Lesson Plan for Narrative Writing

Be sure to read the article “Teaching Voice in Writing” before implementing this lesson, as the background information is critical.

Voice in Narrative (Story) Writing

Objective: Students understand that “voice” in a story should reflect the main character’s unique personality, motivation, and attitude, and that word choice and vocabulary need to be consistent with that.

Procedure:

1. Ask the students to listen as you read the two excerpts from the article “Teaching Voice in Writing” – the “Character 1” example in the voice of the eight year old boy, and “Character 2”, the introspective young woman. (You might print, photocopy, and distribute each excerpt for them to study.) Do not, however, name either character. Ask them to listen to each excerpt, and based on the way each character thinks and speaks to draw a picture in their mind of who that character might be. They should consider/imagine the following:

   • age   • gender   • character traits   • the way each moved   • how they felt about the heat
   • what they were wearing   • attitudes

Create 2 charts that describe these distinctive characters, listing the impressions generated, above.

2. Discuss their observations and impressions. Ask them to cite evidence in the writing to support their suppositions. Point out contrasting language and word choice. Also point out that in order to establish powerful voice every word spoken or thought by a character must be consistent with the age, gender, educational level, experience base, character traits, attitudes, beliefs of that character – not necessarily those of the author!

3. Explain that, based on their impressions of these characters and the corresponding voice the author assigned each of them, they will be writing about these same characters in another scene. Imagine these characters at the county fair. There might be booths with artisans, food, animals and plants from local farms on display, rides and game booths. Imagine how differently these characters might move through the fair. What would they gravitate towards, how would they think about what they saw, heard, tasted, smelled? What might they exclaim?

4. Divide the class into two groups, assigning half the class to write about the young boy, the other, the young woman. Chart the following sentences to begin, respectively:

   He headed across the fairgrounds.                   She headed across the fairgrounds.
Developing Voice in Writing

To brainstorm, have students ask themselves:

- Where would their character be drawn? What would he/she be attracted to?
- How would he/she move?
- What would the character remark about?
- What would the character reach out and touch? How?
- What would the main character be thinking about at the fair?

Next, think about how the character would speak – smoothly or in short bursts? In complete sentences or short phrases? Would the character use simple words or flowery words?

What kinds of words might best describe the way he/she moves? Ran, strolled, marched, sashayed, hurried, etc. Does the flow of the description reflect the character’s point of view, style, and outlook? Check to see if every word used is one that character would use? (It must be!)

5. Circulate as students write, offering assistance, feedback, affirmation.

6. Finally, collect their paragraphs, pull some out at random and read aloud, leaving out any pronouns or names that might indicate which character is being represented. See if the class can distinguish the character based on the voice and tone.

7. End the lesson by reiterating the key learning outcomes – that “voice” is determined by the personality traits, likes and dislikes, attitudes, beliefs, age, gender, experience of the main character. A good check system to put in place is for the student to read their writing, checking vocabulary, word choice, phrasing, sentence style against their character’s traits, to ensure that every word best reflects that character’s voice and point of view.