

Thank you

FOR YOUR  
INTEREST IN  
CORWIN

Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *Writers Read Better: Narrative* by M. Colleen Cruz. These lessons focus on idea generation and strategies for writing fiction, including drawing together plots and shaping stories that match the meaning that young writers are after.

**LEARN MORE** about this title, including Features, Table of Contents and Reviews.

“Whether rereading books or rewatching movies, most of us have a reason we feel compelled to revisit a story whose plot we already know. When I go back to reread or rewatch something, it is almost always because of the deep relationships I developed with the characters and the lushness of settings. These are what draw many children to read stories in the first place: Zélie’s bravery, Junie’s sass, the smell of sweat and the sound of the crowd on the basketball court, the magic of Hogwarts.

However, I’ve often found that students get a quick picture of characters and settings in their heads, a rough sketch if you will, but are unsure of the type of reading work they can do to help make this enjoyment richer and more meaningful—the type of reading work that brings about a more Technicolor, 3-D experience of the story world.

One of the most successful strategies I have used to help students learn these reading moves is to show them how to develop their own characters and settings in their narratives. Whether the students craft these stories from their real lives or they are purely fictional, as they work to bring these characters to life, they begin to understand the techniques a writer can use to accomplish these goals. When they carry those writer selves into their narrative reading, they are more poised to identify these feats in the novels and stories they read and are more open to fully imagining the poignant details of people and place. It’s through the physical details that readers comprehend the emotional landscape the author paints.”

# PART 1

## LESSONS FOR GENERATING STORY: ENVISIONING CHARACTERS AND SETTINGS

### What You Will Find in This Section

This section begins with idea generation, split between strategies for students writing fiction and for those writing nonfiction narrative. The focus is on considering, exploring, and creating. The section ends with a couple of strategies that focus on drawing together plots and making the shape of the story match the meaning the young writer is after.

Paired alongside each of the idea-generating sessions, students will have an opportunity to apply the skills they learned as writers to their experiences as readers. Students will learn how paired and mirror strategies can help them envision tricky setting descriptions and infer complex characters.

The last few sessions can be applied to either fiction or nonfiction narratives for both writing and reading. This includes the digital lessons at the end.

### When to Use These Lessons

As mentioned in the introduction, these sessions are designed to either be taught as an addendum to an existing curriculum, as a full unit on narrative reading and writing, or as a bridge across a content area, such as studying history or people in social studies. You might use lessons in this section to open a unit on narrative writing or to supplement your current reading or writing narrative units. Additionally, you might decide to pick and choose from these story-gathering and development sessions as you move from one type of narrative to another. For example, you might choose to use a fictional character development lesson when teaching students how to read and write historical fiction. Then later in the year, you could choose to teach the lesson on crafting story structure at the outset of a springtime memoir unit.

## Preparing to Use the Writing Lessons

For the writing lessons, you'll want to do the following:

- **Choose a genre to focus on and then flag the lessons that support it.** The lessons in this book support fiction and nonfiction narratives. Some lessons apply to both; others only apply to one. Familiarize yourself with the lessons that match your plans and mark them accordingly.
- **Start thinking of possible stories you might want to write.** Hands down, student writers love it when their teachers model strategies with their own thinking and drafting. I've included some readymade excerpts you can adapt, but it usually works best if you develop a few story ideas ahead of time.
- **Gather possible mentor texts.** Select a few mentor or anchor texts that you will study and refer to throughout the unit. Mentor texts, as described by Katie Wood Ray, Francine Prose, and countless other teachers of writing, refer to texts that model the writing style a writer would like to emulate. Often in classrooms, these texts are from professional writers, although it is not uncommon for there to be some kid-written mentor texts in the mix. Ideally these are short texts, like short stories or picture books that can be read in one sitting and would take 10 minutes or less to read, which will mimic the length of the pieces your students can write.
- **Plan when you will read aloud.** Some teachers assume they have to read aloud an anchor text immediately before the lesson, but it works fine to read aloud a few days in advance or during another part of the day.
- **Create mentor and anchor text baskets.** For those of you who teach older students or students who can read higher-level texts, you might fill baskets with a variety of mentor or anchor texts for students to sort through and explore to get a sense of the genre your class is studying. So, for example, if you are teaching fantasy fiction, you might mix in some traditional fiction, historical fiction, and biography and ask students to sort through the stacks, deciding what stories fit with what they believe makes a fantasy story. Alternately, you might decide to engage the students in an inquiry

where you give them samples of the type of narrative you will be studying and have them chart what they believe are characteristics of that genre.

## Preparing to Use the Reading Lessons

A majority of our students' reading diet has likely been in narrative texts. Many students will likely have a decent working notion of the ways stories go across genre, and you should build on that. To prepare for the reading lessons in this section I recommend the following:

- **Gather and organize books.** If you are planning to teach this as an independent reading unit, be sure there are enough books at accessible levels to offer students choices as well as ensure they are able to read at least a book per week for the duration of the unit. If this is a club unit, you will want to do the same, except with club books. Each book club set would ideally have at least four copies per title.
- **Consider reading access.** If you have students who are not yet reading at grade level, you might want to gather several series books. Series offer built-in supports because once students can read a book in the series, they have a successful experience under their belts and can apply those skills to the next books in a series. You might also consider digital and audio texts for students who might not yet be able to access higher-level texts of interest to them.

## 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 . . .

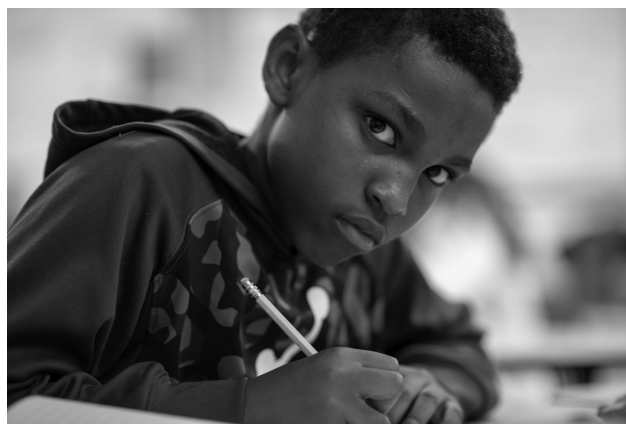
[Turn to your demonstration notebook and make it clear that you're about to write in front of the students. Think out loud as you write.]

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 just stop at 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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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.

