

Stepping into the Story through Character Interpretation

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Character interpretation is one of the most powerful forms of storytelling. A good character interpreter leaves his or her audience feeling as though they have actually encountered someone who experienced the events being described, whether from history, current events or literature.

This handout assumes that you want to portray someone real. The process is similar if you invent a person or portray someone from literature. In that case you *invent* the information you would have researched if the person were real.

Gather the Information

Pick a character: Identify the *type* of person you want to portray. If your story is about someone famous, you might portray someone who knew the person, instead of portraying the actual person (i.e. a family friend, a soldier who served under the General).

Decide whether or not you plan to answer questions in character: An interpretation is more compelling if the audience can ask questions. To answer questions in character you need in-depth background information, though, because you never know what someone might ask!

Learn the facts about the character or event: Use a variety of sources in your research: books, periodicals, the Internet. Use:

- primary sources (things created by that person or someone with first-hand knowledge: diaries, account books, military records, church records, etc.)
- secondary sources (books, articles by authors who were not there) that are well-cited, with footnotes, preferably published by research institutions
- Images (of the person, their home or town, maps of the local area)

Record everything you can about the person, *noting your sources*. Take notes from each source in a different font or color, to help you remember what you found in research, and what you inferred or invented.

- Person's name, birthdate and place, death date and place
- Family members; birthdates, death dates
- Other influential people or events in the person's life
- Person's location or residence at the time of the central events

- Motives, personality traits, major interests, political views
- Relevant events earlier in his or her life
- Physical description
- How this person supports what you're trying to tell, and specific incidents you can use to make your points

Learn about that person's world

- Technology (What are the "modern conveniences?")
- Occupation (What does this person actually *do* at work?)
- Community (Size? Ethnicities? Religions? Attitudes?)
- Childrearing (Typical family size? Typical education by gender?)
- Health (What's usually treated at home? When would they call a doctor?)
- Legal issues (What laws either bind or empower this person?)

Use educated conjecture to fill in the blanks: Invent only what you must to make a cohesive story. Invent in a way that respects the person you're portraying and supports what you're trying to teach.

Organize the Information

List the events and details that are relevant to your story.

Choose the right "window": Don't portray the old lady reminiscing in her rocking chair; portray her *during* the event, when the future is still unclear.

Become a reporter: Note the following bits of information:

- Who is the person?
- When did the central event happen?
- What was that event?
- Where did it happen?
- Why did it happen?
- How did it happen?
- How was the person involved in the event?
- How did he/she feel about it?
- What remains unresolved?

Develop the Interpretation

Refer back to your interpretive objective: What is the story you're trying to tell? Set aside anything extraneous for now. You can add some back in as filler, if you have time..

Beginnings and Endings:

- **Hook your audience!** Capture their attention with your opening.
- **Create a good story in the middle** with descriptive language about the characters, setting and situation
- **Don't tie it up with a bow!** You can foreshadow the resolution, or even resolve the big crisis completely, but leave something unknown, so that you...
- **Release your audience curious** to know more

Learn the Story

Don't memorize your presentation: It's really important not to sound scripted, because you want your audience to believe you are who you say you are. So use as many senses as possible to embed the story in your memory:

- Imagine every experience you plan to talk about, detail by gory detail.
- Use colors, shapes and designs. Make a collage, draw pictures, create anagrams, write poetry, make a storyboard...
- Converse with yourself in character.
- Outline it, longhand, while you speak what you're writing.
- Write it out, longhand, while you speak what you're writing.

Dress for Success

Costuming: If you're portraying a character from history, study the clothing first. You will have more credibility if you look authentic.

- Museum exhibits or catalogues of exhibits
- Books on period clothing
- On-line images: clothing, portraits, and even landscapes that include people

Just because a style was popular, doesn't mean everyone wore it! Be sure you're looking at images of people of the *right age and status*. Look critically at the details:

- Hair and facial hair styles, make-up
- Necklines, sleeve length and shape
- Length and shape of pants or skirts
- Jewelry, Accessories, Caps, Hats, Shoes

You don't have to spend a fortune. Look for items that have the right shapes and figure out how you can adapt them. In general, solids and stripes are safest; stay away from florals and lace.

Fool Their Ears!

Accents: A bad accent can really distract your audience, so unless you're really good at accents, don't use one. If the presentations are worded well, the language will fool your audience into thinking they are hearing accents!

- Use dialect to sound different--read as many primary sources as you can. Pay attention to vocabulary, phrasing and sentence structure.
- Try placing the sounds differently in your mouth to get different sounds; in the front of your mouth or in your throat, emphasizing consonants or not.

Get Ready

Rehearse: Concentrate on the most important points, and play with phrasing until you find what feels natural.

Trial Run: Present to a trial audience or two. Ask them:

- Did I say anything that didn't make sense to you?
- Was the progression of the story clear to you?
- Was there anything you wanted to know more about?
- How can I make this a stronger presentation?

Revise the presentation based on the feedback you receive

Give yourself something to do, if you need to: Use props if they will add realism to your character, but don't let them become the focus of your presentation.

Go!

Don't Pace: Stand on both feet, with your feet apart for good balance. Relax your shoulders and take a deep breath.

Don't Race: Make sure you can be heard: speak slowly and distinctly. Make it seem natural by through variable speed, inflections and tone.

Consider the Space: Should you use a lavalier or over-the-ear microphone, or can you be heard if you simply face the audience and use good voice support?

Save Face: If you forget something, just keep going—they'll never know!