Character and Setting Overview

Characterisation and setting are usual components of effective narrative writing, although different types of stories may only focus on one aspect. Some stories may be character driven (e.g. *Pippi Longstocking* by Astrid Lindgren) and the setting may be very sketchy or undeveloped. Picture books may use the written text to develop character and the visuals become part of the story (visual literacy) adding to the imagery and developing the sense of the setting (e.g. *The Crime of the Agent Mariner* by Pia Santaklaus).

The effective elaboration of character in narratives involves the explanation and elaboration of both their internal elements such as temperament, motives and attitudes, as well as the external elements of appearance and characteristics.

Other stories, which attempt to build atmosphere and suspense, may focus on setting the scene (e.g. the Wild West genre). Many stories have a balance of both components (e.g. *The River Sai* by Rebecca Edwards).
Skill Focus: Developing characters in narratives

STAGES 1–2

Strategy

Identifying characters, their links to the story and both their physical and emotional connections in the story

Activities to support the strategy

Guided

Exploring substantive communication and deep knowledge (QTF)

Read a picture book with students.

During and after reading, students discuss the characters. The teacher writes their descriptions on the board. Discuss their physical appearance, their personalities, the way they acted and the problems they encountered, caused or helped to solve in the narrative. Use open ended questions to develop a deeper discussion of the text, for example:

- What makes you feel the character acted that way? (motives)
- What characters did you like or dislike? (engaging with text)
- Why? Why not?

Exploring metalanguage for character building (QTF)

Students list the elements that were used in the picture book to describe and build the character. Provide blown up pictures of the characters and write a labelled profile as the characters are described as in the example shown.

K–6 Outcomes

WS1.9: Writes elementary texts and elementary descriptions of familiar people and things
WS2.9: Writes fuller descriptions of people, places and things
RS2.5 Infers the nature of character

Item & Stimulus

Writing task criterion 4
Character and Setting

The Box

Reading
Year 3 Q: 30 and 35
Year 5 Q: 20, 22 and 23
Year 7 Q: 7, 8 and 9

Item Descriptor

Developing characterisation and a sense of time, place and atmosphere

Statements of Learning for English (p. 18)

When students write stories they have the opportunity to:
- introduce characters and provide a brief description of setting
- include brief descriptions of familiar characters, places and things.

Other links

www.lego.com
www.flowersink.com.au
Compare the illustrations of other characters by focusing on:

- the descriptive language
- the visual representation of the characters
- how the physical representation supports their personality (such as sneaky, cheeky, sad, shy).

**Independent**

**Exploring deep understanding (QTF)**

Students can describe and illustrate a character from a shared book experience using the framework discussed in the guided component of the lesson. This can involve labelling and writing a description of the character’s physical appearance and their personality.

Use this proforma (or similar) on A3 paper for the students to complete their task.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who were the main characters in the story?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Name</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draw and label the character</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What did they do in the story?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How did they feel?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
### Understanding characters and conflicts in narratives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who were the main characters in the story?</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does the character look like?</td>
<td>What does the character look like?</td>
<td>What does the character look like?</td>
<td>What does the character look like?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does the character behave? (personality and reactions to events)</td>
<td>How does the character behave? (personality and reactions to events)</td>
<td>How does the character behave? (personality and reactions to events)</td>
<td>How does the character behave? (personality and reactions to events)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Guided

Exploring deep understanding (QTF)

The teacher takes small groups to guide them through the following website:

www.lego.com

This website allows students to create a character suited to a chosen setting and develop events that include problems and resolutions. This will require students to work in pairs. Talking through the activities aims to develop students’ descriptive oral language.

The proforma *Understanding characters and conflicts in narratives* is useful to guide their description building.

Pairs of students have an allocated time to develop their characters on the website. Students can print their characters from the website and

- write a description of them
- describe the setting they chose for them to ‘live in’.
Skill Focus: Developing characters in narratives
STAGE 2

Strategy

Creating character profiles as a class to develop a deeper knowledge about the characters

Activities to support the strategy

Modelled

Exploring metalanguage (QTF)

The teacher describes the illustrations on the book cover using language such as:

I can see how the illustrator has used line to create the fur of the dog and the shapes of the trees.

The words say he is feeling sad and the mouth of the dog is going downwards looking sad.

Guided

Shared book experience: Black Dog by Pamela Allen explores character in terms of personality and physical appearance.

Exploring deep knowledge (QTF)

Discuss what students know about dogs in terms of:

• behaviour
• appearance
• personality.

Enlarge several pictures of the dog from the picture book and discuss the mood represented in the pictures. Draw students’ attention to line, colour and shape.

Read the picture book with students, connecting the visual pictures to the meaning in the words.

Also discuss the feelings of the girl in relation to the dog and how the illustrator shows these feelings compared with how the writer tells the feelings in the words.

Exploring higher-order thinking (QTF)

K–6 Outcome

WS2.9: Writes fuller descriptions of people, places and things

Item & Stimulus

Writing task criterion 4
Character and Setting

Item Descriptor

Developing characterisation and a sense of time, place and atmosphere

Statements of Learning for English (p. 18)

When students write stories they have the opportunity to:

• introduce characters and provide a brief description of setting
• include brief descriptions of familiar characters, places and things.
Ask students to carefully observe the visual emotions of the characters and their feelings from different perspectives using Edward De Bono’s red thinking hat.

The open ended questions would focus on:

- feelings
- hunches
- emotions
- intuition.

In the picture book *My Cat Maisie* by Pamela Allen, this would mean asking questions such as:

*How do you think the boy is feeling?*

*How do you think the cat is feeling?*

*How would you feel if you were in the position of the boy/the cat?*

*What is your hunch about what will happen to the boy/the cat in the narrative?*

Discuss the characters and record students’ descriptions using the metalanguage in the matrix.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>What does the character look like?</th>
<th>How does the character act? (personality)</th>
<th>What does the character do? (behaviour)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Illustrate and label (appearance)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Independent

Exploring deep understanding using a framework as a guide (QTF)

Students illustrate their own pet and write a description using the matrix framework as a guide.

The following text is a published piece. This was the third draft of the student’s work.

Planning Sheet | Published Piece
--- | ---
**What does he look like?**
- Buddy Buddy
- Thick, soft, silky black fur and white patches
- Like velvet
- Long, pointy ears, pointed tip
- Long hair, long tongue, to match
- Long, skinny legs
- Strong, leg-like body
- Long, thin, tail
- Sharp teeth, chews things with them

**What is his personality like?**
- Excitable
- Nervous
- Loving
- Busy
- Holds me
- Chews, bobbles, bites, at my ear — everything
- Gobbles down raw chicken
- Barks a lot — loved, scary
- Sneaks out
- Dogs, holes, jumps, forces, smirks, everyone

This is my dog, Buddy. He has short black and white, patchy fur. His fur is so soft that it feels like velvet when you run your hands across his back. He has a pointy muzzle and a pointed end that stops with a wet, black nose. Buddy’s tongue is long, soft and wet. It is the same shape as his muzzle and curls around when it touches his sharp teeth.

Buddy is an excitable dog and jumps up on you when you say "hello. He is very nervous but and has a loud scary bark. He has a fat nose and is very loving. He pats you back by licking you and nibbling on your ear. That’s gross! Buddy spread out because he is "staying to explore. It will dig holes, jump fences, chew holes in, hire just to get out. Now ontoody. He is a busy dog and plays his toys, washing on the line, trampoline, mats, chair. Shoes and anything haaky. I love my dog Buddy.
Skill Focus: Developing characterisation and representation of personalities in characters

STAGE 2 Supporting ESL Students

**Strategy**

Comparing character types in different narratives using a character profile

**Activities to support the strategy**

**Modelled**

The teacher reads *Teacher-Eater* by Paul Jennings, which portrays different dragon characters, to the class.

The teacher asks:

*What animals do the dragons remind you of?*

*How do the words and illustrations influence the way we see the character?*

Other picture books which could be used:

- *Herb, the Vegetarian Dragon* by Jules Bass
- *Emily and the Dragon* by Lyn Lee
- *The Paperbag Princess* by Robert Munsch

The teacher and students discuss and record a character profile.

The profile includes:

- actions
- thoughts
- feelings.
Character: Dragon

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Colour</th>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Personality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>large</td>
<td>emerald green</td>
<td>scaly</td>
<td>fire-breathing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enormous</td>
<td>golden</td>
<td>sharp</td>
<td>monstrous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>huge</td>
<td>ruby red</td>
<td>revolting</td>
<td>troublesome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gigantic</td>
<td>charcoal grey</td>
<td>rotting</td>
<td>vicious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>massive</td>
<td>coal black</td>
<td>mouldy</td>
<td>defiant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>colossal</td>
<td></td>
<td>shiny</td>
<td>vile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>horrifying</td>
<td>freakish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>stinking</td>
<td>dreadful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>wicked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>revolting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Guided

Students brainstorm other characters that they may expect to see in a story with dragons (character relationships). Use pictures of a variety of characters to assist description. Students brainstorm where these characters would live (setting). Students brainstorm what dragons would do (actions). Students orally construct phrases describing dragons using the attribute table above. For example:

• The enormous, emerald green, vicious dragon …
• The gigantic, coal black, fire-breathing dragon …
Students then complete a group of sentences by using the profile table.

Complete the following sentences using the profile table.

- ____________________________ kidnapped the princess.
- ____________________________ flew to the castle.
- ____________________________ attacked the village.
- ____________________________ let out an ear-piercing roar.
- ____________________________ the top of the trees.

**Independent**

**Exploring deep understanding (QTF)**

Students write a descriptive passage describing their dragon using the character profile for support.

Students write a paragraph detailing a dragon’s actions and its corresponding thoughts and feelings.

**Exploring student engagement (QTF)**

Arrange students into groups. Provide a list of the specialised roles of each person in the group such as:

- recorder
- using thesaurus to find other describing words
- reporter
- resources (collecting, handing in).

In pairs or groups, students use the table to complete sentences about the dragon to build a picture of:

- the feelings and emotions of the character (emotional thought)
- the thoughts of the character (rational thought).

Complete the following sentences adding how the dragon felt, what it did and what it thought.

- The friendly dragon felt ____________ as it fled from ______________.
- It thought __________________________
- The wicked dragon felt ____________ as it destroyed ______________.
- It thought __________________________.
- The evil dragon felt ____________ as it ________________________.
- It thought ____________________________.
- The harmless dragon felt ____________ as it rescued ______________.
- It thought ____________________________.
Skill Focus: Identifying characters in narratives

STAGE 3–4

Strategy

Identifying characters and both their physical and emotional connections in the story

Activities to support the strategy

Independent

Exploring higher-order thinking (QTF)

After reading either a class novel from a novel study, or a novel of their choice, students are asked to analyse the characters in the text in terms of which characters had the:

- most impact on the story
- most impact to them personally.

Title of the text:
Purpose of the text:
Describe the main character of the story:
(Include motives, physical and emotional traits)

What is the age of the character?

What is the setting of the story?

What descriptions in the setting set the mood and link it to the main character?

Is the main character introduced in the setting?

What influence did the character have on other characters/events and the resolution?

Describe the relationship of the character to the event or problem.

What reactions did he have to characters and events in the narrative?

What were the values and beliefs of the character? Were they openly explained or hidden from the reader?

How relevant is the theme
- to you personally?
- to your age group?
- to your community?

K-6 Outcomes

RS3.7 Infers the motivation of a character
WS3.9: Writes more involved literary texts

KLA Outcomes

English 4.6.10: Students learn about the structures and features of imaginative texts including characterisation setting, tension and climax, chronology and time, narrative voice, effective beginnings and endings
English 4.7.9: Students learn to make predictions, infer and interpret texts

Item & Stimulus

Writing task criterion 4
Character and Setting

The Box

Reading
Year 5 Q: 34 and 35
Year 7 Q: 12, 24, 26, 27, 28, 29 and 42
Year 9 Q: 8, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 38

Item Descriptor

The development of characterisation and a sense of time, place and atmosphere

Statements of Learning for English (pp. 21-22)

When students interpret imaginative texts, they have the opportunity to infer characters’ qualities, motives and actions.

When students write imaginative texts, they have the opportunity to provide a description of a setting and characters.
Skill Focus: Building vocabulary to develop setting
STAGES: 3–4 Supporting ESL Students

Strategy
Deconstructing visual text to build descriptive language using the following categories:

• parts of the picture
• colours
• shapes
• textures and materials
• sounds
• smell
• ‘looks like’

Activities to support the strategy

Modelled
Discuss a variety of pictures of a haunted house. Discuss the components in the setting. Discuss any cartoons (film and comic) that use the haunted house as a setting. Discuss what is common in all the settings. Develop a word bank of descriptive phrases emphasising those that evoke atmosphere using the categories above to guide the students.

For example:

• cracked creaky stairs
• light as brilliant as lightning flashing
• broken ancient clock that hung at the highest point of the haunted house
• dark mossy tombstones leant to the right like an old grandpa
• twisted turrets and tall towers
• spiral staircase
• dilapidated walls
• rafters
• columns
• pillars
• covered in dust
• spider webs – swayed or hung or draped or dangled
• crumbling mortar
• weather-beaten shingles
• twisted chimneys
• tangle of trees
• sun’s nervous fingers
• ivy covered columns
• low brooding porch
• ghostly mist curled eerily from a rusty grate
• a room that had never been seen by the world
• stained glass windows
• cobwebbed arches
• silent shadow
• forbidding front door yawned open
• secluded corner
• a narrow window stood ajar
• huge iron padlock
• winter, bare and lifeless
• bare wooden floor
• dim interior

ESL Scales

3.1.11.12: Select suitable descriptive words to enhance effectiveness in writing
5.10.6: Uses fitting detail in descriptions and stories
5.11.14: Uses a range of adjectival expressions for descriptive purposes

Item & Stimulus
Writing task criterion 4 Character and Setting

The Box

Item Descriptor
Building vocabulary to develop a sense of character and setting.

Statements of Learning for English (p. 22)

When students write imaginative texts, they have the opportunity to provide a description of a setting and characters.

Students have the opportunity to draw on their knowledge of texts and language to use adjectives, verbs and visual techniques to represent people, places, events and things in a chosen way.
• intricately detailed

Guided

The teacher supplies an A3 size picture of a haunted house. Students are given descriptive phrases on cardboard and together they label it.
Using the attribute table below, students orally construct phrases describing the features of a haunted house.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Texture</th>
<th>Colour</th>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Objects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>large</td>
<td>rough</td>
<td>coal black</td>
<td>ancient</td>
<td>windows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>palatial</td>
<td>weather-beaten</td>
<td>ghostly grey</td>
<td>forbidding</td>
<td>walls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>megalithic</td>
<td>dusty</td>
<td>brown-stained</td>
<td>deadly silent</td>
<td>doors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enormous</td>
<td>crumbling</td>
<td>blood red</td>
<td>twisted</td>
<td>roof</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tiny</td>
<td>bare</td>
<td></td>
<td>ghostly</td>
<td>porch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>compact</td>
<td>cobwebbed</td>
<td></td>
<td>eerie</td>
<td>tower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poky</td>
<td>mossy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>staircase</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Complete the following sentence cloze using the attribute table.

1. The __________, __________, __________ doors were opened wide.
2. The __________, __________, __________ walls looked ominous.
3. Bats perched high on the __________, __________, __________ roof.
4. The wind blew the curtains from the __________, __________, __________ windows.
5. The door was tightly locked by a __________, __________, __________ padlock.

Story script from 2008 NAPLAN.
Read the text through with students. On the second read, students highlight the language that is used to describe the setting.

Discuss what categories:

- the writer has used to describe the setting
- the writer could have added to build the setting.

As a group, develop sentences to extend the description of the cemetery setting.

**Independent**

**Exploring deep understanding (QTF)**

Students complete a narrative orientation (opening) which requires them to describe a haunted house or another mysterious setting. Students may use word banks to enable them to create effective descriptions of the setting. Provide the students with a variety of story openers.

For example:

*William stopped and stared at the address he was given. He looked up and his eyes focused on the house he was supposed to visit. It …*

*There it stood like a monster reaching out. The creaking wood sounded like the house was screaming at me. I …*
Skill Focus: Identifying characters in narratives

STAGE 4

Strategy

Identifying characters’ physical and emotional connections by developing character profiles and mapping character relationships

Activities to support the strategy

Access the website http://www.bellshakespeare.com.au/education2008/14resources/14resources.html and identify stimulus that will support what you want students to learn.

Further information is available in the teacher’s kit on character relationships in the play you choose.

Guided

Discuss character list and identify relationships with the students.

Show students a model of a concept map so that they understand how the information is to be organised.

Exploring problematic knowledge (QTF)

Encourage problem solving strategies by asking questions such as:

• How could we record these relationships?
• What form of mapping would be most effective?
• What issues with recording do you think we will have and how could we overcome these issues?

KLA Outcome

English 4.6.10: Students learn about the structures and features of imaginative texts including characterisation, setting, tension and climax, chronology and time, narrative voice, effective beginnings and endings.

Item & Stimulus

Writing task criterion 4
Character and Setting

Item Descriptor

Developing an understanding of how character relationships are represented

Statements of Learning for English (pp. 25-26)

Students understand that characters and plot are developed using dialogue and written and visual resources that describe appearance and actions. When students write imaginative texts, they develop characterisation through descriptions, actions and dialogue.

Other Links

http://www.saskschools.ca/curr_content/onlineteach/instructionalstrategies/indirectinstruction/conceptmapping.htm
Independent

Exploring deep knowledge (QTF)

Students create a concept map to record character relationships.

Students work in pairs or small groups and evaluate each other’s analysis in terms of:

- how their maps were similar/different
- ways to change and improve the map next time
- ways that worked that you would use again.

Students scan the text and identify the main characters such as Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, the Witches, Banquo, King Duncan, Macduff, Lady Macduff and Malcolm.

Students choose two opposing character types and describe the characters in terms of:

- actions
- personality
- motives.

They use a matrix to record their ideas:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character one:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character two:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exploring deep understanding (QTF)

Students then choose a modern day character or celebrity that fits the profile of Shakespeare’s characters and present their results and explanation to the class.
Skill focus: building settings in narratives

STAGE 4

Strategies

Using film to build description

Deconstructing the setting to understand how it conveys:
• mood and tension
• context for the events to follow

Providing time to research the setting of narratives widens students’ real world knowledge to use as a basis for their descriptions

Activities to support the strategies

Guided

Exploring deep knowledge (QTF)

Go to www.australianscreen.com.au

On this site teachers can access the following two silent film clips. The omission of sound for this activity is intentional as it focuses the students on what they can see not hear.


In both films the following activity is carried out:

The film clip is viewed twice. After the first viewing, students identify the components in the scene.

Using the following categories assists students to deconstruct the film:
• parts of the picture
• colours
• shapes
• textures and materials
• feels like
• mood

The use of effective literary devices will assist in creating similes, metaphors and vocabulary to describe the setting.

Deconstructing Film Clip no. 1

Students can be divided into groups to describe one or all of the categories and then report back to the whole class.

For example:

Parts of the picture: water, icebergs, deck of ship, mast, ropes

Colours: (the film is black and white so they have to be imagined) white, ice blue, black
Shapes: cloud like ice, wavy ocean, stick-like ropes and the contrast of the curves of the ocean to the straight lines of the ship

Textures and materials: water is frozen, liquid, gas

Feels like: cold, icy, air sticks to your lungs with every breath

Mood: loneliness, isolation, sparseness, rawness of nature

**Deconstructing Film Clip no. 2**

View the film clip then discuss the types of themes that would suit the setting. Discussing Mawson’s expeditions in relation to other Australian expeditions and recent current events would assist in making the activity contextual.

**Independent**

Students choose one of the clips to use as stimulus for writing an opening landscape setting for a narrative.