

Creating a Character/ Pre-Writing for strong Idea Development

Having students CREATE A CHARACTER helps them experience several aspects of fiction-writing.

Pre-Writing Directions: Tell students they are going to create a fictional character. Provide each student with a copy of the following questions.

1. What is the character's name?
2. Where was s/he born and raised?
3. What is his/her religion and ethnicity?
4. Briefly (though don't get bogged down with cosmetics), what does s/he look like? Fat, thin, tall, short, muscular, flabby, gray, bald?
5. What does s/he believe in?
6. Where has s/he failed or triumphed?
7. Is s/he married, single, divorced?
8. Most important of all, what kind of work does s/he do? Is s/he happy or discontented with it?
9. What are his/her hobbies? Sports? TV?
10. Is s/he neat or is s/he a slob? In order to establish this on paper, you might wish to describe clothing, closet, a drawer of his/her desk, or the trunk of his/her car.
11. Can your mind picture your character making something? Can you see him/her using a simple tool, perhaps, to shape the hull of a model clipper ship?
12. How do his/her hands behave? Relate them to the tangible things that surround him/her.
13. Is s/he musical? Is there one special instrument that s/he plays well or badly? Does s/he play it alone, for him/herself, or can s/he jam it up for an audience of friends or strangers?
14. What was his/her school and schooling like? Who was the teacher s/he respected and why?

15. What are the events, items, pets, pals. . . that s/he remembers for years?
 16. What are his/her idiosyncrasies? Odd habits? Quirks? Pet Peeves?
 17. Other than memories, what are the tangible trinkets s/he saves and treasures from his/her past?
 18. Is s/he witty? If so, you cannot **tell** your readers that s/he is. Instead, you must let the character **show** that s/he is witty.
 19. How does s/he drive a car, tie a tie, gargle? Does s/he cough often, snore, hum, whistle?
 20. Read the editorial page of your newspaper and choose which opinions s/he agrees with or disputes. Does s/he argue bitterly, silently, or to anyone who will listen?
 21. What is his/her goal? Whom does s/he dream about, yearn for, hate?
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Ask students to create a character sketch which incorporates answers to each of those questions. The answers need not appear in the order of the questions.

Using either read-around groups or response groups, have students share their character sketches with others.

As the papers are read aloud, listening students should jot down unanswered questions and inconsistencies in the character as sketched.

The next step is for the student to use the character sketch to write a short scenario which focuses on one portion or segment of the character's life. This vignette must contain narration and dialogue. It must include showing details which bring to life the chosen scene. It must also convey a sense of the character by using a gesture or mannerism symbolizing one aspect of his/her personality.

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Student sample (first-draft writing):

JOSEPH ATTICUS McNAUGHT--CHARACTER SKETCH

Joseph Atticus McNaught was born in 1947. He was born on the longest day of the year, early in the morning. He was the oldest of three children. When he was two, his younger sister Katrina was born. Gerald, the youngest of the siblings, was born when Joseph was three.

Joseph's father, a hard-working, loving man, died in a car accident when Joe was thirteen.

Joe helped his mother Eilleen support their small home in Southern Nevada. Until he was eighteen, he held two jobs during school and three during the summer.

He never complained, though he never got to go out or really have a girlfriend. He was funny and sweet, and everyone liked him.

When he was seventeen, his mother began drinking. She lost her job and was becoming unbearable to live with. Joe sheltered his brother and sister as best he could. He took Katrina and Gerald to the Catholic church they'd all been baptized in, but he'd stopped going in after his father died.

At eighteen, he began putting himself through college, but not the one of his choice; he had his brother and sister to think about, too.

When he was twenty, he was forced to leave college and his English major to arrange for his mother's funeral. It wasn't anything he hadn't expected, and he handled it well.

With his mother's death, many of his financial burdens were lifted, and after finishing his college degree, he moved into a small apartment and spent his time writing.

Now he lives in a bigger apartment. There is only one chair and a small coffee table on a big rug in the living room. All the floors are bare wood and meticulously clean. Books line every wall--some very worn, only a few obviously unopened.

Joe sits on his floor, a Siamese named Zooey--after a character in a Salinger novel--sitting curled in a ball in his lap, content to be near the man who loves her most. Joe is writing to an English professor who provoked some of Joe's best writing in college and is still Joe's most objective critic.

His slim, almost feminine, fingers easily hold his pen. His strokes are even and painfully legible. He writes of his sincere distaste of the new developments in government. He writes of the hopelessness he feels when he sees starving children in far-off countries. He writes of the anger that the senseless murders he hears about cause him.

He sits back and presses his temples. He looks through thoughtful green eyes at his empty apartment. He thinks about his relationships with other people.

He's always had plenty of friends, but he's always helping them. He loves to help people. People look to him for support, advice, and just friendship, but no one really knows Joe. Joe looks at the photo of his father hanging above his complicated stereo system. In the photograph, his father smiles benignly, showing his straight teeth and magnanimous personality. Joe suddenly feels cold. He shivers and wishes there was someone there he could share his feelings with.

He stands up, holding his wine glass, his bare feet padding lightly toward the kitchen.

"Zooey, looks like it's just you and me for dinner again tonight."

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Student sample (final-draft writing):

JOSEPH ATTICUS McNAUGHT--VIGNETTE

Joe looked up at the lonely house. No lights had been left on for him again. He trudged up the porch steps and grasped the handle to the heavy front door. He could see through the small window that the dull kitchen light was burning. He could also see that his brother and sister were still awake. They were in the living room watching TV. He stepped into the house, hesitantly. He was trying to sense if his mother was awake or not. If she were, she'd be drunk. She'd start a fight. She'd claim he wasn't doing a "damn thing to help" her out around the house.

Joe thought about everything he did do to help keep the house in order. It was summer, so he was holding down three jobs. He took care of Katrina and Gerald because she was usually too drunk. The thought of another scene with her made him wince. If only his father could still be alive.

"Joe? Joe McNaught? Is that you, young man?" a slurred yell came from the kitchen.

"Yes, ma'am. I just got back from the paper," Joe answered, heading for the living room to get Katrina and Gerald to their rooms.

"Well, it's about time you showed your face around here! Go down to the store. I need some liquor," Joe's mother bellowed.

"Mom," Joe said, walking to the kitchen to confront her, "they won't sell me any alcohol there anymore. I'm too young. They know it."

"Oh, damn! I can't believe this. I . . ."

"Mom, why don't you go to bed?" Joe interrupted. He knew she was going to start blaming his father for her predicament. He couldn't stand that.

She looked up at him. He looked into her old eyes and her puffy face. He suddenly wished he could bear all her pain. He wished he could wipe the tear stains off her face and protect her forever. He realized then he loved her, no matter how much she "hurt him. She cleared her throat, stood up, and looked down at the table for a moment. Suddenly, she looked back up at Joe and said, her voice slightly choked, "Yes, I'll go to bed. Things will be better tomorrow. You get your paycheck tomorrow, don't you?"

"Yes, Mom," Joe said thoughtfully. "I get my paycheck tomorrow."

-- Danika B., 11th grade writer