The Arc of Story: Writing Realistic Fiction

Lucy Calkins and M. Colleen Cruz

Photography by Peter Cunningham

HEINEMANN ◆ Portsmouth, NH
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Welcome to the Unit

FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOMS, some things have not changed at all since the first Units of Study for Teaching Writing, Grades 3–5 series was written almost a decade ago; other things have changed dramatically. The fiction book, in the same way, is both the same and different.

Our students still love to read and write fiction. We’ve often described fiction as the genre students “want worst to write.” The lure of fiction is as strong as ever. This is no surprise because, really, the desire to spin stories has been around since the beginning of time. Long, long ago, cavemen used berries and charcoal to put the stories of their hunts and travels on stony cave walls. They told stories around the fire, spinning all that they saw and did and thought into stories that helped them make sense of the world. Patricia MacLachlan has pointed out, “Other creatures have travels far grander than ours. The arctic tern criss-crosses the Atlantic many times, the Monarch butterfly summers in Maine and winters in Mexico. Other creatures have journeys far greater than ours,” she says, and adds, “But we are the creature that live to tell the tale.”

This unit, then, will continue to be an all-time favorite. Tell your children that they’ll launch the year with a unit on fiction, and you’ll see them look startled: really? And then they’ll smile.

The other thing that won’t have changed is that if your teaching is not decisive and strong, your children’s fiction stories will be pretty weak. Yes, this is the genre children want worst to write, but it is also the genre they write the worst. Because we have taught tens of thousands of classrooms full of children to write fiction, we know the predictable problems, detours, side tracks, and dead ends, and we’ll help you direct youngsters on a path that will work, but more on that later. For now, it is enough to say that children’s energy for this genre is both a gift and a curse, because yes, if you can channel students in a productive direction, they’ll be willing to work themselves to the bone to make their writing work. But on the other hand, if your teaching is not decisive and strong, students will carry on, undeterred by your teaching. Your teaching can be very minor—like a housefly, brushed away. So you will see that this book sets you up to teach in ways that make a difference and that save students from some of the problems they’re otherwise apt to encounter.

The Common Core State Standards say essentially that to make all students “college-ready,” the work students do in college needs to have more influence on the work they do in elementary schools. Narrative writing should now become 50% of the writing they do (that’s a lot!), and expectations for narrative writing are nothing to sneeze at. A fourth-grade fiction story has been included in Appendix C of the Common Core, and again, it sets the bar high. You can read it for yourself online.

But the other important thing to note about the Common Core State Standards is that the reading as well as the writing standards require that students are able to bring a writerly consciousness to literary texts. Readers are expected to note the choices that an author has made, to reflect on the reasons an author may have had for his or her craft moves. Common Core State Standards 4, 5, and 6 for reading literature all expect that students can read literature like an insider, like a participant.

If a person has wrestled with whether to write his story in first or third person, it is easier to reflect on why an author may have made that decision. If a person has worked to tuck a necessary backstory into her own story, she can see when an author has done the same move. The ability to do this kind of thinking comes from being a participant in the work of making fiction. Although teachers of literature want students to notice the carefully placed image, the ending that ties back to the lead, the truth is that when a reader is trying to make sense of the substance of a text, the reader focuses on content,
and those sorts of concerns aren’t foremost. As Randy Bomer has said, “Most of the time when we are focused on teaching reading, we want students to let language be a window they look through to the world on the other side . . . But when we look at writing like writers, we ask them at attend to the glass of the windowpane itself: the text structures, sentences, phrasing, words, choices in arrangement and style.”

We chose to begin this year’s fourth-grade curriculum with fiction, one of students’ most beloved units, knowing that for many of them, this is will be a dream come true. For most of their years in school, they have begun with personal narratives. We will lean heavily on those years of experience as we launch into this unit and explain to students that we expect them to carry all those years of experience into this brand-new year. Indeed, you might find it useful to enlist the input of your third-grade colleagues when planning for this unit to more seamlessly connect your realistic fiction plans with their narrative work from the past.

**OVERVIEW OF THE UNIT**

The first part of this unit, the first bend, begins with learning ways to live like writers, seeing ideas for fiction stories everywhere. At the start of this unit, we let students know that fiction writers get their ideas by paying attention to the moments and issues in their lives. Children collect story ideas in their writer’s notebooks, learning to flesh the ideas out a bit so that they contain some of the elements of an effective story. They will likely want to collect a few true Small Moment stories, or at least pieces of those stories, to help launch into fictionalizing those moments. A child who has recently moved could make up a story about a girl who moved, only this time giving the character the companion (A dog? A sister?) the writer wishes she’d had. In these entries, children will not actually write their possible stories; instead, they will write plans for how their stories might go.

After a few days of collecting entries that could possibly become fiction stories, students will profit from trying a few of these ideas out. A great way for them to do this is by story-telling their ideas to a partner. We teach children some storytelling techniques. For example, the beginning of their stories might sound like the beginning of a famous book or a fairy tale, of the sort they studied in third-grade: “Once, not long ago, a boy named Liam . . .” Elevating storytelling helps each youngster bring a storyteller’s voice—and an aura of literary language—to his or her own story plans.

Once children have each chosen a story idea, it is important for them to develop their ideas. One way fiction writers do this is to develop their main characters, perhaps in notebook entries that never appear in the final story. A fiction writer once said, “Before you can begin writing your story, you need to know your characters so well that you know exactly how much change each one has in her pocket.” When children are asked to develop ideas about their characters’ traits, most children will list external traits, such as “She has red hair.” We encourage children to also think of a character’s internal traits. What is she afraid of? What does she want? This helps students delve deeper into developing three-dimensional characters instead of the lighter character work they undertook while writing fairy tales in third-grade. The trick to getting beyond sketches of characters into ones that feel as if they breathe upon the page is to help students create coherent characters with characteristics that fit together in ways that seem believable. When children use broad generalizations, for example, suggesting that a character is a good friend, we ask them to open these terms up, to be more specific. What are the unique ways that this character is a good friend? After the writer gathers entries developing his character, he may dramatize the character, having him perform action in a scene, a fiction writer’s term for a Small Moment story.

Finally, it is important to be sure that your fourth-grade fiction writers think especially about a character’s wants and needs. Usually a storyline emerges out of the intersection of a character’s motivation and the obstacles that get in the way.

In the second bend in the unit, we remind children that what they learned once through revision and editing now needs to move forward in the writing process. In the earlier version of this unit, we used the story mountain as a crucial tool for planning, drafting, and revision. In this unit, we decided to streamline things a bit and revert to the time-honored tool that fiction writers frequently refer to: the story arc. This decision was made partly because we saw many ambitious children, perhaps inspired by the term *mountain*, create plans for stories that had far too many scenes to reasonably be culled into a short story. However, we still felt it was important for students to use a planning strategy that made clear the rising and falling action of a good story. In this version of the unit we focus on the story arc, showing students how stories with two to three strong scenes can successfully show a character, plot, and even setting change over the course of the story. The arc we create in the planning stages becomes a touchstone that students will refer to again and again throughout the unit.
When students begin to draft, they rely on their story arcs as road maps. Each moment on the story arc is usually designated its own page in a story booklet, and this, plus an emphasis on using skills developed in earlier years and on storytelling rather than summarizing, makes it more likely that children’s stories will sound and feel like stories.

The third bend in the unit moves into preparing these pieces for audiences through more focused drafting, deep revision work, and editing. Since the stories will be long, even with the streamlined planning structure, revision will need to begin early; we will begin to teach revision even as many students are still drafting, so that they can include these moves in their drafts from the earliest stages. We help children see that these story arcs are a way to ensure that their characters struggle, deal directly with their problems, and then come to some sort of resolution.

Although the unit focuses on writing fiction, it is also a unit on rehearsal and revision. Capitalizing on students’ beginning-of-the-year energy and their zeal for fiction, this unit encourages them to do more than they have done in years past. Although we emphasize the efficiency of revising as they write, once a draft is completed we then emphasize that writers look back on the trail of a story to consider making substantial revisions. Above all, we teach writers to consider the importance of setting in a story. Earlier, when our students were younger, they were taught to intersperse dialogue with action. Now we highlight the need to ground the entire story (not just the introduction) in a sense of place.

Then, too, children are led to rethink the evolution of their stories. Oftentimes, they approach a fiction story planning for the character to magically receive his or her fondest dream in the form of a solution that flies in out of nowhere like Superman. With help, we show children that in fiction, as in life, the solutions we find are generally those that we make, and if there are magic answers to be found, they usually have been before our eyes all along. This is something that aligns with the Common Core Standards’ emphasis on narrative endings.

In the final bend, we take a dramatic turn from the previous edition of the unit. We switch from teaching our fourth-graders how to write fiction, taking them step by step through the content and the craft of the genre, and instead teach them how to conceive, develop, plan, and carry through their own independent fiction projects. While it is true that this immediate transference of skills reaches for the highest levels of Webb’s Depths of Knowledge, it is also true that independence in writing is one of the goals we hold nearest and dearest to our hearts. This has never been more so than when narrative and fiction begin to take a backseat to persuasive and informational writing in fourth grade. There is no doubt that those two types of writing are crucial to students’ future academic success. In this series, the unit on realistic fiction is the only narrative unit in the fourth-grade curriculum to reflect those needs. However, it is also true that many students would like, perhaps even need, to keep their narrative muscles strong throughout the year. By teaching students how to take the reins of independent fiction writing projects, we give them the skills they need to feel confident that they can continue their fiction writing even alongside the whole-class units that are most assuredly not narrative.

**ASSESSMENT**

Prior to teaching this unit, we suggest you take a little time to establish a baseline understanding of your students’ skills as narrative writers by setting them up to do a narrative writing task. In *Writing Pathways: Performance Assessments and Learning Progressions, K–5* we describe the instruments—learning progressions, rubrics, checklists, and a set of child-authored exemplar texts—that will help you to see where, in the trajectory of writing development, each of your students lies. This initial assessment will help you and your students track their progress over the course of this unit, and this year, and can also serve as a valuable source of information to inform your own teaching.

You may be tempted to assess your students by giving them a fiction on-demand writing task rather than a personal narrative one. But pause for a moment and consider this: most children are much more apt to produce writing that accurately reflects their narrative writing skills when the onus of coming up with a fictional character, a bit of challenge or trouble that character faces, and how he or she handles that trouble, is lifted. That is, it’s far easier to recall a true life story on the spot and then to use the allotted forty-five minutes to write a Small Moment story that is focused, includes detail, introduces a setting, weaves together action and dialogue, and so forth. If you want a measure of your students’ skills in and understanding of the narrative genre, then we suggest you use the Narrative Writing Learning Progression that you’ll find in *Writing Pathways: Performance Assessments and Learning Progressions, K–5*. After all, the basic qualities of writing that make a strong narrative are the same ones that make a strong piece of fiction.

For this initial assessment to provide accurate baseline data on your writers’ narrative skills, be careful not to scaffold your students’ work. After all,
the more poorly they perform now, the more dramatic their progress may be later! You’ll want to simply remind students of the basic qualities you’d expect in a piece of narrative writing, then step back and leave them to their own devices. We recommend that you give students this prompt to start them off:

“I’m really eager to understand what you can do as writers of narratives, of stories, so today, will you please write the best personal narrative, the best Small Moment story, that you can write? Make this be the story of one time in your life. You might focus on just a scene or two. You’ll have only forty-five minutes to write this true story, so you’ll need to plan, draft, revise, and edit in one sitting. Write in a way that allows you to show off all you know about narrative writing. In your writing, make sure you:

• Write a beginning for your story
• Use transition words to tell what happened in order
• Elaborate to help readers picture your story
• Show what your story is really about
• Write an ending for your story

Some of you may worry that welcoming children to the start of a new year by evaluating them may seem uninviting. If so, be a little creative; tell children you’re eager to get their work up right away, for all to see. Or let them know that this bit of writing will help you be the best teacher you can be—and it will help them track their growth as writers across the year.

Whatever you decide, you will want to administer the actual assessment task—and then respond to it—in a way that is consistent across your grade. We recommend that you and your colleagues meet as a team to decide on the conditions so that these are the same, and you can then compare children’s results across not only a single class but an entire grade.

We suggest that when you read the prompt and additional suggestions, students are sitting in their writing seats with enough paper on hand. The paper should be familiar to them, and there should be additional pages available for any kids who are keen to write a lot.

We also suggest that you make copies of the writing children produce for them to paste onto the first page of their writer’s notebooks. This writing will serve as a reminder of what each child’s starting point was in narrative writing. As the year progresses, students can periodically review that piece, making sure that they are doing work that is increasingly more developed and stronger than this start-of-the-year writing. Certainly, as students collect narrative entries in the days ahead, you’ll suggest that they look back frequently at their on-demand piece.

Of course, the immediate goal of this initial assessment in narrative writing is to understand where the bulk of your class falls in regard to the Narrative Writing Learning Progression, letting that information inform the upcoming unit of study. Read each student’s draft, comparing it to the exemplar texts (bear in mind that no one piece will perfectly match the learning progression), and then read the specific descriptors to determine your students’ strengths and needs. The descriptors will be particularly useful as you suggest specific steps each writer can take to improve his or her writing. If a writer’s on-demand narrative is level 4, you and that writer can look at the descriptors of, say, character development for level 4 and note whether the writing adheres to those. If so, tell that child—or your whole class, if this is broadly applicable—“You used to develop the people in your stories by . . . ,” and read the descriptors from the prior level, “but now you develop them this way,” and read the level 4 descriptor. Then offer a pointer from the level 5 descriptor for how to improve. You can even say, “Let me show you an example,” and then cite a section of the level 5 exemplar text.

One final word. This baseline assessment is not assessing you. It is assessing the background your children have when they enter your classroom. But when this unit ends, you’ll repeat this assessment exactly, and when you collect the student writing and look between the first on-demand and the second, the progress that you see will allow for an assessment not only of your students but also of your teaching, and of this curriculum, too. Remember, always, that the goal of any writing instruction is not to produce strong writing. It is to produce strong writers. It is essential that we teach in ways that lift the level not only of today’s piece of writing, but of any piece of writing that a writer does on any given day. We’re confident that if you view this baseline data through the lens of wanting to improve your writers and your teaching, you’ll be able to say, “Look at your progress!” And this will describe both the student’s progress and yours.

GETTING READY

Because this is the first unit of the year, the chances are pretty good that you are inundated with scores of things that need to get done right away. Getting ready for this unit is just one more thing on your list of to-dos. You will want to scan this section quickly for the must-dos and move on from there,
knowing that you will have another stab at this unit next year. If, however, you are ahead of the game, maybe reading this unit a few weeks before the school year starts, we encourage you to take a more leisurely route to getting ready, not just simply reading through the unit, but also immersing yourself in the genre. Take some time to head to your local library and read through a small stack of realistic fiction stories. The best ones for your purposes (and for your fourth-graders) tend to be picture books and short story anthologies, although many teachers we’ve worked with over the years swear by some children’s magazines, such as *Highlights*, as well. Look for clear, realistic plot lines, a few central characters, and good writing. Study them to see what they have in common, what you admire, and what you think you might want to teach.

Next, you will want to dig through that stack to find your favorite text to use as a class mentor. It is important to choose a text that you will enjoy reading again and again, as will your students. We chose Julie Brinckloe’s classic *Fireflies!* After much searching for a newer, perhaps more cutting-edge, text we found ourselves returning to this book for it’s beautiful simplicity, understandable character struggle, and finely crafted language. A longer list of possible mentor texts can be found on the CD-ROM.

Finally, you and your students will be well served if you decide to carve out some time to work on using your own writing to create a demonstration text. This will give you an opportunity not only to practice your own fiction writing skills, but also to create a powerful teaching tool you and your students will return to and rely on throughout the unit. Try to make some time to try out a few of the first teaching points in this book. Better still, invite some colleagues to join you when you do. Not only will you be more likely to try it, but it will be more fun too. You might even decide to co-write your demonstration text. When writing, you might find it easier to choose a plot line and character that you know your students can relate to and will likely be interested in—the best ones being characters who are fourth-graders like themselves whose struggles mirror their own. Take a small bit of time now to write, knowing that you can easily follow up this work during stolen moments every few days throughout the unit.
In today’s session you will guide students into what many fiction writers consider the heart of fiction: character struggle and motivation. You will teach your students that readers will root for a character when they know what the character wants and they see the character struggle toward these goals. As Gerald Brace writes in *The Stuff of Fiction* (1972), “The first essential is the creation of believable persons who wait for something or want something or hope for something—they themselves hardly know why or what. Suspense is created by the waiting and wanting.”

We know this from our reading lives. Charlotte wants to help Wilbur, and this longing leads Charlotte to weave her web. Readers, too, want to save Wilbur. We want this so much that we flinch when Charlotte is almost discovered, and we root for a rat to bring back the much-needed newspaper clippings. Students, like E. B. White, can rope readers in by creating characters who have desires that are intrinsic to their personalities. A shy person might dream of one day overcoming her fear of performing on stage. Encourage students to think not only about what their characters desire, but why these motivations matter so, so much. This will help children create richer, more complex characters.

In life, of course, the path is never smooth. This is true in stories, too. This is something our students spent a good deal of time studying in third grade. We want to live inside a character’s shoes, facing his dragons, reaching for her gold medal. And we want to do so slowly so that we can savor the final outcome after the long buildup. The Common Core State Standards call for students to “organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally” (W.4.3.a). One of the most accessible aspects of fiction that allows students to reach toward that standard is in the familiar work of character.

Even though students are still sorting out how they want their stories to go, this session sets them up to create the right combination of motivation and obstacles. In preparing for this session, make sure that you have read aloud at least one mentor text you plan to refer to throughout this unit. We will refer to Julie Brinckloe’s *Fireflies*! Today’s session builds on the work students have done with familiarizing themselves with the text prior to today.

In this session, you’ll teach children that writers can develop characters by telling about their characters’ motivations and struggles and also by creating scenes that show these things.

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**Session 4: Giving Characters Struggles and Motivations**

**Common Core State Standards:** W.4.3.a,b,d; W.4.5, RL.4.1, RL.4.3, RL.4.10, SL.4.1, L.4.1, L.4.2, L.4.3.a

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Celebrate the character development work children have already done in a way that honors it.

“Writers, I feel as if a whole crowd of people came into the classroom with you this morning. You brought with you Griffen, who dreams of impressing Julie and of having a pet of his own; and Mario, who is hoping to get a chance to play jazz at his church’s coffeehouse; Mrs. Randoff, who has nasty teeth like an old rusty pole and who tells the black kids to get off her block; and Alex, with her horse bracelets and horse T-shirts and horse-sized hole in her life. I jotted down the sorts of details you have been inventing for your characters. Look at the list of what you have done!”

**Develop Characters by Thinking about Their:**

- collections
- favorite clothes
- special places on earth
- treasures
- worries
- quirks
- secrets
- relatives
- ways of walking, talking, and gesturing
- rituals for waking up, going to sleep
- meals and mealtimes
- best friends
- phone calls

**Name the teaching point.**

“Today I want to teach you this: every fiction writer needs to know what his or her characters want and what keeps these characters from getting what they want. I also want to teach you that when you know what your characters yearn...”

Instead of beginning this minilesson by telling specific ways that I hope children have learned to flesh out their characters, I try to simply applaud their enthusiasm and show a list that records what writers have done so far. My fondest hope for the class right now is that they are absorbed in their characters, carrying these ‘people’ with them all the time. I therefore act as if this is already happening.

This session is very full, and of course it could have been broken into separate sessions: we need to know our characters’ wants; we need to know our characters’ struggles (or what gets in the way of achieving their wants); and we need to show, not tell, these details. I decided to consolidate all three of these tips into one teaching point because otherwise, I felt the children’s work would be odd. I didn’t think it’d be valuable for children to spend an entire writing workshop listing only characters’ wants, for example. Also, I’m aware that sometimes separating items that belong together can actually make them more, not less, complicated. Notice that in an instance like this, I don’t hesitate to devote a few sentences to making my teaching point as clear as possible.
for, you don’t just come right out and say what this is. You show what your characters want by putting examples of this into little small moments, into what fiction writers call scenes.”

TEACHING

Show students an example of a published text in which the character wants something and encounters difficulties. Show that the author conveys this through showing action in a scene.

“I learned to do this by studying how published authors—writers like Julie Brinckloe and the authors of the short stories you’ve been reading—write little scenes (which could be called vignettes or Small Moment stories) that show what a character yearns for and what gets in the way for that character.

“In the book Fireflies!, at the very beginning of the story, the narrator sees the fireflies out the window while he’s eating dinner. When we read the story, we come to know that he yearns to go out and catch fireflies so he can keep them as pets—but the author doesn’t come right out and say that. Instead Julie Brinckloe shows this by putting examples of that yearning into scenes. Watch how Julie Brinckloe tells a Small Moment story (or a scene) that reveals what the narrator wants.”

I ran from the table, down to the cellar to find a jar. I knew where to look, behind the stairs. The jars were dusty, and I polished one clean on my shirt. Then I ran back up, two steps at a time. “Holes,” I remembered, “so they can breathe.” And as quietly as I could, so she wouldn’t catch me dulling them, I poked holes in the top of the jar with Momma’s scissors. The screen door banged behind me, as I ran from the house. If someone said, “Don’t slam it,” I wasn’t listening. I called to my friends in the street, “Fireflies! But they had come before me with polished jars, and others were coming behind.

Debrief. Mention that writers create little scenes and then piece them together like bricks. Point out that the scenes show characters in action in ways that reveal their desires and struggles.

“Some people say that fiction is like a brick wall, and the bricks that go together to make the story are scenes, or vignettes. This scene shows how much the narrator wanted to collect fireflies, how excited he was. When he races down the steps to the place where he knows the jars are we see how he’s been thinking about catching fireflies for a while, and that he’s done it before. When he remembers to poke holes in the jar, he knows it’s important, but he also knows his mom wouldn’t want him to dull her scissors, so he does it super quietly—the better to get outside quickly to the fireflies. We also see how excited this kid is when he mentions that if someone told him not to slam the door, he didn’t hear it. He’s seemed like a fairly polite kid and a good listener, so that fact that he couldn’t hear anything the adults would have said to him tells us how focused he is on his task.

“When we are developing characters, then, we need to think not only about what our characters want and what gets in the way for them. We also need to think about how we can create little scenes that show all this.”
ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Rename the longings and difficulties experienced by the character in the class’s story, and then have children talk with their partners to bring these motivations and struggles to life in a scene.

“Let’s try this with Luz. I’ll get us started by thinking a little bit about what she wants.” I assumed the posture I usually take when demonstrating that I am thinking.

“Let’s see. Luz is afraid of the dark. We’ve already decided she’s going to have a slumber party but she doesn’t want everyone to know she’s scared of the dark. That’s the story, but what does she really want? I think she wants her friends to think she is cool. She feels different because her father is Mexican, and she wants them to accept her.

“So will you guys imagine a scene that could show some of this? Let’s put Luz somewhere—packing for a slumber party, climbing into her sleeping bag at the party—and she is doing something (see if you and your partner can come up with an idea) that shows that she is afraid of the dark but doesn’t want to use her night-light when her friends come because she wants to be accepted by them. Turn and talk. See if you have any suggestions for how we could write this into a scene.” The room burst into conversation.

Convene the class and ask a child or two to share a suggestion. Help the child to turn an explanation into a scene. Debrief to point out the process needed to make a scene.

After a bit, I interrupted. “Writers, can I stop you? What ideas did you have for a little scene we could write that might show all this?”

Sirah’s hand shot up. “You could show the slumber party and she says, ‘Good night’ and turns off the light and then lies there in the dark, listening to the noises and worrying.”

Ramon added, “Or you could have her lying in her own bed, a couple days before the slumber party, with the lights off, practicing sleeping in the dark. She could get scared and get up and leave the closet light on.”

“Those are both exciting ideas,” I said. “Ramon, help me actually write what you envision. Class, you’ll notice that Ramon and I can’t actually write a scene until we can picture exactly what happens in a step-by-step way, with all the tiny, tiny actions. So Ramon, let’s picture the whole thing like a movie in our minds. Luz is lying in bed, trying not to be afraid of the dark. What exactly is she doing? More specifically, what is Luz doing or saying to herself that shows the reader that she is scared of the dark and shows the reader that she is practicing sleeping with the lights off?”

“She is just looking up. She looks where the lamp usually shines. She doesn’t want to lie in the dark but she tells herself, ‘I gotta practice.’”

“I can picture it,” I made it clear I was writing in-the-air: “Luz stared through the darkness to where the light usually shone. "I’ve got to practice," she said to herself. She . . . ’What? What does she do next?”

Notice that although this is the active engagement section of the minilesson (when it’s the kids’ turn to do the work), I review the facts and begin the work I’ve proposed. In this way I give the children a running start, passing the baton to them only once momentum has been well established. This makes it much more likely that children can be active and productive even within a three-minute active engagement section.

Novice fiction writers are apt to explain what’s going on rather than to show it. Notice that I help Ramon take his explanation of what’s going on and imagine the actions that a character might take that would convey this. I do this not because I want to teach Ramon (I could do that later in a conference) but because I know that by helping him I can help most of the class.

You’ll recall that this is the portion of the active engagement when the teacher calls on one member of the class to share what he or she just said or did. Usually we select carefully so that we call on children who help us make the point we hope to highlight. But sometimes we call on a child whose contribution is not exactly what we’re after. This revision of one child’s “writing-in-the-air” is a helpful way to demonstrate complex, sophisticated writing work.
“She closes her eyes so she won’t see that it is dark. Then she gets out of bed and she opens the closet door and she pulls the light string on and she leaves the door open just a crack.”

“So let me try that,” I said. “Class, pay attention to the power of Ramon’s tiny, tiny details. I’ll even add some more,” I said, and quickly wrote this scene on chart paper.

I stared through the darkness to where my lamp usually shone brightly. “I’ve got to practice,” I said to myself. I turned onto my stomach and squeezed my eyes shut. But even through my closed eyes, I could tell that the comforting glow from my bedside lamp was gone.

Climbing out of bed, I opened the door to my closet, pulled the light string on, and then closed the door partway, careful to leave a crack of light shining into the bedroom.

Debrief. Reiterate that writers put their characters into situations—small scenes—that reveal their desires and their struggles.

“Ramon and I have put Luz in a situation where we can show what she wants and what she struggles with, and we have tried to write a little scene, a small moment, that shows all of this. Notice the words we chose that really brought the scene to life: squeezed, shut, comforting glow, crack of light. Do you see how these words highlight Luz’s struggle to overcome her fear of the dark? All of you will write lots of scenes like this for your own character today, tomorrow, and whenever you want to write fiction.”

Notice that I pick up exact phrases I used earlier in the minilesson. There are “oodles of things you can think about . . . and just one or two things you must think about.” Notice, also, the parallel structure.

Donald Graves has said, “Fiction is really about character. It is about showing characters wanting things, having aspirations they hope will be fulfilled, or wanting a different life from the one they are living at the moment. Of course, it isn’t long before all this ‘wanting’ produces tough choices, and negative and positive reactions from others. Usually the main character learns something about life itself” (Inside Writing: How to Teach the Details of Craft, 2005, 36).

Put today’s teaching point into context by reminding writers of all they now know how to do. Stress that deciding what their character wants is not an option but is essential, and add this to the chart.

“So, writers, whenever you write fiction, remember there are oodles of things you can think about when you want to develop characters: a character’s special places on earth, best friends, quirks, collections, and ways of waking up. There are oodles of things you can think about, but just one or two that you must think about: as fiction writers you must know what it is that your characters yearn for and what gets in their way.

“You usually build the story line out of your character’s motivations and struggles—so once you know what your character yearns for and struggles to have, then it’s wise to create little scenes that show this. Remember how we just put Luz somewhere—in bed—and came up with something she could be doing—practicing sleeping without a light on to get ready for the slumber party—to show what she longs for? You’ll want to do this same work with your story idea, not once but many times today, and you’ll want to remember to do this whenever you write fiction. The scenes you end up writing today may not end up in your stories. Writing them, like making the two-column chart, is a way to bring characters to life, and that’s our greatest job right now.” I added the latest point to the chart of advice.
Advice for Developing a Character

- Start with whatever you've decided matters to you about your character. Is he or she like you? Like someone you know?
- Put together a character so that all the parts fit together into a coherent person.
- Reread often, asking, "Do these different things make sense within one person? Do they fit together in a believable way? Are these traits here for a reason?"
- Open up any broad, general descriptors—words like sensitive—and ask, "What exactly does this word, this trait, mean for this particular character?"
- If a character seems too good to be true, make the character more complex and more human by asking, "What is the downside of this trait? How does this characteristic help and hurt the character?"
- Know your character's motivations (longings) and struggles.
I stared through the darkness to where my lamp usually shone brightly. “I’ve got to practice,” I said to myself. I turned onto my stomach and squeezed my eyes shut . . .

“Francesca, you’ll get to know Griffen so much better if you make him come to life in a scene in your notebook. I guess you already know he wants to impress Julie. Can you think of one particular time when Griffen acted cool, trying to impress Julie?” I waited until she nodded. “Now you need to ask yourself the same question: ‘What exactly is Griffen doing? How does it start?’

You may find that many of your writers could benefit from a conference like the one I had with Francesca. I pulled my chair alongside her and saw she’d written the entry shown in Figure 4–1.

Griffen likes to act like he is 13. He likes to act really cool. Sometimes he embarrasses himself in front of Julie Colings. Griffen really loves Julie. He is always trying to impress her but this boy Mikey the Bully always takes her away.

“Francesca,” I said. “You’ve got a great idea for your story, and you’ve sketched out some notes on Griffen. Your next step will be to try writing some scenes that show Griffen and Julie in action. They probably won’t be scenes you actually include in your final story, but writing them will help you know these characters better. Remember in the minilesson how we remembered what Luz wants, which is for kids to think she’s cool and to not realize she’s afraid to sleep without a night-light. So all of us imagined a scene that might show Luz doing something around those fears and wants. Ramon started off just summarizing by saying, ‘Luz is lying in her bed, practicing sleeping in the dark. She could get scared,’ but then he ended up making a movie in his mind that showed this. He had to picture it in a step-by-step way, and he started by thinking, ‘What exactly is she doing?’ That scene turned out this way.”

MID-WORKSHOP TEACHING
Sharing a Scene that Shows a Character’s Traits

“Writers, I want to show you the important work Ariana is doing. Yesterday she wrote entries about her character. In one of them, she’d written this.”

Sally is different in front of her friends than her mom. She tries to talk really cool. Sally hates tomatoes, but her mom keeps making stuff she has to eat with tomatoes in it. That makes her mad.

“So today Ariana decided to try her hand at writing a scene that showed this, just like we did with Luz’s fear of the night. You’ll remember that to get started, we began by thinking, ‘Where could Luz be? What could she be doing?’ And so Ariana asked herself these same questions. She knew she wanted to show that her character, Sally, sometimes gets mad at her mother for making her eat things with tomatoes, and also Sally acts differently when she’s talking to her friends. Pretty soon she’d written this scene.” (See Figure 4–2.)

FIG. 4–1 Francesca’s first draft of a scene
I thump, thump, thump down the stairs into the kitchen.

"I hate you."

"What about tomato soup?" I yelled.

"No, we are having tomato soup tonight."

"Mom, I HATE tomato soup!" I yelled.

"You have to."

I didn't get any in a strong voice. "Go upstairs right now, young lady," she said. I thumped back up the stairs and yelled, "I hate you."

That's when my mom got really mad. I picked up the phone and dialed Sarah's number.

"Hello," she said.

"What-up?" I said.

"Nothing up, I got punished." I thumped down the stairs into the kitchen.

"Mom, we are having tomato soup tonight."

"I hate you."

"Go upstream right now, young lady," she said. I thumped back up the stairs and yelled, "I hate you."

That's when my mom got really mad. I picked up the phone and dialed Sarah's number.

"Hello," she said.

"What-up?" I said.

"Nothing up, I got punished." I thumped down the stairs into the kitchen.

"Mom, we are having tomato soup tonight."

"I hate you."

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"Mom, we are having tomato soup tonight."

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"Go upstream right now, young lady," she said. I thumped back up the stairs and yelled, "I hate you."

That's when my mom got really mad. I picked up the phone and dialed Sarah's number.

"Hello," she said.

"What-up?" I said.

"Nothing up, I got punished."

"I love that Ariana brought her character to life, writing a Small Moment story that showed the kind of person she is. So when you sit with your notebook front of you today, before you start an entry, make a choice. Will you add to your chart, listing internal and external characteristics? Will you write about your story idea, thinking on the paper so that your entry sounds like, 'In my story, I might show . . . ? Or will you try the new work you learned about today and write a scene?"
near him. He wants to be a boxer. He goes to boxing lessons.” The details about Max clearly conveyed complexity. Felix wrote, “Max is very scared because there’s this new kid. He’s as strong as a bulldozer. He might cream Max.” In addition, Max is scared of clowns and horses. Felix summarized the latter fear, saying, “Because one day Max’s uncle owned a farm and they were going to ride on horses and there was a mean old one. Max still has a horseshoe scar but he puts cream on to hide it.” (See Figure 4–4.)

After taking a guided tour through Felix’s ten pages of entries, I asked, “What are you planning to do next as a writer?” Felix pointed out that he’d gathered entries especially about his main character, Max, and still needed to decide on his other characters and then develop them. I asked how he planned to decide on the secondary characters, and he said he figured he’d need to write about Max’s parents, so he might start there.

“Felix,” I said. “I want to congratulate you on the fact that you’ve developed a really complex, interesting character. You could have just made Max into a tough boxer, but you built in tension in your story idea, suggesting a new kid moves to town who could be even tougher than Max, and suggesting also that for all his cool, tough exterior, Max is still afraid of clowns and of horses. You’ve made him into a really human, complex, real sort of a person, and I can see why you’re thinking of doing the same work for a host of other characters. You’re really talented at developing characters, and I may want you to help others who struggle with this.”

Then I said, “But Felix, instead of moving on to do similar work with a host of other characters, I think you’d profit by first trying to crystallize your story. If you worked now on a secondary character, it could be someone in the park, someone he boxes with, a person at the farm. I’d first zoom in a bit on the central tension of your story. I’d do that by taking some of the tensions you’ve created in your characters, and try to think through, ‘What might end up being a turning-point moment for Max?’ You could think about a time when he changes, maybe, or when he goes from being totally tough to being something else.” Then I reminded Felix to zoom in on one particular moment, to envision it and to write the scene step by step. Before long, Felix had written these entries (see Figures 4–5 and 4–6).

Should I get on that horse? No, no, no. Do it. Stop going. I won’t. I will. My little brother will make fun of me. He will tell everybody in school. I am scared of horses. What happens when it moves? Nothing. How do I stop it? Oh no, it goes faster. Stop, stop, stop, kablam. I am not getting on a horse ever! It smells, it’s ugly, everything is bad. I’d rather babysit three-year-olds. I will hate horses for the rest of my life. Why did I get on that horse?

FIG. 4–4 Felix’s entry in which he develops the character of Max

FIG. 4–5 Felix’s timeline

FIG. 4–6 Felix puts his character, Max, into action—riding a horse.
SHARE

Mining Past Learning to Apply to Current Pieces

Share the work of one writer who used what he learned about writing in previous years. Explain that all writers can do likewise and invite them to begin.

“Ramon just did some important work that all of us could learn from. His story is about Marco, who knows his grandfather will leave soon for Jamaica and who wants to feel more connected to his grandfather before the old man leaves. Ramon didn’t come right out and say any of this; instead he put his character, Marco, in the kitchen, cooking his grandfather some scrambled eggs as a way to do something for him. Ramon stretches out the action in the cooking scene, like all of you learned to do with your personal narratives. Marco cracks the eggs on the edge of the bowl and is afraid they’ll slurp down the side of the bowl, and he’s worried that the shells will go into the bowl and the breakfast will be ruined. But this is the really smart thing: when I asked Ramon how he’d thought to do this smart work, he said, ‘I just wrote it like a small moment!’

“Based on Ramon’s suggestion, I’ve found an old chart and hung it up. Would you get with your partner now and talk about that Small Moment story chart and your efforts to write what we are calling a scene? Because really, a scene in a fiction story is a small moment.

“If you see qualities of good personal narrative writing that you’ve forgotten to try to do, I don’t suggest revising your writing. Instead, I suggest you take an entry you almost like and write it all over again, an entirely new version, this time using all that we already learned to help you write it as an effective small moment.”

Qualities of Good Personal Narrative Writing

• Write a little seed story, don’t write all about a giant watermelon topic.

• Zoom in so you tell the most important parts of the story.

• Include true, exact details from the movie you have in your mind.

• Begin with a strong lead—maybe use setting, action, dialogue, or a combination to create mood.

• Make a strong ending—maybe use action, dialogue, images, and whole story reminders to make a lasting impression.

• Stay inside your own point of view. This will help you to write with true and exact details.