Develop Strong Characters in Fiction

1. Focus

Explain Strong Characters

Ask: What actions or feelings make a strong fiction character? One who seems like a real person? (Allow responses.) Strong characters are characters who act like real people and who feel the same kinds of emotions that real people feel. Often a character starts out one way in the beginning of the story but changes as the events in the story affect him or her. For example, a character might be scared of something at the beginning but through the story learns not to be afraid. We can use a character web to help us develop ideas for our characters that we can use in our drafts. Today I’ll show you how to use a character web to come up with ideas for strong characters.

Model Strong Characters

Display the blank character web on chart paper or using the interactive whiteboard resources.

Say: I’m going to imagine that I am the writer of the story “The Writing on the Wall.” I will show how the writer might have thought about ways to develop her character from the beginning of the story to the end of the story.

Sample Character Web (BLM 5)

Beginning: eager to go with friend; thoughtless

Middle: feels guilty; doesn’t want to hurt Jake’s or her mom’s feelings; wants to do the right thing; chooses to go with Jake

End: feels bad about her action; realizes she was wrong; is sorry; apologizes

Sample Character Web (BLM 5)

Beginning. Say: In my story, my character Maria has promised to spend the morning with her mom. I’ll have her forget about this. Maybe she could be eager to go with her friend Jake. She’s really being a little thoughtless here. I’ll write down some notes about her on the character web.
Middle. Say: I’ll make Maria torn between going with Jake or going with her mom. I’ll make her feel guilty about it. She is not as thoughtless as she was in the beginning because at least she’s concerned about doing the right thing and doesn’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings. But then I’ll have her go with Jake because she thinks she might be able to go with him and get back before her mom knows she has gone.

End. Say: Maria has changed from the beginning of the story. I’ll have her feel bad about going with Jake. I’ll make her realize that she has hurt her mother and has done the wrong thing. She apologizes to her mom. I’ll jot some notes about her on the web.

2. Rehearse

Practice Developing Strong Characters

Invite students to tell a partner how they will develop their characters so that they change from the beginning of the story to the end of the story. Remind them to think about how their characters deal with the problem in the story and how they can make sure they develop characters who act and feel the way real people do.

Share and Discuss Strong Characters

Bring students together. Invite volunteers to share how they will develop their characters from the beginning to the end of the story. Ask them to explain what makes their characters realistic and why readers will want to read about them.

3. Independent Writing and Conferring

Say: We just learned how to use the problem and solution of a story to develop strong characters who seem like people the reader might know. Before you draft your story, make character webs for your important characters. The information on your character webs will help you create believable characters the reader will care about.

Make BLM 5 available to students who are ready to begin developing their characters during independent writing time. During conferences, reinforce students’ use of this and other strategies using the prompts on your conferring flip chart.

4. Share

Bring students together. Invite volunteers to display their character webs and talk about the characters in their stories.

Strategies to Support ELs

Beginning
Ask students to draw a picture of their main characters at the beginning of their story and at the end. Have them describe their characters, using words or gestures.

Intermediate and Advanced
Pair ELs with fluent English speakers during the practice activity. Provide these sentence frames to help students talk about their characters:

In the beginning of the story, my character is ______.
In the middle of the story, my character is ______.
At the end of the story, my character is ______.
My character changes by ______.

All Levels
If you have ELs whose first language is Spanish, share these English/Spanish cognates: character/el carácter; fiction/la ficción.