Become a Character: Adjectives, Character Traits, and Perspective

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Grade Band
9-12

Estimated Lesson Time
Two 45-minute sessions

Overview

In this activity, students "become" one of the major characters in a book and describe themselves and other characters, using lists of accurate, powerful adjectives. In class discussion, students support their lists with details from the novel.

The description here uses *The Scarlet Letter* as an example, but this activity is effective with any work of literature in which characterization is important. Check below for alternate characters and novels for other books that will work with this lesson.

From Theory to Practice

Character analysis represents one of the most common assignments given in literature classes. A successful character analysis demands that students infer abstract traits and values from literal details contained in a text. This lesson plan not only asks students to infer those traits but also to show that knowledge by applying the traits as they create their own list from the character's perspective. By adopting the traits of a main character, students must "show" their understanding of that character's main features, rather than simply "telling" with a list of traits.

Additionally, the lesson plan provides an opportunity for students to explore the supporting reasons for the traits they have chosen, especially in the context of commonalities among the lists compiled by the class. Even when students can confidently formulate appropriate traits, they often find it hard to connect specific details to their inferences. This process of creating lists and then discussing them as a class gives students practice in connecting detail to inference.

Further, the activity incorporates collaborative learning, grammar instruction in context, vocabulary, and higher-level thinking on issues dealing with the novel.

This lesson plan was adapted from John Forsyth's "Through Characters' Eyes," *Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel.* Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1995, pp. 16-17.

Student Objectives
Students will

- review the characteristics of adjectives.
- define the literary term "character trait" and explore how to provide details that support their inferences.
- conduct research using Internet reference resources to find accurate and descriptive word choice.
- explore perspective by writing descriptive word lists from the point of view of a character in a novel they've read recently.

Resources

- Become a Character Assignment
- Character Traits Worksheet
- Sample Character Traits Handout
- Adjectives Grammar Overview
- Character Traits Chart Student Interactive
- Chart paper and markers
- Dictionaries and thesauruses
- Internet access

Instructional Plan

Resources

- chart paper and markers
- Internet access
- copies of the novel being discussed
- Character Traits Chart Student Interactive (or copies of the Identifying Character Traits worksheet)
- copies of the Become a Character Assignment, or an overhead of the assignment
- print copies of dictionaries and thesauruses to supplement online reference tools
- (optional) copies of handouts on character traits and adjectives

Preparation

- Students have read a substantial portion of the novel and have discussed the relative strengths, weaknesses, and attributes of various characters.
- Make copies of the assignment, character traits, and adjective handouts, if desired. Alternately, find similar information in your class grammar and literature books.
- Test the Character Traits Chart Student Interactive on your computers to familiarize yourself with the tool and ensure that you have the Flash plug-in installed. You can download the plug-in from the technical support page.

Instruction and Activities

Session One

1. Review the adjective part of speech, using the Capital Community College "Guide to Grammar and Writing" Web site or your grammar textbook as as reference.
2. Brainstorm a list of character traits or provide a short list on the board, to provide a sample for students.
3. Working from the information on adjectives and the sample character traits, compose a class definition of the literary term.

4. Using a character from another work that students have read, demonstrate the process of compiling a list of character traits, using online resources such as an Internet dictionary or thesaurus or the thesaurus in Microsoft Word. Share the list of character traits with students, if desired.

5. Compile the data for the character in the Character Traits Chart, showing students how to add items to the chart as well as how to print and save their work:

    a. Type your name in the first slot in the interactive.
    b. For the title, choose the character name. Students may also indicate the book which includes the character.
    c. Click **Next** to move to the chart screen and enter your information.
    d. In the first column, write the character's actions from the book. You can include page numbers also. In the second column, write the character traits related to the action.
    e. Demonstrate that writing is not limited to the size of the box shown on screen. Answers will scroll.
    f. When you've finished writing your responses, click **Finish** at the top of the screen.
    g. In the next window, click **Print**. Your answers will be displayed in a Web browser window.
    h. To print answers, choose the **Print** command from the **File** menu. To save your answers, choose the **Save As...** command from the **File** menu. Students can open the file later in a Web editor or a word processor that imports HTML (such as Microsoft Word or AppleWorks).
    i. Show students that the instructions for using the tool are available by clicking **Instructions** at the top of the screen.

6. Divide students into pairs or small groups. Have students work through the character traits on their own for one character from the book they're reading, using the Character Traits Chart. Ideally, the character that they focus on will be the same character whose point of view they will adopt in Session Two. If computers are not available, students can use the Identifying Character Traits worksheet.

7. Once students have compiled a list of traits and support from the novel, give each pair or group a piece of butcher paper or newsprint and a wide marker.

8. Use the Become a Character Assignment as an overhead or handout to explain the activity to the class.

9. Give the students the remainder of the class to work on their lists.

Session Two

1. Give students 10-15 minutes to finish their lists and their charts.
2. As students finish, post their work on the wall or board until all the lists are up.
3. Number the papers and assign each list a letter, so that everyone can refer to a particular list easily.
4. Each student pair then examine the posted lists and, on a sheet of paper, attempts to identify who is being described.
5. Depending upon the time available, look at each list or a selected number of lists, discussing identities.
6. The authors of the lists under discussion finally give the "right answers." Again, depending upon time, the class can discuss the adjectives in each list and can cite specific events and details from the text which either support or call into question the accuracy of those adjectives.
7. (Optional) Have students look for patterns such as the number of pairs who chose a particular character, or adjectives that were repeated by several groups, as well as adjectives that did the best job of description.

Alternative Focuses

Work	Characters
The Pearl	Kino, Juana, the doctor
The Phantom of the Opera	Eric, Christine, Raoul

This lesson plan could also be used as a semester review. Each group could focus on characters from different readings. In addition to identifying the characters, students would identify the work that the characters are in.

Extension

Expand on students' focus on a particular character from the novel by having them write a character diary entry from their adopted character's point of view. Use a diary prompt from Traci's Lists of Ten, or let students make up their own topics.

Web Resources

Merriam-Webster Online: The Language Center
http://www.m-w.com/

> On this Web site, you can access the full text of Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Eleventh Edition, and Collegiate Thesaurus. Site links take you to word games, the featured word of the day, and to Word Central, a language site for kids.

Adjectives
http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/adjectives.htm

> This section of the Capital Community College "Guide to Grammar and Writing" Web site provides extensive information on adjectives—more than enough information to help any students who are unsure about the part of speech.

Using the Thesaurus
http://atto.buffalo.edu/registered/Tutorials/msword/Thesaurus.doc

> This reproducible provides step-by-step instructions for using the thesaurus in Microsoft Word.

Student Assessment/Reflections

Informal assessment works best for this activity. As students work on their list, circulate among pairs, observing students' use of reference books and their lists of adjectives. Provide support and feedback as you move from group to group.

The ultimate assessment for this activity will be students' reaction to the lists written by their peers and their ability to provide support for the traits on the list. As students go over the lists as a group, reinforce good choice of traits, noting both students' word choice and the connection between trait and character.

NCTE/IRA Standards

> 3 - Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

> 6 - Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts.

> 8 - Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

11 - Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.