

Character Building

Building a character is the foundation of acting at all levels. It is a wonderful time for students to explore what it's like to live in someone else's shoes. They will want to jump right in, because this part of acting is already familiar to them because its essence comes from the desire to play, something they already do without even thinking about it.

A few things to consider:

- As your students experiment with walking and talking like other people they know or other people in the class, make sure they don't mock or mimic but focus on empathy and really walk and talk like someone else without making fun of them.
- Once your students have a solid foundation, encourage them to experiment with extremes. How big can their character be, how loud, how soft?

NASCENT

For beginners, the first steps towards character building, should be to encourage students to develop their powers of observation. This can be done in a variety of ways:

- Have your students move around the room varying the tempos. After a few minutes of this, ask your students to observe how the other students are walking around the room.
- Eventually each student should pick one other person to focus on: How quickly or slowly do they move? What is unique about the way they move? Do their arms swing? Do they lean forward? Do they glide as they move or trudge across the room?
- Once the students have selected a person to observe, encourage them to get up in front of the class, and copy the walk of the person that they have selected for the entire class.

This is a basic way for beginning drama students to think "outside" themselves. The first steps toward understanding and developing character.

Once the basic understanding is established, the students can begin to approach characterization through a variety of more specific exercises:

➤ NASCENT ACTIVITY

For this activity, you'll need the following resources, found as addendums to this document.

- **Addendum 1:** Character Building Lesson Plan

INTERMEDIATE

For the intermediate drama club, a review of the nascent drama club exercises would be appropriate for the group's first month or so but then once those fundamental principles of characterization are re-established, scene-work and more advanced levels of characterization be explored. With the foundation and understanding of character firmly in place, the intermediate drama student can begin to assimilate the principle of action.

- Character grows out of action. "Don't worry about 'being the character' first and doing things 'because that's what my character would do'; instead, do the things your character does in the way he/she does them and see, under the influence of these specific actions whom they cause you to become. **1** *Characterization is a means to an end, not an end in itself.*" **Robert Benedetti; The Actor at Work pg. 233 third edition, Prentice-Hall**

While the beginning student has explored the more technical concerns of characterization, (physical, vocal) the intermediate student can begin to explore internal approaches through an understanding of action and how to choose the best action(s) for their character.

➤ INTERMEDIATE ACTIVITY

For this activity, you'll need the following resources, found as addendums to this document.

- **Addendum 2:** Character Worksheets

ADVANCED

For the advanced student, several weeks/months of review of the intermediate principles of character building can be reviewed before moving on to more advanced principles.

The core principles and the foundation laid out in the intermediate phase are essentially the same for the advanced drama student, however with a solid foundation in place, the advanced drama student can begin to approach more advanced material and can begin developing their own independent approach to characterization:

“Playing a character means playing the character from the character’s point of view, not your own.” **Robert Cohen Acting Power pg. 88 Mayfield Publishing**

➤ **ADVANCED ACTIVITY**

For this activity, you’ll need the following resources, found as addendums to this document.

- **Addendum 3:** Vote or Gote

MUSICAL THEATRE

“Musical Theatre is not more superficial than drama, a common misconception among actors and audience. In many ways musical theatre is more difficult than drama because it needs everything an actor gives to drama yet it needs more.

More force, more economy, more relationship, more humor. There is basically little difference between acting in musicals and acting in theatre; the actor should work in the same probing and dimensional way, but it all must be accomplished in far less time.

There is little time for builds and explorations; the actor has to be there with the feeling from the top, or the scene is over and gone by.” **Michael Shurtleff Audition page 146 “Musical Theatre” Walker and Company**

The musical theatre student needs to share the same foundation of acting principles that the acting student is working on. The principles of Victory/Obstacle/Tactics/Expectation are very much at play in the musical form the difference being that the means of expression is different. For the drama student the mode of expression is the spoken word for the musical student the mode of expression is the song.

- Sung material is dramatic, and the same principles for dramatic acting apply.
- Music students can work on character worksheets and focus on writing a monologue about a character that they have selected but the final means of expression is a song, as opposed to a speech.

Music students should approach a song the same way that actors approach monologues identifying what they want, their obstacle in the song and identifying what tactics they will utilize to overcome their obstacles in the song.

➤ **MUSICAL THEATRE ACTIVITY**

For this activity, you’ll need the following resources, found as addendums to this document.

- **Addendum 3:** Vote or Gote

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BOOKS

The Actor at Work by Robert Benedetti 1976 , A standard in the field consistently providing students with a comprehensive yet simple look into the techniques and demands of acting.

Acting Power by Robert Cohen, 1978. Designed for courses in beginning or intermediate acting, this text is a contemporary, personal and provocative resource for students who strive to become great-not merely good-performers.

Audition by Michael Shurtleff, 1979. Absolutely everything the actor needs to know to get the part as well as how to work on parts is in this book.

WEB

Here's a great resource on building a character for the musical theatre!

www.theatrefolk.com/blog/song-analysis-singing-character

ADDENDUM 1: Character Building Lesson Plan

Lesson Topic/Focus: Building a Character, Lesson Plan 1, Part 1

Grade Level/Subject: Flexible with Adjustments / English Language Arts

Duration of Lesson: 60 minutes (flexible)

Targeted Standards: English Language Arts, National Arts Standards

ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS	BENCHMARKS/INDICATORS
<p>ELA Anchor Standard, Writing CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.</p>	<p>Ability to develop an imagined character through the completion of worksheets.</p>
<p>Theatre Anchor Standard, Creating Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.</p>	<p>Ability to develop an imagined character through character study exercises.</p>
<p>Theatre Anchor Standard, Performing Develop and refine artistic work for presentation</p>	<p>Ability to create and present work: unique, appropriate voice and physicality for one imagined character.</p>

ESSENTIAL QUESTION(S)

An essential question is a question that probes for deeper meaning and understanding of an issue, concept, or principle.

How can we use a variety of techniques to create a complex character?

LESSON SUMMARY

Brief overview of the lesson

Through use of character worksheets, visual images, and physical and vocal exercises, students write a monologue for a complex character.

STRATEGIES

Check all that apply.

	Summarizing and note taking	X	Reinforcing effort and providing recognition
X	Cooperative learning	X	Generating and testing hypotheses
X	Questions, cues and advanced organizers	X	Identifying similarities and differences
	Homework and practice	X	Setting objectives and providing feedback
X	Non-linguistic representations		Other

PROCEDURE

Guiding Purpose: Students explore and push their vocal, physical, and imaginative boundaries in attempting to create a complex character.

The Student Will be Able To (TSWBAT):

- develop an imagined character through the completion of worksheets.
- develop an imagined character through character study exercises.
- create and present work: unique, appropriate voice and physicality for one imagined character.
- Write a monologue in from the character's point of view.

Entering Activity – 15 minutes:

Teacher will distribute a set of photographs depicting a diverse (age, gender, race) group of people.

Teacher will ask each student to choose one photograph of a person that most interests them.

Teacher explains that the picture will now serve as an inspiration for character development exercises to complete in class today. Teacher provides a definition of character as follows:

one of the persons of a drama or novel.

Teacher distributes character worksheets and instructs students to complete the worksheet for the person in their chosen worksheet. She reminds them that they will have to use their imaginations to complete the worksheet, as the picture only provides some visual cues, such as race or gender or age.

Teacher tells students they will have 10 minutes to complete the exercise.

Interactive Instruction: Mill and Seethe (15 min)

Teacher asks that everyone gets up and walks around the room, at a normal pace, a normal walk.

Teacher then starts giving prompts like “switch direction,” “if you’re walking at a 5, bump it up to an 8...now down to a 2...etc.” “keep within your own personal space.”

Teacher then asks everyone to envision the character they created at their desk--“Does that character lead with a certain part of their body [TA demonstrates], maybe they have an extremely fast walk, or slow; maybe they have an odd twitch as they walk, etc. Begin walking as this person; let their walk, their physicality, inhabit your body.

Teacher has everyone do their imitative walks for a few minutes, then asks them to think about their character and what their voice might sound like. Give prompts like “is it shaky or robust, is it high or very low.” Ask them to say their name aloud as they walk.

Teacher then asks everyone to think about their character’s personality traits—“are they shy and prefer to avoid eye contact, are they gregarious and love a strong handshake.” After some prompts, ask the students to greet each other with a brief “hello, I’m_____.” and then move on.

Teacher prompts students to let go of their character and move toward a more neutral walk. Once everyone is in neutral. Ask them to move to their seats.

Teacher then leads students through a series of questions. “What did you discover about your character?” “How will those discoveries influence your writing about the character.”

Authentic Engagement: Monologues (15 min)

Teacher passes out pencils and monologue worksheet to everyone. Explains monologue as follows:

A monologue is a speech delivered by one person.

The Greek root word *monologos* translates to “speaking alone,” and that’s a *monologue*: one person doing all the talking. In theatre, sometimes a character has a monologue that they perform. You might have an internal monologue where you talk to yourself to better understand some dilemma. Some people talk forever in a constant monologue, never letting you speak. If two people talk back and forth, it’s a *dialogue*, which is different and probably more fun for everyone.

DRAMA CLUB Chapter 9: Character Building

Teacher asks that everyone focus on one of the character's goals from the character worksheet.

She says, "I want you to write a monologue in this person's voice. It could be to a friend, a family member, to themselves alone in their house. It could be to anyone, but it should focus on what this person wants and why, and what they plan to do to achieve their objective. Think about content but don't forget to think about tone, too, and the kind of wording this particular person would use. Try to capture their voice."

Once they're ready, teacher has them start writing. She lets them know they have 10 minutes.

Closure & Consolidation (10 minutes):

After 10 minutes, teacher asks that they stop writing, even if it's unfinished. She then asks for volunteers to read their monologues aloud for the group. She tells volunteers that they are welcome to perform the monologues as their characters—imitate their voice, their physicality, etc. There is no pressure, as no one in the room will know if they are doing an accurate portrayal or not!

Evaluation/Assessment (Formative, Summative)

X	Pre-Assessment	X	Open Response
	Anecdotal Records		On-Demand
	Checklist	X	Writing Portfolio Tasks
	Multiple Choice		Quiz/Test
	Open-Ended	X	Self-Assessment/Reflection
X	Questioning Techniques	X	Other Journal

Notes:

RESOURCES/TECHNOLOGY:

Think about practical issues and materials needs for lesson implementation.

- Character Worksheets
- Pictures of a variety of people
- Monologue Worksheets
- A trunk with many various hats, costumes, and props, for students to use in characterization choices
- Writing materials (pens, pencils, journals, glue or tape, scissors)

Additional Notes/Attachments/Differentiated Learning Plan:

Lesson Written by: Emily Goodridge with Pamela DiPasquale for THE CLEVELAND PLAY HOUSE

ADDENDUM 2: Character Worksheets

As students approach different dramatic materials, they can be encouraged to work on character worksheets as they prepare their characters providing them with a blueprint to work from every time they approach a role.

Here are some examples that could be part of a character worksheet:

The following is best considered when students ask themselves a series of questions:

A. What does he my character want? OBJECTIVE

B. What is standing in his/her way to achieve their desires? OBSTACLE

C. What is the best way action for his/her character to employ in order to achieve what they want? TACTICS

- Encourage your students to find these answers though careful analysis of the texts that they are assigned.
- As they progress, introduce the concepts of *relationships* that can be integrated into their approach to character building. An understanding of their *relationship* to the other characters in their scenes will have a profound influence on what choices they make to achieve their *objectives*.

Depending on the level of the class, these more advanced concepts of character building can be integrated as early or as late in their development as necessary.

ADDENDUM 3: Vote or Gote

VOTE OR GOTE

Dr. Cohen has developed an acronym for acting technique and character building that incorporates all of the foundation principles into an easy to remember acronym: V.O.T.E

Victory or **G**oal: *What does my character want?*

Obstacle: *What is standing in my way?*

Tactics: *What actions will I play in order to overcome the obstacle(s) in order to win my victory?*

Expectation: *What will happen for my character when he/she achieves their victory?*

This acting philosophy is grounded on positive expectations; characters should *expect* to win their victories in their situational pursuits. When a character expects to win and they are thwarted by an obstacle(s) in their pursuit of victory, the natural result is an *emotional* response to the challenge that is presented.

As drama students evolve, they are naturally going to concern themselves with how to *feel* what they are portraying. There are volumes written on this subject from Stanislavski to Lee Strasberg to Sanford Meisner; Cohen's approach is generated out of the pursuit of victory in scenes through *action*. This is a much preferred approach for the contemporary actor. Often approaches which do not focus on *action* lead to over-acting, indicating or telegraphing which are the death of good acting and characterization.

Now that the *advanced students* have an approach to *character*, they begin to explore a wider variety of texts:

Shakespeare, Chekhov, Miller as well as a wide variety of more contemporary authors both comic and dramatic: Ives, John Ciani (*Almost Maine*) can be approached for scene-study or production if the students are ready. All of these writers have characters which are age-appropriate for *advanced high school* drama students.