

Character The Need to Tell

Objectives:

To create an individual character and establish a foundation for characterization.

To write a monologue based on a photograph used to create a character.

Outcome:

Writers will have written a monologue based on a visual image.

Preparation:

A critical part of the preparation for this exercise is finding photographs or other visual images. We often use art photography by Diane Arbus because of the dramatic nature of her work. You may choose photos that emphasize a specific theme, correspond to a specific historical era, or use more fanciful images (caricatures, animals, etc.) with younger writers or to inspire more imaginative writing. Make sure you have enough photographs for each writer to pick her or his own copy when the time comes.

Note: Try to avoid advertising and photos of celebrities or other recognizable subjects; images that allow for a wider range of interpretations foster creativity and tend to result in more inventive writing.

Procedure:

1. Hold up a photograph. This will be used for a group brainstorming session.
2. Tell the group that there are no right or wrong answers, as you will all be making this up as you go along. Ask the following questions:
 - What is her or his name? (Get a specific answer. You may have to vote between two or three names.)
 - Who is this person? (Have writers begin to define the age, occupation, and general biographical history from what they see in the picture. Make a group decision about who this person is.)

Note: We are now moving away from what can be seen and transitioning into inferring emotions and thoughts from visual cues.

Note: As writers are working, encourage them to hear the voice of the character and to hear the peculiar phrases and distinct way this character has to speak to evoke a particular place and time.

- What is special or unique about her or him? (Have writers think about the way she or he talks, walks, or dresses. Begin to flesh out the outward signs of personality and some specific character traits.)
- Where is she or he? (Derive what information you can from the photograph. Get writers to be as specific as possible.

For example: A restaurant. What kind of restaurant? Expensive or cheap? Does she or he eat there all the time or is this the first time? What's the name of the restaurant?)

- How does she or he feel about being there? Why? Happy? Sad? Angry? Worried? What does the expression in the picture tell you? (This gives the character an identity grounded in place, time, and tone.)
 - What does this character need, want, or dream about? (Whatever you get is fine: a boyfriend, a job, an iPod.)
 - What's stopping her or him from getting it? (He needs an iPod, but has no money. She needs a job, but no one will hire her because she has a police record.)
3. Inform the group they will now have the opportunity to allow her or his character to speak. Instruct writers to begin a speech (written in first person) bearing in mind what the character **Needs To Tell**. Add three new questions writers should answer individually:

- **What** does she or he need to tell?
- **Who** is she or he telling?
- **Why** does this need to be told today?

The character doesn't need to answer these questions in the monologue, but the answers should be what drives her or his words.

Summary Activity and Questions:

Have a few writers read their monologues aloud. Note in each what the individual had to say.

Ask your writers:

Who was this character talking to?

Was she or he alone in the room?

What happens next?

Who would the other characters be?

What might happen?

Were there any words or phrases that the group found interesting?

Tell writers that they have begun to create characters by using a set of key questions and inventing their answers. You can use these questions to develop characters from other pictures, drawings, or faces you see or imagine.

Discuss monologue with your writers:

A monologue is a speech given by one **character**. It is usually written in the first person and may be delivered to another **character** or even to the audience. **Monologues** often take place in extraordinary moments for extraordinary reasons.

Expand the Activity:

You may wish to have writers write a second monologue based on an individual picture of their choosing. If this is the case, let writers first individually answer the preceding "What," "Who," and "Why" questions before they begin writing. It is often fascinating for writers to see how many different and distinct stories and characterizations can emerge from a single photo.

Note: Make sure that every time a writer shares her or his work out loud, it is affirmed with applause.