



Thinking creatively: how to create... a fictional character

Overview: Being able to imagine and understand other people and their lives is an important ability for all of us. To do this, we need to use our creativity. Being creative can help us think about and understand how other people live. These activities will help you with thinking creatively by creating your own fictional character.

Time: 30-60 minutes per activity (6 activities total)

Teachers: You can use these activities with a class, as one-off activities or as part of a series on developing creativity and creative writing.

Learners: You can do these activities on your own or with a friend. Just follow the instructions!

Level: Intermediate

Activity 1: Look in the mirror

1. Look at yourself in a mirror. What do you see? Write about what you see in 12 sentences: describe your face using simple language but with as many details as you can. Write not what you know about yourself but what someone else sees when they look at you.
2. Next, think if your face shows anything about your character or your personal history? Do you have a scar, perhaps? Where did it come from? Do you have eyes that look like your mother's or hair like your brother's?
3. Now, make a list of what you think are your four best qualities, and four things you don't like about yourself. Can you see these things in your face, or in the description of your face you have written?
4. Write a short paragraph describing how you are different at different times. How are you when you are alone? When you are with friends? When you are at school or work?

Think of a time recently when you have wanted to make a good impression on someone. (Who was it? Why? Was it an interview? Or a new friend?) What did you do? How did you feel? How did you want to appear, and how did you actually appear?
5. Now it's time for reflection. Look back at what you have written: this shows the difference between appearance and reality. What is real and what is not?

Real-life people are sometimes different to how they appear – and so are some of the best fictional characters. Think of Iago in *Othello*, the mysterious Adam Lang in Robert Harris' *The Ghost* or the characters who don't tell the truth in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Strong fictional characters must be believable and giving them a physical appearance is important. You don't always have to tell your reader what the character looks like, but it is important that *you* know. If you have a full understanding of your character (how or what they would do or think in any kind of situation) it will make the character seem more real, and also give more possibilities to you, the writer, when you decide what to do with your character.



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Activity 2: Faces and questions

Find some pictures of faces. Cut some out of an old magazine, Google 'interesting faces' or use a Macmillan Reader and look at the 'People in the Story' page at the beginning of the book.

Choose one face you like. Then think of twenty questions to ask this person. The first three questions should be:

- ▶ *What is your name?*
- ▶ *How old are you?*
- ▶ *What do you do?*

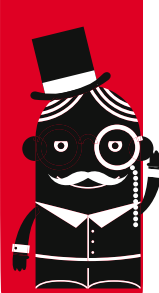
The other questions can be about anything at all, but try and make them interesting. Here are some suggestions:

- ▶ *When were you happiest?*
- ▶ *Do you have any brothers or sisters?*
- ▶ *What is your most treasured possession?*
- ▶ *What's your favourite food?*
- ▶ *What did you last dream about?*
- ▶ *Have you ever told a lie?*
- ▶ *What is your earliest memory?*
- ▶ *What is your greatest fear?*
- ▶ *What's the worst thing anyone has ever said to you?*
- ▶ *What's your favourite smell?*
- ▶ *Do you have any pets?*
- ▶ *What is one thing that nobody knows about you?*
- ▶ *What do you want to do in the future?*

Now write the answers to the questions. Make them all into one paragraph instead of separate sentences. For example, your answer could begin 'My name is ... and I'm ... years old, which is too old to be a ...'. See how many of the answers to the questions you can link together.

Hint: If you can't think of a name, try looking in the telephone book! It's full of them! Otherwise, look at Charles Dickens' books (*A Tale of Two Cities*, *Our Mutual Friend*, *Great Expectations* and *The Old Curiosity Shop* are some of the ones available as Macmillan Readers). His characters always have unusual but memorable names, based on their character or appearance.

A writer should know lots of things about their character, even if those things don't always go into the story.





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Activity 3: The things we carry

1. Look in the pockets of your trousers, jacket or coat, or in your bag. Put the things you find on the table in front of you. Perhaps you have some keys, your phone, a train or bus ticket, some coins. What other things are there? Is there anything unusual? Describe the items that you have in front of you.
2. If a stranger saw these things, what would the stranger know about you? That you drive a car or have a bicycle? That you travel by bus? That you always carry a pen and a notebook? That you're a student or an office worker? Write down three things that people could know about you by looking at these items.
3. Now, look around your house, room or classroom and find a collection of about twenty small objects. These can be anything at all: an old receipt, a letter or postcard, a pencil, a packet of sweets, some coins from another country, a ring or earring. Put them all in a bag or a box, then take out six of them. Put the six objects on your desk.

These are six objects that have been found in a person's pockets. Who is this person? What do we know about the person from these objects? What kind of a person would have these objects on them? Is it the same person as the one you invented in activity 2, or a different person?
4. Write a description of this person. What are their habits? Their daily routine? Ask some of the questions that you asked in activity 2.

Activity 4: Bring a notebook

If you want to create characters and write stories, one important thing you should always do is *carry a notebook*. At all times. In your pocket, in your bag. It doesn't have to be an expensive, beautiful notebook, it can be cheap, simple notebook. (Sometimes it's better to have cheap notebook – if you have a very beautiful notebook, sometimes you don't want to write in it because you are afraid your words will not be as good as the notebook! But with a simple notebook it doesn't matter: you can write anything.)

Everywhere you go, and every time you see or think something interesting, make a simple note of it in your notebook.

Go to a place where a lot of people come together, for example a canteen, a café, a bus stop or a park. Look around you. What do you see? What do you hear?

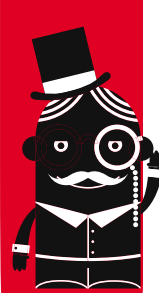
- A) *Look*: if you see a person who has an interesting face or is dressed in an unusual way, write down a description of them in your notebook (but be careful not to stare!) What does this person think when they look in a mirror? How would this person answer the questions from activity 2? What do you think this person carries in their pockets?
- B) *Listen*: listen carefully to how people speak. Write down exactly what they say. How do they speak? Do they speak fast or slowly? Do they have an accent? If your characters speak in a realistic way, it can make them more believable.

Activity 5: Putting your characters into a story

'Character is plot, plot is character.' This quotation, often said to be by F. Scott Fitzgerald (who wrote *The Great Gatsby* and many other stories), shows how important a good character can be in building a good story. Books such as Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* or *Huckleberry Finn* are more about the characters of the boys, rather than what actually happens to them, and even though Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories all have great plots, people remember the character of Holmes as much as the adventures he has.

Here are two activities you can try to get your story going.

- A) Take one of the characters you created in activity 2 or 3. Imagine they have just got home. Write a paragraph describing exactly what they are thinking and feeling.
- B) If you have created more than one character, or if you are working as part of a group, put two of your characters in the same place. Where do they meet? In a café? On a train? At an airport? What do they say to each other? Write a paragraph describing the scene, then the dialogue between them. (If you have kept a notebook, you can perhaps use some of the dialogue you have noted down here.) Now imagine there is some kind of conflict or problem that the characters have. It could be a small problem (the coffee is cold, the train is late), or a big one (there is a bomb on their aeroplane, they have just stolen a million dollars...). How do the characters face their problem?





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Activity 6: Things to remember

Here are some important things to remember when you create fictional characters.

1. Make your character 'grey.' By this, we don't mean 'boring', but a mix of good and bad features. Few people are all good or all bad. Most of us have some good qualities and bad ones (think about the exercises you did in activity 1.)
2. Is your character human? Your character could be an animal or a robot or a ghost or even a tree!
3. Experiment and play with your character. Use the activities as a starting point. After that, you can change or develop your character in any way you like.
4. Write what you know: write from your life. Use your own experiences, memories and notebook entries to make your character more real. You can even make a character simply by describing someone you know – and then changing them!
5. If you get stuck, try these things:
 - a. Draw a picture of your character. This is good if you are more of a visual person, and important if you want to write a comic strip, graphic novel or film script.
 - b. Make a poster for your character. If they are a criminal, it could be a 'Wanted' poster, if they are a film star, it could be for one of their movies.
 - c. Imagine a newspaper interview with your character. Why would they be in the news, and what would they say?
 - d. Make your character's passport. Which country are they from? Which countries have they visited?

Follow up

- ▶ Thinking creatively is not only important when developing a character or writing a story – it's an important life skill. As a follow-up activity, list as many situations that you can think of where you would use your creativity in everyday life.
- ▶ Keep an eye out for the next set of activities: **how to write... a short story**.