Greasers.

In *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, Cassie has no problem speaking her mind to others.

If students are having trouble coming up with ideas, I might read aloud a sentence with character detail from a recent novel we've read, and ask students what they learn or infer about the character from this passage.

We then talk about how a reader can take the author's "clues" about characters in order to come to an understanding about them, and I use this as an opportunity to bring up the role of adjectives. I mention that adjectives are valuable words for writers, since they help define characters and scenes and make them come alive for the reader. This serves as a handy lead-in to the next step.

Reviewing Adjectives with a Picture Book

At this point I tell students I'm going to share a spectacularly illustrated nonfiction book about adjectives, titled *Many Luscious Lollipops*, and written by Ruth Heller.

Depending on the grade level and language ability of the class, some students may feel it's a little silly, but it's

a light-hearted way to explore the topic, and is especially helpful to any students who are still learning to recognize and use adjectives.

Besides being a great adjective review, *Many Luscious Lollipops* offers engaging, vivid pictures, and uses a rhythm and rhyme scheme that lend itself to a lively delivery, whether read aloud by the teacher or by student volunteers. Here's a sample stanza from page 2:

"An adjective's terrific
when you want to be specific.
It easily identifies by number, color, or by size.
TWELVE LARGE, BLUE, GORGEOUS butterflies."

Reprinted with permission from *Many Luscious Lollipops* by Ruth Heller. (Scholastic, Inc., 1989). Used by permission of Grosset and Dunlap, a division of Penguin Books for Young Readers. Copyright © 1989 by Ruth Heller.

After we finish *Many Luscious Lollipops*, I prompt students to talk about their reactions, by asking questions like "What did you like best?," "Which page was your favorite?," "What are some of the categories of adjectives you learned about?," and "How could this book help you improve your own writing?"

Character Analysis: A Collaborative Exercise

Next I tell students that they are going to put their knowledge of characters and adjectives to work with a cooperative group activity, based on the book we've started reading, *The Pigman*.

I give each student a two-sided handout of a graphic organizer like the sample shown on page 3. (Download this handout page from the August 2008 *Classroom Notes Plus* web page at www.ncte.org/pubs/journals/cnp/issues) Then I give students the guidelines for their assignment.

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Handout on _____ (Character Name)

The graphic is a large, stylized representation of an open book. The pages are lined and contain labels for 'word' and 'passage'. The central circle is empty. The labels are oriented vertically on the pages and horizontally in the center.

Labels on the left page (top to bottom):
passage:
word:
passage:
word:

Labels on the right page (top to bottom):
word:
passage:
word:
passage:

Labels in the center (top to bottom):
passage:
word:
word:
passage:
word:
passage:



Student Assignment

In a few minutes I will assign you into small groups of 3-4 students. Your job is going to be to think of four distinct adjectives to describe John and four distinct adjectives to describe Lorraine, as a group, and to record these words on your graphic organizer. Write the character's name in the center of the circle.

Each student is to fill out a copy of the two-sided handout page, one side for each character, even though you are coming up with the answers together.

You should think about what you have learned about the characters so far, considering their appearance, actions, thoughts and feelings, speech, what others say about them, and any other information you feel is relevant. Jot down possible adjectives as they come to you, consult the thesaurus and dictionary if you like, and confer with your group about your ideas.

After your group agrees on the first adjective, write down that word on the line closest to the center circle, and then look through chapters 1-5 of the text for a quote to support the chosen word. Once your group has agreed on the quote, write that down in the rest of the space.

There are four quadrants on the graphic organizer, one for each adjective and book passage.

The point of requesting "distinct" adjectives is so students will need to consider a variety of characteristics for each character, and won't simply choose multiple synonyms for the same characteristic.

When students begin working on identifying the adjectives that describe their character(s), I encourage them to talk and share ideas within their groups. The main point of having them work in cooperative groups is so they can bounce ideas off each other and expand their thinking.

I also circulate around the room to help and consult. A common problem is that a student will think of a word that is not an adjective, as in the example "John is a rebel." In this case I might respond, "Yes, that's true, but rebel is a noun. Let's see if we can find an adjective that carries the same idea."

I might also review the part of *Many Luscious Lollipops* which talks about creating an adjective by adding a suffix. From this a student will be able to figure out the adjective form of "rebel" is "rebellious."

Finding Support in the Text

Next I might say something like, "Now, can you find a passage from Chapters 1-5 (of *The Pigman*) that would show that John is rebellious?"

Typically someone in the group will say, "What about the time he let off bombs in the boys' bathroom at school?"

and the students will begin paging through their books, searching for the example.

Typically, even if students haven't completed the book, at least one student can recall the location of the passage or get close enough that a few minutes of skimming yields the appropriate passages. When students get stuck they can describe the passage they're thinking of and I can usually help them find it. Referring back to familiar text is beneficial, because it helps students absorb the material, and in the process they often make a new insight into a character or another aspect of the novel.

Next, students record the adjective and corresponding passage (or as much as will fit, plus an ellipsis) in the graphic organizer. I also instruct students to record the page number of the passage for reference.

Once students are finished, each group shares their words, along with the passages that support them, and I make a master list on the overhead.

Here's an example of the master list of adjectives for John Conlan that we produced:

angry, rebellious, indignant, immature, smart-mouthed, cocky, spiteful, creative, sullen, critical, obnoxious, handsome, cavalier, clever, observant, depressed, sarcastic, mischievous

Students enjoy the process of sharing their words as a class and justifying them with text references. As we proceed, I ask the class if there are any words that just don't fit, and if we agree that there are, then I cross those words out. When there is more than one character then we repeat this step.

Here are some sample pairings of words and passages produced in my class:

Character: John Conlan from *The Pigman*

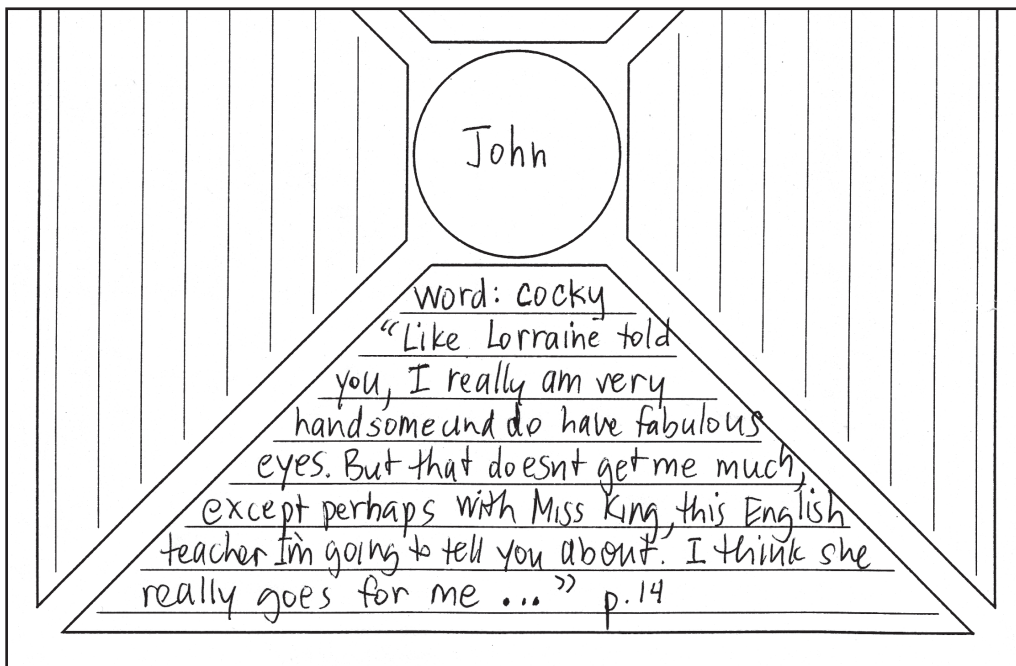
Word: mischievous;

Passage: "But on Wednesdays when I knew there was going to be a substitute teaching one of the classes, I'd pass the word at lunch and all the kids in that class would buy these scrawny apples. Then we'd take them to class and wait for the right moment-like when the substitute was writing on the blackboard. . . . Then I gave this phony sneeze that meant to hold them down near the floor. When I whistled, that was the signal to roll 'em. Did you ever hear a herd of buffalo stampeding?" p. 2

Character: John Conlan

Word: cocky;

Passage: "Like Lorraine told you, I really am very handsome and do have fabulous eyes. But that doesn't get me much, except perhaps with Miss King, this English teacher I'm going to tell you about. I think she really goes for me the way she always laughs a little when she talks to me and says I'm such a card." p. 14



Sample Quadrant for *The Pigman*

Character: John Conlan

Word: spiteful

Passage: “Now it was just the way I said yeah that set him off, and that night when he got home, he just put the lock on the phone and didn’t say a word. But I’m used to it. Bore and I have been having a lot of trouble communicating lately as it is, and sometimes I go a little crazy when I feel I’m being picked on or not being trusted. That’s why I finally put airplane glue in the keyhole of the lock so nobody could use the telephone, key or no key.” p. 16

During this step where we share adjectives and talk about the characters, I can tell from students’ comments that they are developing a more analytical stance toward the characters as a result. Here’s a representative exchange:

Student #1: “I don’t think ‘angry’ fits John. He just isn’t an angry type of person. He may act out at school or with his parents, but that’s just his rebellious way of responding to the adult world of rules. John is free spirited and doesn’t want to conform.”

Student #2: “You’re right, when John acts like a smart aleck it’s more in defiance of adults and their rules than it is out of hatred.”

Journal Entry

Finally, after students examine our master list, I assign a journal entry either as in-class writing or as homework.

The prompt is “Which three adjectives are most accurate in describing John and why?” and I ask students to write one paragraph of four to six sentences.

The purpose of this reflection is to have students analyze the list more deeply and to bring closure to the activity.

Here’s a sample journal entry:

“I think John is cocky, rebellious, and clever, because almost from the very start of the book John is getting into some type of trouble.

He has problems with just about every adult he comes into contact with and he does not deal with criticism well. He seems like the type of person who always thinks the other person is wrong. He also seems smart because when he plans to do something, like the bathroom bombs or apple roll, it’s usually extra well-planned out or unusual, so this is why I would say he’s clever.”

This activity takes approximately three days to complete, and is open to modification—for instance, to spend more time on adjective use or on discussion of the reading. It lends itself to end-of-the-book discussions because you can return to the list when students are done reading and talk about whether the adjectives still fit the characters. You can also discuss static and dynamic characters—review the terms briefly, and then ask students which characters they see change or grow throughout the novel, and how they change. Do students see changes in minor characters like Norton and Lorraine’s mother?

A variety of discussion and writing topics are possible based on the adjective exercise, the completed character handout sheet, and the journal entry assignment.

Overall, I consider this activity effective because it makes students think, gives them a chance to work together and bounce their ideas off one another, and promotes closer reading of the text.

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