

CHARACTERS

NCTE/IRA Standards:

Objective: Understand characters and create characters for a screenplay or other literary form.

Procedure: Display and distribute the following resource pages to students:

- An overview of characters & examples of characters from movies
- Some keys to creating unforgettable characters

Allow the students a few minutes to skim each resource page before reading the text aloud. Reading the text aloud increases the likelihood that all students will be able to understand and participate. Pause appropriately to explain concepts contained in the instructional text, especially concepts that may be unfamiliar. Solicit comments from the students and ask questions to promote their thinking or evaluate their understanding. Elaborate on the instructional text according to the needs of the class.

It will be helpful to spend extra time differentiating among **primary**, **secondary**, and **tertiary** characters. As examples, use characters from movies with which students are familiar. Encourage the students to provide their own examples. If necessary, discuss the role of extras in a movie and ask students to provide examples.

Introductory Activity: As a group activity, ask students to identify some of the primary (major) characters in movies they know. Continue by identifying secondary (minor) characters in the same movies. You may restrict the activity to major and minor characters or expand it to include tertiary characters and extras. Base your use of the terms primary/secondary or major/minor on your judgment of students' familiarity with the terms. Ideally, they would learn all the terms.

Arrange students in small groups of 2 to 4. (Alternatively, students may work individually.) Duplicate the Character Profile page for each group. Distribute the profiles to the students. Have each group choose a familiar movie and complete the profile for one fictional character in the movie. The character should be primary or secondary. Display the completed character profiles or print them out and distribute them to the groups. Allow the groups to read all the character profiles and comment on them.

Extended Activity: As a class or in small groups, have the students develop two major and two minor characters for a movie of their own creation. They can use one of the movies created for the synopsis activity or a new movie. Ask the groups to complete a profile form for each of the characters.

Note: Have the students retain the character profiles because they will be useful in other modules.

Internet Search Suggestion: Have the students search for lists of the "best" characters of all time using Heroes and Villains. Discuss and debate findings.

Characters

The people involved in the action of a movie are called *characters*. Sometimes animals or imaginary creatures or even things can be characters, as in *Charlotte's Web* or *Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium*.

Great movies have great characters. Many people believe that the characters are what make a movie great. Some poor movies have great characters, but this doesn't happen very often. When a movie is based on something from real life, some of the characters might be real people played by actors.

There are three categories of characters:

- **Primary characters** play the most important roles in a movie. There are just a few primary characters. They are also called **major characters**.
- **Secondary characters** are less central, but still important to the story. They are also called **minor characters**. There may be ten or more secondary characters. They are usually familiar to major characters in some way.
- **Tertiary characters** play very small roles in a movie. They help to move the story along. They may appear just a few times in a movie.
- **Extras** are characters who appear in a movie incidentally, like people walking down the street where a primary and secondary character are conversing.

Screenwriters focus on primary and secondary characters, and spend just a little time on tertiary characters. They don't worry much about extras. The director will usually be responsible for what extras do or say. The screenwriter might include a direction for extras in a script like, "The kids erupt off the bus. A few seconds pass, and then Will follows."

Characters are defined by what they say and do. Screenwriters spend most of their time thinking about and writing their characters' words and actions. Even if a movie happens in a wonderful place and has fabulous special effects, it is the words and actions of the characters that make the movie great.

Some Example Characters from *Bandslam*

Primary (Major) Characters: Will, Karen, Sam, Charlotte, Ben

Secondary (Minor) Characters: Bug, Omar, Basher, Ben, Kim, Irene

Tertiary Characters: Miles, Ms. Wittenberg

Extras: Obnoxious girls in mall, kid on bus with iPod

Some Example Characters from Other Movies

Primary (Major) Characters: Bella (*Twilight*), Wilbur (*Charlotte's Web*), Lucy (*The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*)

Secondary (Minor) Characters: Jacob (*Twilight*), Templeton (*Charlotte's Web*), Professor Kirke (*The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*)

Tertiary Characters: Laurent (*Twilight*), Mr. Arable (*Charlotte's Web*), Father Christmas (*The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*)

Extras: Forks High School students (*Twilight*), People at the fair (*Charlotte's Web*), Kids on the train (*The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*)

Keys to Creating Unforgettable Characters

- Decide who will be the major and minor characters. Give them names and make a list of these characters to help keep them straight.
- Have a clear picture of a character in your head. Many writers describe how a character looks, the way a character acts, and the character's background so they understand a character better.
- If a character is a real person, research the person using primary and secondary sources.
- If it helps, base an imaginary character on a real person you know. This will help you create lifelike characters.
- Learn your characters so well that you feel like you know them.
- Make the character speak and act in a way that is believable to the audience. Say lines aloud as you write them to help you determine whether they sound true to life.
- Keep track of characters through the movie. Don't let them bounce around or disappear without a purpose.
- Evaluate your characters as you write to be sure they are playing the roles you intended want them to.
- Be sure that every character has a role in moving the story along. Eliminate extraneous characters.
- Introduce main characters as early in the movie as you can.

NAME: _____ DATE: _____

Character Profile

Character Name _____

Movie Name _____

Brief Synopsis (What is the movie about?) _____

Is the character major or minor? _____

What does the character look like? _____

What are the character's personality traits? _____

What are some of the things the character does in the movie that reveal some of the character traits you listed? _____

What should the audience know about the character's background to help them better understand the character? _____
