



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2013 Volume III: John L. Gaddis, Professor of History

Understanding Character Development Through the Use of Autobiography

Curriculum Unit 13.03.08, published September 2013
by Taylor Davis

Introduction

The numbers eleven, twelve, and thirteen seem small; and in fact, they are. When compared to the number sixty-eight or even twenty-six, they stand as "less than" in value. My sixth grade students are eleven, twelve, and thirteen years of age. In the grand scope of many adult eyes, their lives appear to be tiny, barely beginning; and in fact, they are. But I argue that even with a life so small these young students still have tales worthy of telling.

At the start of middle school, a new step in a child's education, a right of passage crossing from fifth grade graduation into the doors of a secondary school, my students find themselves in a complicated mix. They are at the final stages of childhood, in the middle of adolescence, and can eagerly smell the thrill of being a teenager. At eleven years old their lives are full. They talk incessantly, they form relationships, they hang out with friends, they go through an array of changing emotions on a weekly, daily, and hourly basis. They seek to be loved, liked, validated, and approved. They wish to please, but also rebel. They are starting to sort out who they are and who they will become, and they have stories to tell about it all.

At twenty-six, I find myself in the unique position of guiding my students in uncovering their character. Each year I watch the character of my students bud, morph, waver, grow, and begin to solidify. The well-known children's author Roald Dahl was sixty-eight when he first published his autobiography *Boy: Tales of Childhood*. As he recalls and writes the memories of his life with striking childlike detail, readers see the character of a young boy begin to form. It is the moments of childhood, current and past, the actions and decisions of those very full eleven, twelve, and thirteen year old lives, that impact character. For my students, it is these moments that comprise the autobiographies of their lives right now and paint the portrait of who they are.

My curriculum unit, "Understanding Character Development through the Use of Autobiography," emphasizes the complicated mix in which my students stand—child, adolescent, teenager—and the defining moments that characterize who they are. The unit is designed for the middle school classroom and can be adapted for grades six through eight. Throughout the course of a month, students will read and write in the genre of autobiography. Using *Boy: Tales of Childhood* by Roald Dahl as a primary mentor text, students will explore the principals of autobiography and use Dahl's writing to analyze character development within several of the

short chapters. Students will examine the techniques that Dahl employs as he brings to life the characters of his past and use his text as an inspiration for writing their own autobiographical vignettes that center on a theme of childhood.

The goal of my unit is to ultimately have my students arrive at a view of autobiography as a portrait of a person's character, as a story or the compilation of several small stories that have the power to show who a person is. As students explore this concept, they will master the skill of characterization and acquire techniques used in characterization that can be applied to their own writing.

Demographics

I teach sixth grade English to students at Lucille M. Brown Middle School in Richmond, Virginia. My school system services students from an urban environment who vary in socioeconomic status and academic ability level. Most, but not all, of my students come from a low socioeconomic status. Many qualify to receive free or reduced priced lunch and come from single-parent households. Academically, they are all general education students; however, within the general education program, my students are grouped into varying class "settings," including inclusion, general, honors, and advanced. Though these leveled distinctions in class settings exist, many of my honors and advanced students are not necessarily "gifted." On standardized state and local assessments they typically perform at an average sixth grade level, while my general and inclusion students often perform slightly to well below grade level.

In 2012, over half of the population of Richmond was black or African American. Thirty-nine percent was recorded as white, and just over six percent was Hispanic or Latino. ¹ My school and classroom represents this trend only in part. My students are predominately African American. More than three fourths of the students in each of my classes are black. Unlike the population of Richmond, very few of my students are white. I teach four core sixth grade English classes and one Enrichment subsection. In those five classes, I may have a total of three to five white students. Over the past two years, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of Hispanic students attending Lucille Brown Middle School. Hispanic and Latino students make up slightly less than a fourth of each of my general education classes. One class may be comprised of about five or more Hispanic students.

Rationale

What I notice from my students in varying degrees is that they have a lack of relevant experiences to draw from when asked to infer in a text. They lack either personal knowledge, the knowledge that can come from sheer familiarity, or sometimes both. With all that the city of Richmond has to offer—a variety of museums, festivals, farmers' markets, a zoo, park and river systems, a vibrant art community, music scene, and multiple theater opportunities—they are exposed to very little outside of their communities and therefore have little to build on when asked to read between the lines and glean meaning from a text. This deficit limits my students when it comes to successfully being able to master the skill of making inferences and drawing conclusions. I notice this difficulty, although sometimes in different manifestations, in both my African American students

and in my Hispanic students. Being able to make meaning out of implied information is a skill that is vital in establishing good reading comprehension. My curriculum unit, in part, helps students to master an aspect of this skill.

My unit addresses inferences in the form of characterization. Authors use several different techniques to develop characters in their writing. Rather than describe a character's complete personality to readers, they show who a character is and reveal traits by detailing the character's actions, describing the character's appearance, writing authentic speech, providing a window into the character's thoughts, and looking at how others view the character. By using these techniques, an author forces a reader to rely largely on his or her inference skills when determining who a character really is. Likewise, an autobiographer shapes the facets of his or her own character for readers by implying traits that must be inferred largely from actions in and reactions to different situations in his or her own life.

Content Objectives and Unit Overview

Through the study of this unit, students will investigate the process of characterization, practice the inference skills necessary to master it, and explore the techniques used in creating it within writing. In *Boy: Tales of Childhood*, Roald Dahl paints memorable pictures of the characters from his childhood before detailing his experience with those characters. As students come to chapters in Dahl's book that contain rich character sketches, they will identify the information in the text that allows them to characterize. As guiding questions, students will be asked to identify the ways in which Dahl provides opportunities for his readers to characterize and consider why an author would craft characters in the way that Dahl does. Students should be able to pull out writer's techniques in the process of characterization, such as the use of vivid adjectives in description, showing details, figurative language, and the inclusion of dialogue. The second part of my unit will focus on the teaching and application of these techniques in guiding students to write several short autobiographical pieces about their childhood.

Dahl's autobiography can be looked at as a series of short chapters or vignettes about different times in his early life. The book is presented in chronological order, but one event is not necessarily directly related to the next. Each chapter centers around what could be considered a fairly common theme of childhood, for instance a time of questioning, a deep-seated dislike for a grown-up, a dream of the future, a traumatic event, or being reprimanded for doing something wrong. Students will be asked to pull, or in some cases construct, these themes from each chapter. As students compile a list, they will be asked to participate in informal autobiographical journal writing about times in their lives that center on similar themes. Students will select two to five journal writings to revise as they learn about the writing techniques Dahl uses in characterization. During the writing process students will be exposed to mini-lessons on the various techniques that they observed in Dahl's writing (vivid description, showing details, figurative language, dialogue). In addition to the examples presented in the mentor text, *Boy: Tales of Childhood*, these techniques will be modeled for students, and they will be provided with opportunities to practice and evaluate the use of each technique in class with the goal of successfully incorporating the techniques into their own autobiographical writing. The focus will be on writing in a way that shows or reveals character.

As students read Dahl, they will also be learning about the genre of autobiography. Students will be asked to consider how an autobiography can be seen as a portrait of a person's life. They will consider the meaning and

also the limitations this idea presents in examining a person's life. Students will apply their knowledge of autobiography to Dahl and also to their own personal writings. At the conclusion of the unit, students will prepare several revised autobiographical vignettes focused on a common childhood theme that in some way reveals character. Students will choose one of these vignettes to publish in a class book. Students' writing will demonstrate an understanding of techniques used in the process of writing characterization. As a closing exercise, students will share their writing with their peers and once again be asked to come back to the idea of an autobiography as a portrait. Students will discuss how the pieces of writing their peers chose to share show a picture of who the writer is.

Background

Roald Dahl (The Writer and the Text)

The beloved children's writer Roald Dahl is both the subject and the author of the primary text for my unit. Dahl himself experienced many rather ordinary events in his childhood, but he tells his story in a very colorful way. He was born in Britain to Norwegian parents in 1916. In Dahl's biography, *Storyteller: The Life of Roald Dahl*, his biographer Donald Sturrock remarks that Dahl was often regarded as an outsider and seen as a foreigner because he was born to immigrant parents.² Nevertheless, Dahl was proud of his Norwegian heritage. He spent most of his childhood growing up in Wales. His mother taught him to speak Norwegian and would often tell him stories from her native country that would later influence him as a writer. Dahl's father, Harald Dahl, was a self-made man who left Norway early in his life to make a living for himself. At the age of fourteen, Dahl's father lost an arm after falling off the roof of a house. Despite this hardship, Dahl's mother always portrayed Harald as one who persevered, met adversity, and overcame obstacles. Harald died when Dahl was just three years old. As Dahl described it, Harald was grieving over the recent death of Dahl's older sister. When Harald contracted a case of pneumonia in 1919, he simply refused to fight against the illness and chose instead to join his daughter in death. This moment would later prove to be a significant event for Dahl. He, too, would lose a daughter later in life and many speculate that the loss of his parent influenced the structure of many of his children's stories.

Dahl's mother, Sofie Magdalene, single-handedly raised Dahl, his two stepsiblings from his father's previous marriage, and Dahl's three sisters on her own. Dahl was Sofie's only son, and as Sturrock writes, "he was his mother's pride and joy."³ She dedicated her life to her children, and Dahl described her as highly influential in his life. He was just as fond of his mother as she was of him.

When Dahl was seven years old, He attended Llandaff Cathedral School. It was there that he received his first beating by the school's headmaster. Corporal punishment in school was not unusual in Dahl's day. In fact, the beating he received at Llandaff would not be his last. Dahl was punished for pulling a prank on the owner of the local candy shop. Dahl and his friends placed a dead rat that they found into one of the shop's sweets jars. When the terrified female shop owner discovered it, she went to Dahl's school and demanded that the boys be found and punished. Indeed they were. While the story is adventurous and rather comical, the beating that Dahl and his friends received for their actions was not. It was harsh, so much so that Dahl's mother was deeply disturbed by it. She came to the rescue of her son and after giving the headmaster a piece of her mind, removed Dahl from the school at the end of the next term.

Boy: Tales of Childhood covers Dahl's earliest years. Comical, adventurous, and cringing tales like the one above fill the pages of the book. Dahl writes mainly about his experiences in Welsh and English boys' preparatory and boarding schools in the 1920s and 30s and about the adults and unforgettable people he encounters while there.

Some of his experiences are very common, like crying on the first day of school, feeling homesick while away from his mother, and enjoying sports. Other experiences are rather characteristic to the time and characterize Dahl's life as out of the ordinary for our time, like serving as a Fag, or as Dahl puts it, "the servant of the study holder in whose study I had my little desk,"⁴ at his final school, Repton. As a Fag, he was made to pre-heat the frosty wooden seat of the outhouse lavatory with his bare buttocks on winter nights whenever the study holder wished to use the restroom. He writes about pranks he played as a boy, such as filling his half-sister's fiancé's pipe with goat droppings. Dahl got into his fair share of trouble as a boy and recounts those memories with striking detail. He tells of the trouble he gets into for receiving a stripe for talking during Prep when he needed to ask for a nib for his pen. With the grandeur and nostalgia associated with a child's magical place, Dahl writes about the summer holidays he spent in Norway. He writes about the traumatic accidents he incurred as a child, like nearly losing his nose in a car crash. He ends the autobiography at the completion of his secondary schooling having obtained a much-coveted job at the Shell Oil Company in East Africa at the age of 20 in 1936.

The Text

I chose to use Dahl's autobiography for several reasons. I found it quite accessible for the students in my classroom. The book as a whole is short. There are 176 pages and almost every page has an accompanying illustration, photograph, or excerpt from a letter written by Dahl to visualize what is being said or to simply present an artifact from Dahl's life. The length and the pictures are significant for my students, who often are not readers outside of the classroom and many of whom read below grade level, because they will no longer view the text as intimidating or as an impossible feat to finish before they even begin. The chapters are also fairly short, meaning my students can read portions of the book in class, and still have additional time to discuss the content, apply skills, and engage in related activities all on the same day. The book lends itself well to largely independent reading within the classroom. Though the Flesch Kincaid Reading Level Scale registers the text at a 7.7 reading level, as a teacher, I found the book to be manageable reading material for my students. The language was not terribly complicated, nor does it impede comprehension. I feel comfortable allowing my students to read the text on their own without feeling the need to stop and explain or check for understanding at every third paragraph, page, or end of a chapter.

Even though the book is set throughout the early 20th century (1920s-1930s) and in the United Kingdom, a territory largely unfamiliar to my students, I don't find the historical context of the book to be a great hindrance to students' comprehension of the material either. In the context of my unit it was important to me that my students not spend a significant amount of time on acquiring historical knowledge of an unfamiliar time period or place. There is some background knowledge that will need to be introduced like showing my students where the United Kingdom and Norway are and making sure they understand the difference between our schools today and the English schools of Dahl's time. Dahl, himself, also includes necessary background information in his writing, such as explaining the school roles of headmasters, Boazers, and Fags or letting the reader know about the difference in medical practices during his day.

Children love Dahl's stories and his writing style. Dahl's biographer attributes the popularity of his stories with children to two factors, his ability to easily recall his own childhood and his capacity to relate to children while

still an adult ⁵. "His seductive voice, the subversive twinkle in his eye, and his sense of the comic and curious gave him an ability to mesmerize almost every child who crossed his path—yet he could also remember and reimagine his own childhood with astonishing sharpness. The detail might sometimes be unreliable, but what never failed him was an ability instinctively to recreate and understand the child's point of view." ⁶

Roald Dahl is a pied piper of children's literature, and in choosing his autobiography it is my hope that my students will be lured into his writing as well. The events that he writes about are relatable across time and space. The chapter in which Dahl receives a stripe when he is caught talking during Prep as he asks the boy beside him for a nib for his pen reminds me at once of my students. When they are caught talking in class at times when they should be working, the excuse I always hear often involves "but I was asking . . ." some variation of somebody for something extremely vital. They know what it is like to feel like they are in a critical predicament and solved it the best way they knew how—"There was still another half-hour of Prep to go and I couldn't sit there doing nothing all that time. Nor could I put up my hand and tell Captain Hardcastle I had broken my nib. I simply didn't dare. And as a matter of fact, I really *wanted* to finish that essay." ⁷ They know how they slyly talk in class as if it is unbeknownst to supervising adults—"Dobson's desk was almost touching mine. I thought I would risk it. I kept my head lowered but watched Captain Hardcastle very carefully. When I was fairly sure he was looking the other way, I put a hand in front of my mouth and whispered, 'Dobson . . . Dobson . . . Could you lend me a nib?'" ⁸

And then there is that *but*. They know what it is like to be caught doing something wrong, but, for lack of a better word, from their point of view it was for an inherently "good" reason—"Suddenly there was an explosion up on the dais. Captain Hardcastle had leapt to his feet and was pointing at me and shouting, 'You're talking! I saw you talking! Don't try to deny it! I distinctly saw you talking behind your hand!' I sat there frozen with terror. 'Do you deny you were talking?' he shouted. 'No, sir, no, b-but . . .'" ⁹ My students can connect to this event in Dahl's life, and because they can connect to it, they can bring experience and feeling to the text as well.

Autobiography

When I teach autobiography, I teach it as the story of a person's life told by that person. We talk about the fact that an autobiography is written in first person. We examine the prefixes and root words auto- (self), -bio- (life), and -graph- (write). If there is time, we may read a short excerpt from an autobiography. At times, I have had students compare an autobiographical account of an event to the same biographical account so that they can see the difference in the first person and third person point of view and the amount of personal detail a writer can include in an autobiography. And then we move on in the curriculum. All in all, the information I give on autobiography is basic and brief, and in reality the amount of information I give is often seen as enough in my school district. Autobiography is not really valued in the sixth grade English class as part of a literary genre. We shy away from it in the classroom, but the genre should truly be considered for its wealth of literary worth.

Autobiography exposes students to nonfiction writing and also can be manipulated for the use of teaching fiction standards as well. Quite a few autobiographies are written by children's and young adult authors. I find that these autobiographies not only work well for teaching the principles of the genre, but, because of the quality of writing, can also be used to teach literary techniques. Dahl's autobiography reads very much like one of his children's stories and therefore includes fictional literary techniques. It is because of this similarity that I can use his work to teach characterization so fully and in a way that is applicable across genres.

The Principles of Autobiography

Autobiography, like biography, has several common and loose-fitting defining principles or characteristics. Hermione Lee in her book *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* coins ten rules that biography must follow.¹⁰ Borrowing from Lee, I will suggest to my students that autobiography follows many of the same principles as biography and adapt those principles for use in my classroom. Rather than list these principles for my students, as an introduction into the genre I will ask them to explore the principles by reading Dahl's autobiography and writing an informal version of their own autobiographies without much initial guidance. After sharing some of the autobiographies in class, I will ask students to discuss a few of the common principle ideas that were inherent in almost everyone's writing.

For instance, most students will begin their autobiographies with their birthdate. Principle One: Autobiographies typically start at the beginning of a person's life and work their way up. I am sure they will list most of the following information in their writing, their name, the names of their parents, where they live and go to school, their current age, and their grade. Principle Two: An autobiography tells who a person is; it establishes a sense of identity. Many students will share significant events in their autobiography. Principle Three: Autobiographies include significant events and the author selects which events to include. At some point, one student may ask another, "that really happened to you?" Principle Four: Autobiographies are intended to be true accounts of a person's life; it is a nonfiction form of writing. And in the same respect, students should note that some experiences are subjective to the writer's point of view.

Finally, and more so perhaps in the autobiographies that we read, students should note that autobiographies have an element of reflection and highlight a sense of value in a person's life. This is Principle Five. Lee ascertains in her ninth rule for biography that biography should have value for the reader, "a recurring argument is made for the usefulness of the genre. If biography can teach us how to live our lives, or can open our minds to lives very unlike our own, then it has an educational purpose: it is a branch of history and of knowledge."¹¹ One of the earliest autobiographies published, Saint Augustine's *Confessions* mirrors this principle. At the time the book was published, Augustine was a bishop in the Christian church, yet there seems to be no omission of even the most lurid of sins in his writing. Augustine shares the stories of his life, exposing his imperfections, because we as readers stand to gain and learn from the example of how he lived his life.

Autobiography as a Portrait

In my unit I want my students to understand autobiography as a nonfiction work of art that paints a detailed picture of the character of its subject through the careful and deliberate telling of life experiences. Lee shares the long-standing analogy of a biography as a portrait. She writes, "the subject of a biography, like that of a portrait, should seem to be alive, breathing, present in all the totality, there-ness and authenticity of their being."¹² The same idea is true in autobiography.

Biographies and autobiographies use words to paint pictures of their subjects. And like Lee suggests, the subject comes alive. There is not just a visualization of a face; there is a depiction of character in the autobiographical portrait. The inner character further shapes the face we see in our mind's eye. In Robert Caro's biography of President Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Means of Ascent*, a portrait of a man before becoming president, before signing one of the greatest civil rights bills into history, is painted in full detail¹³. As a reader, it is not just a distinguished face that I see. Hidden in the lines of Johnson's face is the slightest trace of a hardened wince that comes from trying to hide the pain caused by a rogue kidney stone during his election for the Senate seat in 1948. In his eyes, there is determination to win that election at

all costs. His eyes are not kind. They suggest that he is willing to do whatever it takes to win, even if his actions are unethical. In my mental portrait, Johnson stands erect reaching the full height of his impressive stature. His size and stance suggest that he is formidable. One arm is slightly bent in front of him and the hand forms a fist, which shows that he is not in the least bit afraid of the hard work that will be necessary to achieve his goals. He wears a neat suit of the times, with a fresh crisp shirt. He does not smile. The Johnson I see depicted in Caro's biography would not smile for a still portrait. There is very little that is nice or especially cheerful about him at this time in his life. He is deceitful, dirty, driven, a strategist in every way, and the look on his face suggest these qualities in the slightest of ways. After all, Johnson was a master at projecting only what he wanted prospective voters to know.

As I read Caro's biography, Johnson came alive. I felt like I came to truly know who Johnson was, and I could see a clear image of him in my mind's eye. Caro's attention to detail, selection of stories to share, inclusion of other's reactions to Johnson, and speculation or uncovering of his thoughts created a picture of a full man whose character was as round and multi-faceted as any person I know. Caro's book is an excellent example of biography as portrait at its best.

Like Caro, Dahl creates portraits with his words when he writes. In my unit, my students will consider the idea of an autobiography as a portrait in both the autobiography that they read and in the autobiographies that they will write. Students will examine the parts of Dahl's autobiography that reveals character, and they will write their autobiographies with the intention to reveal a certain facet of their own character. My goal is for my students to "show" with their words. In addition, students will be exposed to actual portraits during the reading of Dahl's autobiography to introduce the idea of characterization. They will work with portraits and decide what a picture and its details can say about the subject's character.

Character and Characterization as a Skill

When Roald Dahl writes, his characters literally leap off of the page in a very imaginable way. Readers can picture the person he is describing. Take for instance the character of Mrs. Pratchett, the owner of the sweet shop that Dahl and his friends like to visit in Llandaff

Her name was Mrs. Pratchett. She was a small skinny old hag with a moustache on her upper lip and a mouth as sour as a green gooseberry. She never smiled. She never welcomed us when we went in, and the only times she spoke were when she said things like, 'I'm watchin' you so keep yer thievin' fingers off them chocolates!' Or 'I don't want you in 'ere just to look around! Either you *forks* out or you *gets* out!' But by far the most loathsome thing about Mrs. Pratchett was the filth that clung around her. Her apron was grey and greasy. Her blouse had bits of breakfast all over it, toast-crumbs and tea stains and splotches of dried egg-yolk. It was her hands, however, that disturbed us most. They were disgusting. They were black with dirt and grime. They looked as though they had been putting lumps of coal on the fire all day long. And do not forget please that it was these very hands and fingers that she plunged into the sweet-jars when we asked for a pennyworth of Treacle Toffee [. . .]" ¹⁴

Before Dahl even allows Mrs. Pratchett to speak, we know she is, at least from a child's point of view, pure evil. The moustache on her lip does not categorize her as a beautiful woman. She is ugly, never smiles, and always has a sour expression on her face. These details are all characteristics associated with meanness. And the description of the minute detail of her hands, only serves to further this idea. Dahl zooms in on Mrs. Pratchett's hands, writing her as a character that no one would want to touch let alone like. Mrs. Pratchett

makes us cringe, as she should. It is clear from what she says that even though she runs a sweet shop she doesn't particularly care for the company of children. And her speech—words and expressions like *yer, them chocolates, 'ere, forks out*—gives the idea that she is not part of a particularly high class. This is the process of characterization, the revelation of a character's personality through the details a writer provides in the character's physical description, speech, thoughts, effects on others, and actions.

In order for students to really go in depth in the process of characterization, they must be able to infer. Authors can and do explicitly state character traits in their writing, but often the traits are implied. Making an inference is the process of combining evidence from a text with information acquired through personal experience to read in between the lines and fill in information that the writer may have left out. For instance, Dahl doesn't have to say that Mrs. Pratchett does not like children, we can infer it from how she speaks and looks at them and from how Dahl writes about her— he writes from a child's point of view, and his word choice does not paint her in a favorable light. Inferring is an important piece of successful reading comprehension. As Kathryn S. Carr states in the article "The Importance of Inference Skills in the Primary Grades," "an author never states everything that happened in a story; information that can be logically assumed may be omitted [. . .] the reader, therefore, constructs inferences in order to make sense of the story." ¹⁵

My students find it difficult to make correct inferences in their reading, and they struggle with reading comprehension as a result. I have found that it is easier to teach inferences when I make it relevant to my students. After all, making inferences is something that we do in our everyday lives, too, outside of the written text. I point this out to my students when I teach inferences, and I point it out to them when I teach characterization as well. We make judgments about people based on what we see, even before we truly know a person. For example, students feel that they know whether a teacher is nice or mean even if they don't have a class taught by that particular teacher themselves. When asked how they know, they point to evidence that can be used to infer a character trait like the fact that the teacher talks in a stern way, that she does not smile or has a mean look on her face all the time, that she stares at them in the hall. This process is natural to students. It is not a foolproof system for judging character and may not always be accurate, but it can serve as a starting point for showing students that they do know how to make inferences and that they do use this skill in their lives.

Teaching Strategies

Throughout the course of this unit, several teaching strategies will be used to address the content of the unit and teach the skills of characterization, including the use of visuals, mnemonic devices, class and small group discussion, the use of mentor texts, and journal writing.

Use of Visuals

Portraits, photographs, and illustrations of subjects will be used in this unit as a visual to help students activate their thinking, infer, and transition towards mastering characterization within the written word. In the development of mental faculties, visual literacy comes before verbal literacy. ¹⁶ As a strategy in teaching characterization, students will be shown carefully selected pictures of individuals and start with "reading" a picture for clues about characterization while reading the text. Attention will be focused on interpreting the subject's facial expression, pose, and gestures. ¹⁷

Graphic Organizers

Graphic organizers are visual tools used in the classroom to help students organize information and understand relationships or processes. Graphic organizers will be used as a teaching strategy in this unit to help students isolate and organize information from the text that can be used to characterize a character. The graphic organizer created for this unit will be laid out in a way that reminds visual learners of the factors used to characterize an individual, including the character's speech, thoughts, and actions, a physical description of the character, and the reaction of others to the character. A matrix graphic organizer will be used to assist students in recognizing that a logical sequence or step must occur in their thinking to lead them from textual evidence to inferring a character trait. The use of this graphic organizer will also support students in verbally explaining "how they know" when inferring a character trait by highlighting textual evidence. ¹⁸

Use of a Mnemonic Device (STEAL)

The skill of characterizing will be taught through the memorization of a mnemonic device adopted from ReadWriteThink. The acronym STEAL will be used to help students remember the pieces of information used in characterization. The letters of STEAL stand for the character's Speech, Thoughts, Effects on Others, Actions, and Looks. ¹⁹

Discussion and Use of Probing Questions:

Class and small group discussion with the incorporation of probing questions will be used at frequent points throughout the unit. Discussions will give students a platform upon which to explore ideas, clarify thinking, and arrive at conclusions about the content of the unit. ²⁰

Use of Mentor Texts

Mentor texts are texts that provide examples of exceptional writing style and craft techniques that students should aim to emulate. Roald Dahl's autobiography serves as the primary mentor text in this unit. Other short excerpts from autobiographies may be used for the purposes of emphasizing and illustrating characterization techniques that authors use. ²¹

Writer's Journals

The use of writer's journals will serve two purposes in this unit. This informal writing, in which very little to no attention is paid to the mechanics of spelling and grammar, will be used to help students explore and reflect on their stories from childhood. Second, writer's journals will serve as a collection of student writing that can be used for the practice of revision in writing techniques.

Classroom Activities

Activity One: Introduction to Autobiography and the Author Roald Dahl

Placement in Unit: Complete this lesson as the starting point for the unit.

Instructional Focus: In this lesson, students will discover, construct, and understand the principles of autobiography. Students will be introduced to the author Roald Dahl.

Materials: Information on Dahl's life acquired from a biographical source (online or print), printed pictures from Dahl's life found on Google Images, white or chalkboard, dry erase markers or chalk, magnets, paper, pencils, butcher paper, marker.

Activity: Explain to students that they will soon be reading an autobiography of a man named Roald Dahl and that they will begin the autobiography by first learning some information about the author's life. Draw a timeline on the board beginning at the year of Dahl's birth (1916) and ending at the year of his death (1990). Use the information compiled on Dahl's life, the pictures found on the Internet, and the magnets to construct a visual timeline for Dahl's life. Write a date and post a picture to the appropriate place on the timeline while talking about that event in Dahl's life. Pause occasionally to allow students to ask questions or comment. In constructing the timeline, do not give away too much information from the text *Boy: Tales of Childhood*, instead gloss over this part of Dahl's life and focus more on Dahl's adult life. Include interesting events like his work for the Shell Oil Company, his enlistment in the Royal Air Force, his start as a writer first for adults and then for children, publishing dates for some of his more famous and familiar works, his two marriages, the family tragedies he sustained, etc.

Explain to students that the timeline represents Dahl's biography, but they will be reading Dahl's autobiography, and that the autobiography will focus on Dahl's younger years. Ask students what an autobiography is. Students should be familiar with this word, but if they are not, explain it as a story of a person's life written by that person. For homework on this night, assign students the task of writing their autobiography. Inform students that they will be asked to share their autobiographies with the class. Limit the autobiography to a minimum of two-pages and a maximum of three and give students as little guidance on what to write as possible.

When students return to class, pair them with another student and have them read that students' autobiography. When students are finished, have a few students read their autobiography aloud. Instruct students to listen for similarities in how the autobiographies are told and in the information each includes. Allow students to comment or ask each other questions about what they have written. Tell students that they are going to come up with some principles of autobiography based on what they have written. Guide students in discovering and constructing these principles. Record the principles on a large sheet of butcher paper to post in the classroom for the duration of the unit. Note that principles may be added, altered, or debated as students begin reading *Boy: Tales of Childhood* or writing their own autobiographies.

Activity Two: Introduction to Characterization

Placement in Unit: Complete this lesson after students have read through chapter four in *Boy: Tales of Childhood*, "The Great Mouse Plot."

Instructional Focus: In this lesson, students will understand characterization as the inner and outer nature or personality of a person or character in a text. Students will justify inferred character traits in oral discussion.

Materials: *Boy: Tales of Childhood*, access to computers/Internet, portrait books (paintings and photographs), illustrated children's books

Activity: Have students read *Boy: Tales of Childhood* through chapter four, "The Great Mouse Plot," before

completing this activity. Tell students that today they will go on a search to find the best picture of Mrs. Pratchett, the owner of the sweet shop from chapter four. This is a good activity to complete in your school's library. Group students in mixed ability level groups of three students each. Explain to students that they may use computers, picture books, art books that contain portraits or photographs, illustrations in picture books, etc. to find a picture that most accurately represents Mrs. Pratchett. Ask your school's librarian to help in identifying what books would be best for students to use and keywords that may aid students in conducting an Internet search. Students must be able to justify why their picture best represents Mrs. Pratchett. Tell students that the more details they can find in their picture from the text, the better. Let students work freely for about 15-20 minutes to find Mrs. Pratchett and prepare their justification to present to the class. To add more excitement to this activity, turn it into a competition for the group that finds the best Pratchett picture.

As groups share their Pratchett pictures and justification, use probing questions to lead them in a discussion of character. Ask why. Form questions that will require students to go back to the details of the text. If students point to an implied character trait of Mrs. Pratchett, ask how they know. List any character traits students correctly identify on the board with the justification to support it.

Once all groups have presented, explain to students that they have just completed the process of characterization. Tell students that they found a picture that suggested Mrs. Pratchett's character or personality. The picture told what kind of person Mrs. Pratchett was. For homework, have students characterize a person that they know well in three to four paragraphs. Students should explain the person's personality and their nature and give examples to justify each character trait.

This activity can be extended. Select several portraits, photographs, or illustrations of people from children's books that are good examples of pictures that reveal character. Group students again into mixed ability groups and allow the students to discuss the supposed character of the subject of the picture. Instruct students to work together to tell the story of the person in the picture and incorporate the subject's character traits.

Activity Three: Going in Depth with Characterization

Placement in Unit: Have students complete this lesson after they have read through chapter twelve in *Boy: Tales of Childhood*, "The Matron." This lesson can be repeated several times throughout the unit for additional practice with characterization as students continue their reading.

Instructional Focus: In this lesson, students will move from understanding characterization to engaging in the process of characterization using textual evidence.

Materials: *Boy: Tales of Childhood*, STEAL mnemonic and graphic organizer from ReadWriteThink, pencils

Activity: Explain to students that they will be characterizing individuals today in *Boy: Tales of Childhood* using evidence from the text. Go over the process of making an inference with students using textual evidence. Use Mrs. Pratchett as an example. Point out to students that sometimes in characterization, an author will not tell readers something directly, but that he will give us clues to infer it. For instance, no one at Mrs. Pratchett's store gets a bag for their sweets unless they spend a whole sixpence in the store ²². Using this information, we can infer that Mrs. Pratchett is cheap and concerned about making a profit. To further support this inference, we could add from the text the fact that she doesn't want all of the boys to come into the store if only one of them has the means to be an actual customer. ²³ Nowhere in the text does it say that Mrs. Pratchett is cheap and focused on a profit, we infer it. Point out to students that in order to infer this character

trait about Mrs. Pratchett, we used her actions, what she said, and her thoughts.

Explain to students that in order to characterize an individual within a text, we often use a process that can be remembered using a pneumonic device from ReadWriteThink called STEAL (Speech, Thought, Effects of Others, Actions, and Looks) ²⁴ . Tell students that each of these pieces of information can tell them something about a person's character. Use student examples from the class to further illustrate this point. A STEAL graphic organizer from ReadWriteThink can be used to help students organize the information used to characterize Mrs. Pratchett, or students can list the information for each part of STEAL and the character trait that they can infer from it in a chart on their own notebook paper. Guide students in identifying the information necessary to characterize Mrs. Pratchett. Allow students to ask questions and contribute as you guide them through this process. Note that students can use information in chapters 3-6 to characterize Mrs. Pratchett.

Once students have read through chapter 12, "The Matron," they can work independently on a second STEAL chart for the Matron. Use students' finished charts to assess their ability to pull out useful pieces of textual information and make logical inferences pertaining to characterization. Go over the chart with students and address any issues in the characterization process, as needed.

For homework, have students identify one or several places in *Boy: Tales of Childhood* where they could characterize Dahl. When students return to class, have them share the places they have marked and discuss why these places provide good information for characterization. Talk about the type of information that is provided and what inferences can be made from it.

Activity Four: Autobiographical Writing on a Theme

Placement in Unit: Have students complete this lesson several times throughout the unit

Instructional Focus: In this lesson, students will practice autobiographical/personal narrative writing using Dahl's writing as a mentor text.

Materials: Writer's journals or paper, pencils

Activity: After reading a chapter in *Boy: Tales of Childhood*, have students discuss the common childhood or autobiographical theme of the chapter. For instance, the theme of chapter one, "Papa and Mama," is where a person comes from. Dahl writes about his background and gives us the information we need to understand what he will write later about how he grew up. Chapter seven, "Norway," is about taking a journey or a trip. The theme of chapter fifteen, "Captain Hardcastle," is about getting in trouble at the hands of a teacher. As students read each chapter work with them to construct a theme or central idea for the chapter.

Instruct students to write in their writer's journals on the decided upon theme or idea. Students must write autobiographical sketches. They may need to consult or be reminded of the principles of autobiography from activity one as they write. Students will have the opportunity to read several chapters from Dahl each week, and as a minimum should write on at least one theme per week. Allow students to choose which theme they will write on. Share with students that every single writing may not be perfect or even completed, but that it is important for them to put their ideas down on paper in a logical way. Let them know that their writer's journal is a place for them to share their stories, be expressive and creative, explore their thoughts and reflections on an event, and try new writing techniques. Students should receive a completion grade for their writer's journals each week.

As students get further into the text, encourage the expectation that writings in their journals become more detailed and sophisticated. Ask them to tell a story as Dahl does. Point out writing techniques that Dahl uses in the text and ask students to identify techniques that they see. Model these techniques for students and encourage them to try them in their writing. After reading a chapter that students find interesting, ask them what Dahl did to make the story appealing. Ask them to model one or more pieces of their writing on Dahl's style. Allow students to share what they feel is good writing with the class.

Activity Five: Revise Writing with an Emphasis on Characterization

Placement in Unit: This lesson can be ongoing and revisited several times. Have students complete this lesson only after completing lessons two and three and after they have accumulated a significant number of writings in their writer's journals.

Instructional Focus: In this lesson, students understand the revision process as a necessary part of writing in which they clarify and improve their ideas and writing. Students will focus on revising their writing to reveal character.

Materials: *Boy: Tales of Childhood*, writer's journals, paper, pencil, teacher-created example of an autobiographical sketch that reveals character, revision pens or pencils of a different color, highlighters, document camera and LCD projector or overhead projector for displaying writing.

Activity: Ask students to review the writing in their writer's journals and mark the writings that have the potential to reveal something about an aspect of their personal character. Students should mark several pieces of writing, but for this lesson have them only work with one piece of writing at a time. Ask students to share what aspect of their character the writing reveals and how or why.

Ask students to turn back in their books, to chapter four, "The Great Mouse Plot." This chapter is a good chapter to use to illustrate how a story reveals character. Read the following quote from chapter four to students, "When writing about oneself, one must strive to be truthful. Truth is more important than modesty. I must tell you, therefore, that it was I and I alone who had the idea for the great and daring Mouse Plot. We all have our moments of brilliance and glory, and this was mine." ²⁵ In light of what students already know from having previously read this chapter, ask what qualities about Dahl this quote reveals. Students should point to traits like cocky, confident, grand trickster, crafty, and daring. Ask students to find evidence in the chapter that supports the traits they listed for Dahl and to note them using a STEAL chart

Tell students that today they will be revising their writing to reveal character. Remind students of the idea of an autobiography as a portrait of character. They should provide enough information and detail to allow readers to infer their character traits. They should "show," not "tell." Direct students' attention back to their STEAL chart and highlight how Dahl included details that suggested that he was, for instance, daring. It was his idea to torment Mrs. Pratchett and put a dead mouse in her Gobstopper jar (thoughts). His friends first stare at him in wonder when he suggests the idea, "then as the sheer genius of the plot began to sink in, they all started ginning. They slapped me on the back" ²⁶ (effects of others). Dahl did not back down from the challenge when his friends decided that he should be the one to actually place the mouse in the jar, and, despite the danger of being caught, he didn't chicken out during the act either (actions). After they leave the shop and his friends ask if he actually did it, Dahl exclaims triumphantly, "'Of course I did!'" ²⁷ (speech). The teacher should then again point out how Dahl uses the process of STEAL in revealing his character.

Ask students to write out which details from their own story reveal or can reveal the character trait that they

believe their story conveys. Students will use these notes as a guide for revising.

Model for students how to go back into their writing to revise. Use one of your own writings as an example for students and project it on the board. Using the highlighter, go back and identify places where information can be added that will reveal character. Then use a pencil or pen of another color to add those details to your writing. Be sure to identify where additions should go with an arrow. Read through your additions for students and comment on the sound and feel of the details that you add. Model both good and bad examples of revisions for students and think aloud on why the revision is good or bad. Allow students to ask questions or to help make revisions to the writing.

Give students time to revise their writing using the same revision process and their notes as a guide. When students are finished revising, have them swap writing with a partner. As students read another's writings ask them to identify the character trait that the student aimed to convey. If the character trait cannot be easily or correctly identified then the student may need to add additional revisions.

Lesson Six: Culminating Activity - A Portrait of Words

Placement in Unit: This is the final lesson of the unit and should be completed as a culminating activity.

Instructional Focus: In this lesson students will edit and publish one of their revised pieces of writing for the purpose of including it in a class book.

Materials: Writer's journals, pen or pencil in a different color from original writing or revisions, computer access, picture of students, access to laminating and binding machine

Activity: At this point students should have several pieces of revised writing in their writer's journal. Ask students to select the best piece of revised writing they have that tells a story that they would like to share. Explain to students that they will be peer editing this piece of writing for spelling, grammatical mistakes, and mechanics so that it can be published in a class book.

Students should have several students edit their writing. Pair students with someone of their same ability and someone of a higher ability for editing. Note that it may be useful to select certain students to serve as peer editors for the class, depending on the makeup of the class. Ask students to focus on editing for only a few types of mistakes based on the needs of the class. For instance, focus on paragraphing, correct use of quotation marks in dialogue, comma use in compound sentences and or introductory clauses, consistent verb tense, subject-verb agreement, spelling, etc. Be sure that each skill has been taught or reviewed before asking students to edit for it. Once students have edited their writing, allow them to type their final piece.

As a final assignment, bring students' attention back to the idea of the autobiography as a portrait of character. Explain to students that their autobiographical pieces are portraits in words. Assign students the task of taking or finding a picture to match their autobiographical piece. Set the following guideline for pictures: (1) the picture must be of the student only, (2) their facial expression or gestures should suggest the facet of their character that is revealed in the writing, (3) students are permitted to include other details in their picture to help suggest the intended character. Encourage students to take their own pictures or use pictures that they already have at home, but caution students about simply using a picture that they think is flattering or cute. The intent is for the picture/portrait to be revealing of character. Share examples with students to help them understand the concept.

Bring the unit to a close by laminating students' stories and pictures and binding them in a class book to be shared and displayed in the classroom. As students read each other's writings encourage them to share with one another and comment on the portrait they see in their mind's eye.

Bibliography and Resources

Adomat, Donna Sayers. "Becoming Characters: Deepening Young Children's Literary

Understanding through Drama." *Journal of Children's Literature* 38, no. 1

(2012): 44-54.

Campbell, Kimberly. *Less Is More: Teaching Literature with Short Texts, Grades 6-12*.

Portland, Me.: Stenhouse Publishers, 2007.

Caro, Robert A. *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Means of Ascent*. New York: Vintage Books, 1991.

Carr, Kathryn S. "The Importance of Inference Skills in the Primary Grades." *The*

Reading Teacher 36, no. 6 (1983): 518-522.

Dahl, Roald. *Boy: Tales of Childhood*. New York: Puffin Books, 2009.

ReadWriteThink. "Defining Characterization." Defining Characterization -

ReadWriteThink.

www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/lesson_images/lesson800/Characterization.pdf

(accessed July 15, 2013).

College of Education, Idaho State University. "Electronic Journal for the Integration

of Technology in Education." IU Webmaster redirect.

<http://ejite.isu.edu/Volume1No1/Stokes.html> (accessed July 16, 2013).

Saskatoon Public School. "Instructional Strategies Online - Discussion." Online

Learning Centre. <http://olc.spsd.sk.ca/DE/PD/instr/strats/discussion/>

(accessed July 16, 2013).

"Learning Aids: Make Your Brain More Efficient by Organizing Information

Graphically Using Graphic Organizers, Mind Mapping, Concept Mapping...."

Graphic Organizers, Concept Mapping, Mind Mapping, Brain Storming and other Organizers. <http://www.graphic.org/organizers/1.html> (accessed July 16, 2013).

Lee, Hermione. *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

O'Shea, Catherine, and Margaret Egan. "A Primer of Drama Techniques for Teaching Literature." *The English Journal* 67, no. 2 (1978): 51-55.

Prior, Lori Ann, Angeli Willson, and Martinez Miriam. "Picture This: Visual Literacy as a Pathway to Character Understanding." *The Reading Teacher* 66, no. 3 (2012): 195-206.

United States Census Bureau. "Richmond City QuickFacts from the US Census Bureau." State and County QuickFacts. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/51/51760.html> (accessed July 16, 2013).

Stokes, Suzanne. "Visual Literacy in Teaching and Learning: A Literature Perspective." *Electronic Journal for the Integration of Technology in Education* 1, no. 1 (2001). <http://ejite.isu.edu/Volume1No1/Stokes.html> (accessed July 15, 2001).

Sturrock, Donald. *Storyteller: the life of Roald Dahl*. London: HarperPress, 2010.

"VDOE : English Standards of Learning Resources." VDOE : Virginia Department of Education Home. http://www.doe.virginia.gov/testing/sol/standards_docs/english/index.shtml (accessed August 3, 2013).

Vessey, Mark. *Confessions*. New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2007.

"Using Mentor Texts to Thread Reading and Writing Together." Using Mentor Texts to Thread Reading and Writing Together (PDF). <http://www.vpaf.uni.edu/events/brc/documents/handout13/UsingMentorTextstoThreadReading.pdf> (accessed July 15, 2013).

Appendix

The unit, Understanding Character Development Through the Use of Autobiography, addresses the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) sixth grade English academic standards for the Richmond Public Schools district that are listed below. Note that this unit may be adapted for grade seven and eight middle school English classrooms.

Reading

6.5 The student will read and demonstrate comprehension of a variety of fictional texts, narrative nonfiction, and poetry.

- a) Identify elements of narrative structure, including setting, character, plot, conflict, and theme.
- f) Use information in the text to draw conclusions and make inferences.
- g) Explain how character and plot development are used in a selection to support a central conflict or story line.

Writing

6.7 The student will write narration, description, exposition, and persuasion.

- a) Identify audience and purpose.
- c) Organize writing structure to fit mode or topic.
- f) Write multiparagraph compositions with elaboration and unity.
- i) Revise sentences for clarity of content including specific vocabulary and information.

6.8 The student will edit writing for correct grammar, capitalization, punctuation, spelling, sentence structure, and paragraphing.

Notes

1. "Richmond City QuickFacts from the US Census Bureau," State and County QuickFacts, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/51/51760.html>.

2. Donald Sturrock, *Storyteller: the Life of Roald Dahl* (London: HarperPress, 2010), 19.

3. *Ibid.*, 36.

4. Roald Dahl, *Boy: Tales of Childhood* (New York: Puffin Books, 2009), 154.

5. Donald Sturrock, *Storyteller: the Life of Roald Dahl*. (London: HarperPress, 2010), 40.
6. *Ibid.*, 40.
7. Roald Dahl, *Boy: Tales of Childhood* (New York: Puffin Books, 2009), 114.
8. *Ibid.*, 114-115.
9. *Ibid.*, 115.
10. *Ibid.*, 6-18.
11. *Ibid.*, 17-18.
12. Hermione Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.
13. Robert Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Means of Ascent* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).
14. Roald Dahl, *Boy: Tales of Childhood* (New York: Puffin Books, 2009), 33-34.
15. Carr, Kathryn S, "The Importance of Inference Skills in the Primary Grades," *The Reading Teacher* 36, no. 6 (1983), 518.
16. Stokes, Suzanne, "Visual Literacy in Teaching and Learning: A Literature Perspective," *Electronic Journal for the Integration of Technology in Education* 1, no. 1 (2001). <http://ejite.isu.edu/Volume1No1/Stokes.html>
17. Prior, Lori Ann, Angeli Willson, and Martinez Miriam, "Picture This: Visual Literacy as a Pathway to Character Understanding," *The Reading Teacher* 66, no. 3 (2012): 195-206
18. "Learning Aids: Make Your Brain More Efficient by Organizing Information Graphically Using Graphic Organizers, Mind Mapping, Concept Mapping...." <http://www.graphic.org/organizers/1.html>
19. "Defining Characterization," www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/lesson_images/lesson800/Characterization.pdf
20. "Instructional Strategies Online – Discussion," <http://olc.spsd.sk.ca/DE/PD/instr/strats/discussion/> (accessed July 16, 2013)
21. "Using Mentor Texts to Thread Reading and Writing Together (PDF)," <http://www.vpaf.uni.edu/events/brc/documents/handout13/UsingMentorTextstoThreadReading.pdf>
22. Roald Dahl, *Boy: Tales of Childhood* (New York: Puffin Books, 2009), 36.
23. *Ibid.*, 37.
24. "Defining Characterization," www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/lesson_images/lesson800/Characterization.pdf
25. Roald Dahl, *Boy: Tales of Childhood* (New York: Puffin Books, 2009), 35.
26. *Ibid.*, 36.
27. *Ibid.*, 37.

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

©2023 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University, All Rights Reserved. Yale National Initiative®, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute®, On Common Ground®, and League of Teachers Institutes® are registered trademarks of Yale University.

For terms of use visit https://teachers.yale.edu/terms_of_use