Following Characters into Meaning

BUILDING THEORIES, GATHERING EVIDENCE

LUCY CALKINS ◆ KATHLEEN TOLAN
Dedicated to Melanie Brown, with thanks for unending support and generosity.
FOLLOWING CHARACTERS INTO MEANING

VOLUME 1: Envisionment, Prediction, and Inference

PART ONE  WALKING IN A CHARACTER’S SHOES

SESSION I  Making Movies in Our Minds As We Read
“If we read well, we become the character in a book. We read the words and then poof! We are one of the characters in the mental movie we’re making. Poof! I’m Willy, bundled up on that sled, snow flying into my eyes, my heart racing, urging Searchlight on.”

ASSESSMENT  DEVELOPING CONCRETE, OBTAINABLE READING GOALS

SESSION II  Living in the World of a Story
“When we read, you and I need to be the ones to notice if we are just gazing out at the text, thinking, ‘It’s as pretty as a postcard.’ We need to notice times when we are reading on emotional autopilot—maybe understanding the text, but not taking it in. And we need to say, ‘Stop the car. Pause the reading.’ When we read, we need to see not just words, but also the world of the story through the eyes of the character. There is a rap on the door, and we hear it. Even before the character calls, ‘Come in,’ we practically call out a greeting ourselves.”

SESSION III  Stirring Our Empathy Through Personal Response
“When we read ourselves awake, really envisioning what’s happening in the story so that we are almost in the character’s shoes, we often find ourselves remembering times in our lives when we lived through something similar, and we then bring feelings and insights from those experiences to bear on our understanding of whatever we are reading.”

SESSION IV  Letting the Text Revise Our Image of the Characters
“A reader not only sees, hears, and imagines as if in the story, making a movie in the mind. A reader also revises that mental movie. Often when we read on, the story provides details that nudge us to say, ‘Oops, I’ll have to change what I’m thinking.’”

SESSION V  Spinning All We Know into Predictions
“One way readers read actively and wisely, then, is we empathize with the main character, we feel with the main character, in a way that leads us to anticipate what the character will do next.”

SESSION VI  Detailing Predictions to Bring Out Personalities
“To predict well, it helps to make a movie in your mind of what has yet to happen. Those movies need to show not only what will happen next, but also how it will happen. We can anticipate how things will happen by remembering what we already know of our characters.”

SESSION VII  Mining Details About Characters
“When you read in such a way that you are connected with a character, when you open your heart to him or her and care the same way you would about a friend, then envisioning, predicting, and thinking about a character happen all at once, in a whoosh.”

ASSESSMENT  ANALYZING TEXT DIFFICULTY TO INFORM (AND TRANSFORM) INSTRUCTION
FOLLOWING CHARACTERS INTO MEANING

VOLUME 2: Building Theories, Gathering Evidence

PART TWO  BUILDING THEORIES ABOUT CHARACTERS

SESSION VIII  Talking to Grow Theories About Characters
"We pull in to read, yes, but we also pull back from reading to think. We read like we are a character in the book, but we also read like we are a professor, growing intellectual ideas about the book. We read like we’re under the covers, reading by flashlight, but we also turn the imaginary lights on in the room and scrutinize the text to grow ideas. The most fervent ideas center on the people in our books."

SESSION IX  Developing Nuanced Theories About Characters
"Researchers have found that some people, like my husband, are good at reading people, and those who can read people in real life can also read people in stories. To read people—in life and in stories—it is important to remember that actions can be windows to the person. In life and as we read, we can pause after a character has done something and say, ‘Let me use what just happened as a window to help me understand this person.’"

SESSION X  Expecting Complications in Characters
"It is important to keep in mind that characters are complicated; they are not just one way. And here’s a key point: To grow nuanced and complex ideas about characters it helps to think deeply about times when a person seems to act out of character."

SESSION XI  Attending to Objects that Reveal Characters
"Paying attention to the objects that a character keeps near and dear is one way to grow ideas about what kind of person that character is. Those objects are often windows into the mind and heart of our characters. The possessions that a character keeps close almost always reveal something important about the person."

SESSION XII  Seeing Characters Through the Eyes of Others
"When readers want to think deeply about a character, we examine the ways that people around the character treat the character, looking especially for patterns of behavior. We not only notice how other people, other characters, treat and view the main character; we also notice what others call the character and the voice and body language people assume when talking to the character."

SESSION XIII  Reaching for Exactly True Words
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PART THREE  FROM INFEREN CE TOWARD INTERPRETATION

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“As Jasmine showed us yesterday, once readers have grown a theory, a big idea, we reread and read on with that theory in hand. And I want you to know that we hold a theory loosely, knowing it will have a life of its own as we travel on. It will take up places we didn’t expect to go.”

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“A simple, obvious idea about a character or a book is a great place to start, even if your goal is a complex idea. To take that simple idea as a starting place and to climb to higher levels of thinking, it helps to use a few phrases as thought prompts, grasping those phrases like we grasp rungs on a ladder, using them to help us climb higher and higher.”

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“The stuff that keeps recurring, that resurfaces often, that is threaded in and out of the fabric of a narrative, is the biggest stuff. That’s true in life, and true in books. In books, the things that the author mentions again and again are the ones that she really wants you to notice, the ones that are critical to understanding the essence of the character and the story.”

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“I want to teach you a way that readers can intensify our reading, a way readers can catch some of the spirit of the book, to hold onto for themselves even when they are finished reading.”

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“We can look back on the jotted notes we make as we read, and research our thinking, asking, ‘What sort of thinking do I tend to do as I read?’ After we spy on our own thinking, we can put together all the clues that we see, and together, these can help us construct a sense of ourselves as readers. We can come away from this saying, ‘I’m the sort of reader who does a lot of this kind of thinking…, and who doesn’t do a lot of that kind of thinking.’ We can then give ourselves goals so we deliberately outgrow our current habits as readers and thinkers.”

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IN THIS SESSION, you will teach students that readers notice complexity in characters by paying attention to times when they act “out of character.”

Expecting Complications in Characters


But what about the mean kid who befriends a stray kitten and treats that kitten as a family member? Or the shy kid who tries out for the lead in the school play? People, as the saying goes, are often not what they seem.

When we look at people—real and fictional, alike—we see what we expect to see. Expect nerd, and that’s what you will get. But this overly simplistic way of categorizing people is limiting on both sides. On the one hand, labeling people this way costs us the possibility of truly knowing and connecting with another person. On the other hand, being confined to such a narrow definition can be downright suffocating.

Those who love us the most, our families, often feel more at liberty than anyone to pigeonhole us into narrowly defined roles. I have a friend whose parents always referred to her as “pretty” while referring to her sister as “brainy.” Well, it turns out the brainy sister didn’t like school very much and weathered much disappointment when she didn’t fulfill the dreams her family had for her. My friend,

GETTING READY

- Bring your read-aloud, The Tiger Rising, to your minilesson. You will reread a section from the end of Chapter 12.
- Prepare an anecdote to share with children about a time in your life when a person acted out of character, and instead of dismissing those actions as weird, you reflected upon those actions and therefore on the complexities of the person.
- Ask children to bring their reading logs to the lesson so they can study their partners’ logs.
- Be prepared to channel readers to work in small-group discussions during the active involvement.
- You may choose to prepare the chart “When a Character Acts Out of Character, Think About . . . .”
- Bring the chart “Strategies Readers Use to Grow Ideas About Characters” to be reviewed during the lesson.
- Prepare the chart “Prompts to Grow Your Ideas.”
- If you choose to confer with small groups, be prepared to read from books such as Amber Brown Is Not a Crayon and Journey.
the pretty one, went to fabulous schools and did well, yet still feels self-conscious about her intellect. No one fares well when viewed in terms of absolutes.

Characters—like the people in our lives—are not just one way.

Novelist Anna Quindlen writes, “Books are the plane, and the train, and the road. They are the destination, and the journey. They are home.” Reading, at its best, helps us to know and understand our world, our relationships, and ourselves. If we say simply that Anne Shirley is “unlucky,” isn’t that missing the point? We want to model for our children how to look at another person with openness and compassion, not rushing to decide what to call her and then moving on. Especially if we want children to read themselves into books, we must pause to acknowledge the many different ways in which our characters can behave, under different circumstances, with different motivations. Characters—like the people in our lives—are not just one way.

I once met a third grader named Peter who was often at the center of disciplinary issues. In truth, Peter’s exuberance and impulsiveness proved a challenge, and he had a reputation for being difficult. His teachers wrote this word—*difficult*—on his school forms to warn future teachers. Peter’s classmates used this same word, or worse, to describe him. And, if asked, Peter himself would dismally say that he was a troublemaker. If we call Ramona Quimby “troublemaker,” we are only seeing one part of her, just as many people in Peter’s life saw him as just one thing. But if we encourage children to notice Ramona’s sensitivity, her loyalty, her great capacity for joy—all the complicated, true aspects wrapped up in one character—might we also teach them to see the Peters in our rooms the same way? Might we also teach the Peters in our rooms to learn to see the wonderful, complicated depths in themselves?
Connection

Remind children that we read people by regarding actions as windows. Ask them to read each other by studying logs.

“Readers, would you bring your reading logs with you as you come to the meeting area?”

Once they’d convened, I said, “Last night, did any of you try to ‘read’ people in your life? Like at home, did you try reading your brother or sister?” A few kids nodded. “Well, before we continue, let’s practice reading people, studying what a person does, and speculating what the actions might mean. To do this, exchange reading logs with your partner.” After they did this, I said, “Partners, look at the reading log you are now holding and really quickly, in the blink of an eye, think, ‘What actions does this log suggest the reader has and has not been doing? What choices do I see the reader making? What theories can I grow about this reader from considering the reader’s actions, and choices?’”

After a minute, I said, “Readers, can I have your eyes? Give me a thumbs up if you noticed a pattern in your partner’s reading—like you noticed that he or she reads more in one place or another, or reads some kinds rather than other kinds of books.” Many did so. “That’s wise. Remember, when trying to read a person or a character, it’s especially important to notice actions that happen more than once, which seem like a characteristic pattern. After you see a pattern, you need to think what the pattern could reveal, what it could mean. You might ask yourself, ‘How does everything I already know about this person connect with the actions I’m just now seeing?’ Think about that for your partner.” I gave them a long minute of silence and meanwhile did this

Coaching Tips

There are lots of reasons for this connection. First, the connection ideally provides you with a vehicle for keeping lessons from previous minilessons alive—and that includes minilessons from much earlier in the year. For your teaching to matter, it needs to make a lasting impact. This will only happen if you revisit what you taught previously.

If you’re worried about time, you could ask children to study their logs in partnerships when they first enter the classroom at the very start of the day, and then in the minilesson you could simply ask them to talk about their musings. But I think it is more likely you’ll decide simply to give children just a tiny bit of time for scanning a partner’s log. A lot can be seen in a minute!

Then, too, any one aspect of your teaching can always risk becoming ho-hum. Because minilessons are designed to follow a consistent architecture, it is important for you to be vigilant, making sure they don’t slip from being patterned to being dull. I designed this connection after Kathleen and I said to ourselves, “We need to be sure we are varying our connections.”
thinking myself. “Now think, ‘What theory do I have that could maybe explain the pattern that I’m seeing?’ Say to yourself, ‘I’m thinking that perhaps my partner . . .’ (finish that sentence in your mind.)” After a few seconds of silence, I coached, “Try saying also, ‘Or, could it be that . . .?’ And finish that sentence.

“Partner 2, turn and tell Partner 1 your theory about Partner 1 as a reader. Start with, ‘I’m thinking that perhaps you. . .’ Show your evidence and be gentle. If you have time, then share your alternate idea: ‘Or, I’m thinking perhaps it could be. . .’ For now, Partner 1 just listen to this person say stuff about you.”

Remind children of yesterday’s discovery that when we read characters, we let their actions serve as windows to the sort of person that they are.

“You’ll remember that we started out yesterday’s minilesson talking about the fact that some people are good at reading people, and we said that those who can read people in real life can also read people in stories. To read people, it is important to see that actions can be windows to the person. So when you read your books, you paused from time to time, as we did when we read The Tiger Rising, to think, ‘Let me use what just happened as a window to help me understand this person.’ Remember that when you were growing ideas about Willie May, I coached you to avoid trying to pin her down too much. I cautioned you to resist trying to shoehorn her into just one single word—such as, disgruntled.”

Name your teaching point. Specifically, tell children that characters are complicated.

“Today, I want to emphasize that it is important to keep in mind that characters are complicated; they are not just one way. And here’s a key point: To grow nuanced and complex ideas about characters, it helps to think deeply about times when a person seems to act out of character.”

Notice that the language I’m using with readers is tentative. The strongest ideas emerge out of lots of thought and reflection, after revising one’s initial ideas. Teaching readers to be tentative with their theories teaches them to be more open to revision across their lives. Revision is, after all, the heart of much that is beautiful in our world.

You will not have time for the partners to reverse roles, with Partner 1 “reading” Partner 2. If you are really uncomfortable with this, you can sneak in some time later in the school day, outside the reading workshop. For now, though, remember this is just the connection, not the minilesson itself!

It is crucial that children recall previous minilessons, drawing repeatedly on all that we’ve taught. We keep yesterday’s ideas alive by retelling them and by showing how today’s teaching fits tongue-and-groove into yesterday’s.

Notice in this teaching point as in so many, you help readers know a goal—growing nuanced and complex ideas that take into account the complexity of characters—and you equip them with particular techniques for reaching that goal—thinking about times when a character acts out of character. You have yet to give specific tips for how readers go about thinking about those out-of-character times. That is what the rest of your minilessons will do. You should be realizing already that when characters seem to act out of character, often this is actually because the theory of that character was too rigid, too simplistic. The person is actually not acting out of character so much as defying the label he has been assigned by someone else.
Tell children about a time in your life when a person acted out of character, and instead of dismissing those actions as weird, you thought, ‘Why might the person have done that?’ and developed more complex, nuanced ideas about the person as a result.

“Sometimes in life, doesn’t it seem like we can try to peg a person as being just one thing or another? Like I might say about a person, ‘He’s such a baby,’ or ‘She’s spoiled.’ But the truth is people are not just one way. To grow more complex ideas about a person or a character, it helps to pay attention to instances when the character seems to act out of character. Then instead of just saying, ‘He’s acting weird,’ or ‘That’s really strange,’ we can push ourselves to think, ‘What might have motivated the character, the person, to act in this way?’ That way, we can end up realizing that perhaps the character, the person, wasn’t acting in such an odd way after all. Perhaps we just needed to expand or deepen our understanding of the person.

“Sometimes I work on my reading muscles when I’m thinking about the characters—the people—in my life. For example, last weekend my family convened in New Hampshire for a big family wedding. The night before any wedding in my family, most of the guests join us for a gala square dance. At the square dance, we always present a whole sequence of toasts, many of them rhyming ditties, created in the bride and groom’s honor. At this particular event, my 89-year-old father stepped up to the microphone and began playing the role of the master of ceremonies. The wedding was put on by the bride’s parents—my sister and her husband—but before either of the bride’s parents could step into the role of MC, my father did so. After each cluster of cousins or sibling presented a song or poem, my father would add in his booming voice some commentary explaining who that group of presenters was and how they fit into the family.
“This wasn’t my father’s event. The nine of us kids are already married. My dad’s a classy guy and doesn’t usually push himself to center stage. Later, on the way home from the weekend, I thought about how it was out of character for Dad to act in that way.

“I could have just dismissed Dad, saying, ‘He was acting a bit odd,’ and shrugged it off. But instead, I tried to read him well, to think more deeply about this one time when he seemed to act out of character. I asked, ‘Why might he have been acting like that?’ Think about it yourself.” I paused.

“You might be thinking what I’m thinking. See, it occurred to me that my dad is probably very aware that at age 89, he won’t be there for many more family weddings. And he is no doubt aware that others will step in to fill his role as the head of the family. As I think about it, it makes total sense that he’d cling to the role while he can.

“Do you see, readers, that my father acted in a way that at first seemed out of character? I could have just shrugged it off, saying, ‘That was weird of him.’ But one way to grow richer, more nuanced ideas about people is to pay attention to times when a person acts out of character and to think, ‘What might be behind this?’ That way, we can grow ideas about characters that are more complicated. That’s important, because characters—like people in real life—are not just one way.”

Notice that instead of jumping to tell students the conclusion I came to, I unrolled the story in such a way that I hope they, too, are bemused by the way my dad has acted out of character, and they, too, are drawn to speculate what the reasons could be for his actions. Then, joining them in this mental work, I share the tentative theory I came to after I grappled with the question, “Why might my dad have acted so out of character?” I am always aware that if I sequence the teaching section of a minilesson just right, I support kids in actually joining me in the sequential journey of thought, the mental work, that I am spotlighting. The trick lies in not summarizing my thinking process, but in revealing it.

You’ll find you own stories to share in the place of mine. For example, when fifth-grade teacher, Sarah Colmaire, piloted these lessons, she told her children a story about her childhood best friend, Maggie. Sarah explained that generally Maggie was a kind friend, but there was one way in which she was not kind. When she and Sarah played together, Maggie always insisted that she choose what they’d do together. Sarah was often confused by this, but accepted it, thinking this was just the way Maggie was in the world. One day Maggie’s older sister Chelsea joined their playdate and was really bossy, deciding exactly what they would do and when they would do it! Maggie was silent and Sarah couldn’t believe it! It took seeing Maggie with her older sister Chelsea for Sarah to realize why Maggie was usually so bossy—what motivated her to be that way.

I love that last sentence. “Characters—like people in our lives—are not just one way.” This is one of those lines that I want to hit just right. I want to say it with a lilt, an intonation, that makes it likely that kids end up carrying that little bit of advice with them always. This means, of course, that I’ll come back to this line repeatedly, like a theme song. Watch for it!
Active Involvement

Set children up to notice, in a read-aloud, that the protagonist is acting out of character and to ask, “What does that show?”

“You and I definitely have some ideas about Sistine. We know that she’s . . . what?”

Children called out, “Gutsy.”

“Angry.”

“Hates being in that town.”

“So let’s keep our theory about Sistine in mind, and pay attention—like thoughtful readers do—to whether there are times when Sistine acts out of character. If that happens, we could just say, ‘What? That’s weird!’ But let’s try, instead, to think, ‘What might motivate Sistine?’ and ‘What might this show about sides of Sistine we’d never realized were there?’

“Readers, position yourselves in groups of four. The quickest way to do this is for your partnership to join the partnership that is near yours so you have a group of four. Remember not to leave anyone out. It can be a group of six. Are you ready? I’m going to reread a part of Chapter 12 and then, after I read a bit, you are going to talk in your small group about whether Sistine acts out of character, and if so, what that suggests.”

Then I opened The Tiger Rising and began reading aloud from Chapter 12.

When he straightened back up, he saw that Sistine had picked up the carving of her. He had left it lying on his bed, intending to work on it again in the evening.

He held his breath as she stared at the piece of wood. It looked so much like her, with her skinny legs and small eyes and defiant stance, that he was certain she would be angry. But once again she surprised him.

“Oh,” she said, her voice full of wonder, “it’s perfect. It’s like looking in a little wooden mirror.” She stared at it a minute more and then carefully laid it back on his bed.

You may want to recap all you’ve said by displaying a chart like this (you do not have time to make this right now):

Notice that I return to a part of the text children have already read. I do this for two reasons: First, because this particular bit of text is a good illustration of what I am teaching and, second, because the task of understanding characters’ complexities can be tricky business, and I know children will have an easier time of it if they do it by examining a familiar section of text.
“Readers, right now, turn toward your small group. Talk about what might have motivated Sistine—whom at first seemed to be angry about everything—to act in this way that at first seems out of character.”

I stepped through the crowd of children sitting before me and then crouched alongside a group and listened for a minute. Wanting to ramp up the conversation, I whispered to Fallon, “Some people say that people are formed by parents and their home life. What do you know about Sistine’s parents that could suggest why she would act so sensitive, so appreciative of something beautiful?”

I listened in as children talked. After a bit, Grace announced, “Rob is different from the other kids and so is Sistine. Maybe that’s why she decides to be friends with him. Like when he first saw her, Rob thought she was even weirder than he was.”

Josh added, “I think she was just trying to be nice for a change. Maybe she knew that he was holding his breath when she saw the whittled figures so she was real nice about them.”

Sam added, “I don’t know that she was trying to be nice. She’s too blunt to be nice. I think it’s that she respects Rob because he whittles. Sistine knows about art and about Michelangelo. She respects art. That’s why she was so respectful of what Rob made. She knows he was the only kid who knew about the Sistine Chapel.”

Josh continued, “They’re both different from the other kids and they’re both kind of artsy but she’s a little crazy too. Like when Rob told her he knew where there was a tiger, she believed him at once, though it’s kind of crazy for a tiger to be in a cage in the middle of nowhere and for no one to know about it.”

Grace jumped in, “I agree. Sistine is the only person who takes Rob seriously and she even put her hand on his rash. I mean, that’s so, ew. But she did. So she does crazy things, and she really takes Rob seriously. It’s like once she’s decided to be his friend she’s really sincere.”
Fallon said, “Yeah, Sistine respects art, and she respects Rob for being an artist. That’s why she picked him to be friends with. She could sense he was different than the other kids in Lister. Like he had more depth to him. She gets the stuff he does.”

Meanwhile, I was listening to a second group and heard Emma lay out her theory. “I think that Sistine just acts tough on the outside but inside she’s really kind. Like she knew that Rob would be hurt if she made fun of his whittling so she was respectful instead.”

Izzy jumped in, “Yeah, like she can be mean about the other stuff, but she knew that this must be special to Rob.”

“Maybe she’s got two sides, one mean and one nice,” Malik wondered. “Or she’s like—really moody ’cause she’s always catching Rob off guard with her reactions.”

At this point, I whispered to Emma that she might help the group consider why Sistine acted out of character, suggesting that sometimes people draw on what they learn from their parents.

Emma nodded to me and then turned to her group and with great confidence said, “Well, why do you think Sistine thought the figures were beautiful? Do you think it was because of her parents? I mean, they took her to see the Sistine Chapel.” Emma said this last bit as if she was coming to a realization in that moment, as she spoke. “Her parents named her after the Sistine Chapel so they must have taught her to value art,” she added.

“I think Sistine recognized art when she saw it,” Kobe finished.

I convened the class. “Readers, I am stunned by what you thought. You’re all coming up with insights about Sistine that I don’t think you had when you were reading the book alone. Characters, like people in real life, are not just one way. Characters are complicated. Now, we’re starting to see all the complex layers of Sistine and how she has more to her than she initially showed.”

Listening to these children, what impressed me especially was the snowballing nature of their conversation. Even when one child disagreed with the previous child’s ideas, there was a sense that their thinking took in each other’s insights, becoming layered. Fallon’s insight was well beyond anything she could have come to on her own, but because she comprehended the ideas that others shared, synthesizing those ideas with the book and adding her own original ideas, she ended with a dense and layered insight. Then, of course, it is interesting if a student can’t respond in kind. As we listen in on kids’ conversations, we’re assessing comprehension. Later, in true Vygotskian fashion, we will try to help children do on their own what they were first able to do with support from each other.

As I say this—“Characters are not just one way”—I am aware that this will be truer for texts that are level N and above. Stories that fall within the level K/L/M band of book difficulty tend to feature characters who have one or two predominant characteristics, and these characteristics are described by the narrator or the characters. Still, if one looks closely and thinks deeply, even those characters take on layers of complexity.
Send children off to do their own reading, challenging them to notice when characters act out of character and to let those instances deepen their ideas about characters.

“As you read, I want you to author a reading life that allows you to see a lot in texts and that especially allows you to see that characters are complex. The work you have been doing, thinking deeply about Rob’s actions and the way in which he seemed to act out of character, is the same kind of work you need to do with your independent book.

“Today and from now on, if your character surprises you, instead of simply saying, ‘That’s weird!’ and letting the surprising part pass by you, try pushing yourself to really think, ‘What might motivate my character to act in this way?’ and ‘What sides of my character might this reveal, sides I’d never realized were there?’ Of course, you’ll want to make sure that you are doing other work as a reader today, and I’ll be coming around to admire that work. And remember you can always continue the work we’ve done for the past couple of weeks.” I pointed to the chart.

**Strategies Readers Use to Grow Ideas About Characters**

- Slow down your reading so you can really attend to what is going on in the first few chapters.
- Remember to carry important things from one chapter to the next.
- Be ready to be confused. This book is not going to read like an Amber Brown book or even like Because of Winn-Dixie. It’s going to be tough, but if you keep your thoughts and confusions in mind, keep reading, it will all work out in the end.

You’ll recall that throughout the first unit of study, you often talked with children about authoring reading lives in which reading works for them. So when you say, “I want you to author a reading life that allows you to see a lot in texts,” you are harkening back to that earlier unit of study and keeping the content you taught earlier alive for your children.

It is very important to teach children the way in which a reading curriculum accumulates, leaving the reader with a repertoire of skills and strategies. Today gives you a chance to convey the cumulative nature of your teaching.
CONFERING AND SMALL-GROUP WORK

Support Reading Skills that Transcend Any One Unit

Today’s minilesson was an important one, and you will certainly do some conferring to be sure that readers are growing more nuanced and complex ideas about characters. Remember that if children are reading books in the level N/O/P/Q band of text difficulty, chances are good that their main characters are ambivalent. Amber Brown wants to be thirteen and also wants to be nine. She is starting to like her mother’s new boyfriend but also resents him and is worried about betraying her father. There will probably be places in the text where the character or the narrator comes right out and tells readers about the character’s traits and feelings, but readers will need to carry those places to other sections of the story where the character acts in those ways. You’ll meanwhile want to keep in mind that once readers are working in the level R/S/T band of difficulty, characters will almost certainly be nuanced. Good guys won’t be all good, and bad guys won’t be all bad. And readers will often be expected to infer what the character is like as a person, often not only from noting the character’s actions but also from noticing the character’s interactions with the setting, with places. Terabithia reveals a lot about Jess and Leslie. I’ve written more about this in the assessment section in this volume and the next one.

Although some of your conferring and small-group work will follow the day’s minilesson, by the time you are midway into a unit of study, it will be important for you to be sure that much of your work also supports skills that transcend any one unit. In this section, I’ll talk about two challenges you’ll especially want to address. First, you’ll have some children who will need you to help them develop into more resourceful and experienced word solvers. And secondly, you will also probably want to take advantage of the fact that you have a small window of time before your children progress into a nonfiction reading unit of study, so this may be your last good chance to move some youngsters up a level of text difficulty. It will be easier for them to tackle texts that are a notch harder now rather than waiting until the next unit of study, nonfiction reading, which will pose its own challenges.

My colleagues and I recently did an informal study of third graders across the fifteen cities and towns that we know best. We administered running records to thousands of readers and then studied those running records, looking for trends. One of the things we found was that an astonishing number of third
graders decoded unfamiliar vocabulary but felt no need to generate any sort of a definition of the word and instead seemed to pronounce the word and then simply pass over it. We watched as a child encountered an unfamiliar word—say, the word _adoration_ in the sentence “She watched with adoration as her big brother walked across the stage to receive his award.” In most cases, the child could decode the word but then just continued reading on, seemingly oblivious of the fact that she had just said a word that meant nothing to her. Afterward, if we took the child back to the passage and said, “I noticed you worked hard to pronounce this word—_adoration_. What does it mean?” the child would inevitably shrug and say, “I don’t have any idea.” We realized, after gathering this data, that we needed to teach readers more strategies for figuring out the meanings of unfamiliar words.

The truth is that there are countless occasions when we are sitting with a child and that youngster nonchalantly breezes past a word that he or she does not really grasp. You’ll want readers to understand that rather than letting those words simply slip through her fingers, it’s really helpful to take note of the word, to act as if they’ve just found a small treasure. A person who is willing to work just a bit can make that unknown word her own. The reader can become word rich, if he or she collects the words that others overlook.

Of course, some children will not just breeze past words but will instead mumble tricky words under their breath or skip over them altogether, and of course if they skip past many words, the resulting text becomes full of gaps, like Swiss cheese. Readers do this either because they feel embarrassed that they are unfamiliar with the word or because they don’t want to pause to figure out the word. It’s important that you address this habit, either in whole-class lessons (if many children do this) or in small-group or individual conferences.

You will want to teach your children that readers use a variety of strategies to figure out the meanings of unfamiliar words. As most of your children will probably already know, readers first try to pronounce the word. Many readers find it helpful to “chunk” the word in meaningful ways to pronounce it, usually going back and getting a running start on the first chunk or two of the word as they progress to later ones, almost smashing the parts together. Remember to coach readers that after they’ve chunked the word into parts and pronounced a part or two, that is a powerful time for them to think again about meaning, going between the portion of the word they have said and the sentence’s meaning, thinking, “What might make sense that starts like this?” Once a reader has pronounced the word, if that word is still unfamiliar, you’ll want to encourage the reader to substitute a
But even after you can say the word, readers need to figure out what the word, and I've seen you doing some good work so you can say the word. knowing what it means. Readers use what we call adoration, when can you imagine using it? Could you use it in any of the writing entries you've got going in your writer's notebook? Could you use it when talking about your social studies unit? Your church? Of course, after a bit of demonstration, you will want to set readers up to practice the strategies you have demonstrated. You may distribute a passage with some tricky words in bold, and ask them to work for a few minutes on that passage, perhaps with a partner. Alternatively, you may

synonym for the word, and you'll say, “Check to see if that (substitution) makes sense in the sentence.” You hope the reader will actually substitute the synonym, checking to see if the sentence now makes sense and sounds right. The process takes a few moments, but the more children practice this procedure, the more automatic it will become. Encourage the reader to own the word, putting it to use, integrating it into his or her own vocabulary. For example, you might say, “Now that you know what that word, adoration, when can you imagine using it? Could you use it in any of the writing entries you've got going in your writer's notebook? Could you use it when talking about your social studies unit? Your church?”

You will find that some of your children can do this extremely easily. Give these children a passage with a few obtuse vocabulary words, and they will quickly be able to replace those words with new words that are at least the right part of speech (although children usually do not know parts of speech at this age) and will generally fit into the passage. Other children, however, will be utterly stymied by this activity. The latter group could certainly benefit from a bit more coaching!

But first, you probably just need to teach kids the process of trying to figure out what a word means and then using that information on the run during reading. To do this, gather a small group and begin with a clear teaching point. You might say, “I have noticed that you have difficult words in your books—and that'll keep happening even when you are my age. Sometimes, when you get to a difficult word, I have noticed that you drop your voices, begin to mumble and move past that word as quickly as possible.” If you decide to demonstrate what it looks like when a reader does this, don’t be timid about exaggerating a bit. You might, for example, read a sentence at full volume, and then when you encounter a difficult word, quickly drop your voice to a barely audible whisper and then bring the volume back up as soon as you are past the word. If it’s humorous, all the better. Children will recognize themselves in your portrayal, but if you are being a bit goofy, they won’t feel the sting of critique. You might then continue by saying, “We readers know that it’s important to be able to read all the words in our books. And reading a word means being able to say it and knowing what it means. Readers use what we know about decoding words to figure out how to pronounce a tricky word, and I’ve seen you doing some good work so you can say the word. But even after you can say the word, readers need to figure out what the word probably means. To do that, readers use the context—that is, use what is going on in that part of the text—to figure out the meaning.”

Model the process. Let’s imagine, for example, that you decided to do this demonstration within the text Amber Brown Is not a Crayon. Opening the book, you might spot the sentence, “Her long blonde hair is perfectly combed, with a really pretty multicolored ribbon barrette,” and you might think that barrette could be tricky for many readers of this series. You would then read the sentence aloud and deliberately stumble over the word barrette. You might think aloud, “Hmm . . . I should first try to pronounce this. I wonder if I can use any chunks at the start of the word—any parts of a word that I have seen before?” You might then notice that the first part of the word is bar. Then, you could repeat that first syllable and try to add the next part onto it, ultimately stringing the syllables together into the word barrette. Sometimes, simply figuring out how to pronounce the word is sufficient for the reader to recognize the word and know its meaning. However, sometimes the pronunciation doesn’t help. You could then demonstrate how to go about using the context to discern the meaning of the word. You’ll need to shush those helpful souls who call out the meaning. Say, “I need to focus here,” and pretend to not hear their definitions. Make sure to show your thinking out loud. Ask yourself, “I wonder what that means?” Then read the sentences around the one in which the word appears to figure out a possible meaning. Your thinking might sound something like, “I notice that they are talking about hair so it must be something about hair. And they are talking about a girl’s long hair; sometimes girls use clips in their hair. I’m thinking it means a hair clip. Let me try reading the sentence with the words hair clip to see if that fits.” Then, substitute the synonym and reread the sentence, confirming that the new word makes sense.

Although you will want to show your readers that we juggle many strategies when we hit sticky parts in a text, make sure that your modeling is both explicit and brief. Children need to spend the majority of the small-group time independently practicing the strategies, so be quick and brief.

Of course, after a bit of demonstration, you will want to set readers up to practice the strategies you have demonstrated. You may distribute a passage with some tricky words in bold, and ask them to work for a few minutes on that passage, perhaps with a partner. Alternatively, you may
immediately ask them to apply what they have learned to their independent reading books. “Readers,” you might say, “it’s time for you to work on this same strategy in your own books. Right now, skim your book and see if you can find a tricky word and put your finger on it. I’ll help if you can’t find one. Then, try to use what you know about being a flexible word solver to try and figure out that word. Remember to use more than one strategy.” As children work on the words in their books, you will want to rotate from one member of the group to another, coaching each reader individually. When you do this coaching, listen to the child and compliment the child on any strategy that you think the child is beginning to use that will pay off, and then give the child a tip for how he or she can do even more with that one strategy or incorporate another strategy as well. You might, for example, help one child use prefixes and suffixes to speculate what the word might mean or help another weigh whether the tone of the text is such that the word seems to be a positive word or a negative one. Above all, encourage your readers to try more than one word-solving strategy and encourage them to not only aim to say the word but also to speculate about its meaning.

At the end of your small-group work, make sure to link today’s teaching to ongoing work, reminding children that they should continue to use multiple strategies to figure out tricky words as they read. You may want to acknowledge that it can feel clumsy, pausing every time one encounters a tricky word, but remind readers that any new process—riding a bicycle or cooking an omelet—feels arduous at first. Tell your readers that the more they practice, the more natural the process will feel, until it’s practically automatic.

Some kids find it useful to reread passages that contain words that were once tricky words. For these children, you could suggest that they leave Post-its at all the places in a book where they’ve done some good word-solving work, keep that book in their book bin (or baggie). A couple of times a week, these children could practice reading the marked sections. They might practice reading aloud those passages containing unfamiliar words to partners. So if the partner stumbles over lots of words, the other might say something like, “It’s a bit choppy. Can you try it again?” The coaching partner could also say things like, “Whoa, slow down! You are going so fast it’s hard to follow,” or, “All that work on the tricky word messed this up. Can you go back and reread so it sounds smooth?”

Use Small Groups to Help Readers Tackle Books that Are a Notch Higher than Those They’ve Been Reading

Earlier in this section, I mentioned that you have a window of time to move children to higher levels of text difficulty while they are still reading fiction, before the upcoming nonfiction unit. Assess to see if some children may be ready. If you do move children up, remember that for a time, their baggies of books might contain some that are easier and some harder. For the harder books, it will help if you read aloud the first chapter or otherwise give a strong book introduction, and it will help if the reader is reading this book in synchrony with another reader, so their talk can be especially supportive.

Some of the time, you’ll use small groups as a forum for moving a couple of readers up a notch. When I decided to move three readers from books at level R to those at level S, I channeled them to start by reading *Journey*, by Patricia MacLachlen, and doing so in sync with each other. I gathered the trio, and said, “You have told me you are eager to tackle books that are a bit more complex, so let’s read one book together that will be challenging for you. I’ll help you, and you can help each other, and I think if we pour a lot of effort into this one, beautiful book, it will teach you how to read other books that are equally complex. I know you
know to start by looking at the cover and reading the blurb on the back to get a feel for what this is going to be about, but before you do this, I want to remind you that books like this one will not contain straightforward, predictable stories like you read at earlier levels. Remember earlier when you read *Amber Brown* books? She had a problem, and in the book, she solved the problem.

“Yes,” Isaac responded. “Her mother found a new boyfriend, David, that she wanted to marry, and Amber wasn’t so sure.”

“I’m sure all of you remember that everything worked out fine in the end. Amber realized her mother was going to marry David and she would have two families—one with her mother and David and one with her father. The books you used to read tended to go like that—the main character had one problem that you could put your finger on pretty easily, and that problem got solved. In the books you’ll be reading starting today, there won’t be one obvious problem, or one obvious solution. Today, you are going to read a story about another family, but you are really going to need to pay attention to what is going on in the first few chapters to set you up for what this story is going to be about. So I want you to think of doing several things:

- Slow down your reading so you can really attend to what is going on in the first few chapters.
- Remember to carry important things from one chapter to the next.
- Be ready to be confused. This book is not going to read like an *Amber Brown* book or even like *Because of Winn-Dixie*. It’s going to be tough, but if you keep your thoughts and confusions in mind and keep reading, it will all work out in the end.

“Here is a copy of the book *Journey*. Let’s look at the cover, read the blurb on the back, and get ready to talk about what you think the book is going to be about. There is going to be a tricky vocabulary word in the blurb—*inevitability*. Remember how we look in and look around the word to determine its meaning. Let’s see if you can do that work.”

The readers inspected the cover and read the blurb.

“So readers, do you have some idea of what the book is going to be about?”

“The mother leaves the boy and his sister with their grandparents, but he doesn’t know why she left?” Brianna replied.

“Did the rest of you have the same idea?” I pressed.

“Yes,” Grace replied. “There were a lot of pictures on the front and back of the book. We are going to need to look for clues in the pictures that the grandfather takes and that will maybe tell why the mother left and where she went. It says, ‘Journey learns to look and finds that, for him, the camera is a means of finding things his naked eye has missed.’”

“Great, I like how you went back into the text to support your answer. So what does *inevitability* mean?”

No one responded. The kids had puzzled looks on all their faces.

“See, I told you these books are going to be tricky and create questions or confusions that are not easily answered. I’ll tell all of you that inevitable means something that must be done and is unavoidable. And yes, Journey’s job and your job will be to find out why it was unavoidable that the mother had to leave.

“I’m going to read the first page to you. Do you remember that in *The Tiger Rising*, the characters got very complex because they had multiple problems and pressures (lots of problems and pressures)? Remember how Rob, at the start of the book, is alone in a new and hostile place, he misses his dead mother terribly and feels pressure from his father not to express his sadness, and he feels the pressure of knowing there is a tiger trapped in the woods. When I read this page from *Journey* to you, I want you to use a spyglass that lets you consider multiple pressures on the characters. I’ll read the first page after the title page, which is called a *prologue*.

Mama named me Journey. Journey, as if somehow she wished her restlessness on me. But it was Mama who would be gone the year that I was eleven—before spring crashed onto our hillside

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**Remember to carry important things from one chapter to the next.**

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with explosions of mountain laurel, before summer came with the soft slap of the screen door, breathless nights, and mildew on the books. I should have known, but I didn’t. My older sister Cat knew. Grandma knew, but Grandma kept it to herself. Grandfather knew and said so.

Mama stood in the barn, her suitcase at her feet. “I’ll send money,” she said. “For Cat and Journey.”

“That’s not good enough, Liddie,” said Grandfather.

“I’ll be back, Journey,” my mother said softly.

But I looked up and saw the way the light trembled in her hair, making her look like an angel, someone not earthbound. Even in that moment she was gone.

“No, son,” Grandfather said to me, his voice loud in the barn.

“She won’t be back.”

And that was when I hit him.

I told the readers that before, they carried with them a sense of the characters. Now they will also need to carry with them confusions and uncertainties. What persistent questions were still not answered and needed to be carried into the book? The children listed several: Why did the mother leave? Would she actually come back? What do Cat, Grandmother, and Grandfather know about the mother that makes them feel that she would not come back?

Before I sent the students off to begin reading the book, I posted the things that they would need to remember as they began reading Journey and other books that were this complex.

In the discussion that followed the reading, I led students to describe Journey as a boy who didn’t want his mother to leave him with the grandparents. I led them to realize that characters will probably not just have one layer to their problems. What else could be going on here? The children thought that the grandfather seems to have a negative view of what the mother says about returning, and this makes Journey angry at the grandfather. And maybe Journey is struggling with the whole idea of living with people who won’t tell him things. Then I prompted the readers to do similar work with the mother. At first, they seemed mad at the mother for abandoning her child, but I nudged them to realize that in the books they would be reading now, including this one, characters aren’t all good or all bad. The mother is not going to be all bad. They described her as not bad so much as restless. And they saw signs that she cares for her children, because she said she would send money. She also told Journey she would come back.
Remind children to prepare for the conversations they’ll have soon. Remind them to push their thinking. After a time, ask them to talk with their partners.

“Readers, in a minute, you’ll have a chance to have a grand conversation. Your book talk will be a lot richer, though, if you anticipate the stuff you want to talk about and read in such a way that you are looking for treasures. You may be reading with tons of predictions flooding into your mind as you race ahead of the story, thinking, ‘I bet such and such happens.’ You may be growing ideas about your character and letting these ideas become deeper by noticing when the character acts out of character. In a second, I am going to give you another five or ten minutes for reading, but before you continue reading, reread any Post-it notes you’ve written so far, starring ones that seem to you like they could perhaps spark grand conversations. If you haven’t already recorded an idea you’d really like to talk more about, do so now. Take a second to jot a thought you’d like to share with someone.

“If you already have a good thought recorded, or if you are just recording a thought now, see if right now, you can grow your thinking by jotting further thoughts onto your note. Push yourself to see more by looking more deeply at your idea and trying to uncover the treasure that might be hiding inside that initial observation or jotting. You could use one of these prompts to extend your thinking.”

Prompts to Grow Your Ideas

“This is important because . . .”

“This makes me realize that . . .”

“The bigger idea here is that . . .”

Coaching Tips

Usually a share session is the way to end a workshop, functioning as the bookend to the minilesson. This share, however, needs to be inserted into reading time, with the idea that readers will continue reading for another five minutes and only then meet with partners.
“Once you’ve recorded or extended your thought, get back to reading, but read with your thought in mind, carrying it with you, seeing if the upcoming story sparks more thoughts related to the one you are carrying. Remember, you’re reading to prepare for a grand conversation, so grow some more cool ideas as you read, perhaps ones related to the idea you have already starred. Try to be the kind of reader who doesn’t just pass by possible treasures but instead reads and jots with an eye for what is lurking beneath the surface.”

After another five minutes of reading time, I said, “Get with your partner—and use the time well.”