

Mini-Lesson: Understanding Characters

Purpose

Students will identify how authors reveal characters through what they say, how they look, what they do, and what others say about them (Fountas and Pinnell).

Standards

- Standard 2, Getting the Meaning, Fluency: Students will use pacing and intonation to convey the meaning of the clauses and phrases of the sentences they read aloud.
- Standard 2, Getting the Meaning, Comprehension: When engaging with narratives, students will explain the motives of characters.
- Standard 2, Getting the Meaning, Comprehension: When engaging with narratives, students will say how a story relates to something in real-life experience.
- Standard 3, Reading Habits, Literature: Students will examine the reasons for a character's actions, accounting for situation and motive.

Materials

My Rotten Red-Headed Older Brother by Patricia Polacco

Overhead transparency of page 4 of *My Rotten Red-Headed Older Brother*

Intended Learning Statement

"We've thought and talked a lot about characters in our stories. For the next several days, we'll examine how an author reveals characters as a story is developed and how thinking deeply about the characters can help us understand the story better.

Remember, we have read My Rotten Red-Headed Older Brother by Patricia Polacco, and it is a favorite. Now we'll examine parts more closely and see how she helps us understand her characters through what they say and do."

Whole Group Instruction

- **Modeling:** Briefly summarize the first page (not necessary to reread), reviewing how the setting is a farm in Michigan and how her "babushka" would tell stories to Patricia and her brother.

Display the overhead transparency of page 4 and read the first paragraph to the group. *"Now I knew that she loved me all right, but I couldn't quite understand how she could even **like** my older brother, Richard..."*

"I'm thinking that the way this sentence is written can help us to figure out, or infer, some feelings Patricia has for her brother. Do you see how she has put the word 'like' in italics to help us notice it? Listen to me read it again." Reread.

"What did you notice me do when I read it?" Students respond. *"That's right, I emphasized it with expressive feeling. Some of you who have a brother or sister might use your own background knowledge to think about what that feeling might be. What are you inferring she feels about her brother, _____?"* Students respond. *"Why do you think that?"* Students respond. *"Does anyone have a different thought? Why?"*

"Let's go on with this part of the story and see if our thinking is on the right track." Read the rest of page 4. *"When she ends this part with 'he would do something*

terrible to me and laugh, I'm thinking that she might next actually tell us about one of those terrible things...something he does. Let's see..." Read pages 5–8.

Use an overhead of [Inferring: Developing a Theory about Characters](#) to record what the characters said and/or did and what they were thinking and/or feeling.

- **Active Involvement:** Ask students to talk to each other to develop a theory or an understanding of the character. *"Turn to your partner and talk about what is your theory of the character. Think about what the character says, does, feels, and thinks to help you understand the character so you can develop a theory. When you have a theory, it will help you predict what the character will do next, understand the character's relationships with other characters, and help you see how the character changes over time as your theory changes."*

Have several students share their theory of the character and explain how they arrived at that theory.

Work Period

"When you are reading fiction today, either independently or in your guided reading group, think about how the author gets you to understand more about the character in your story through what they say or do, think, or feel. Mark the place with a sticky note and be prepared to share something you found out or inferred about your character."

Share Time

"Today we've heard several examples of how we can better understand a character. We've seen that an author helps us understand a character in several ways."

"The author might..."

- *provide dialogue, which helps us infer feelings or thoughts of the character; or*
- *give us examples of character actions.*

"Who found places in their reading where the author reveals character?" Students share their examples and put their sticky notes next to the appropriate strategy on the chart.

"Tomorrow we'll work with this idea some more."

Note

You may want to use the guiding questions from [Scaffold for Inferring](#) if you are just introducing the topic of inferring about characters. Be sure students understand how they can use character actions and dialogue to infer before you ask them to develop a theory of character.