

The Main Character Questionnaire



- ✓ Overhead transparency of “Main Character Questionnaire”
- ✓ Many photocopies of “Main Character Questionnaire”
- ✓ Wall poster of Margaret Banning quotation
- ✓ Wall poster of Virginia Woolf quotation
- ✓ Wall poster of John Irving quotation
- ✓ Extra-fine-point permanent marker

LESSON 30

NOVEMBER

What I Was Thinking

The next several mini-lessons are described in Lesson 5, “Problems to Explore in Fiction,” which helps students notice the themes or plot premises that authors of published fiction have selected, then generate and discuss problems they might be interested in exploring in their own short fiction. I do the same. Then I choose one problem or *What if?* from my list as the foundation for a main character I’ll invent as a demonstration in the next mini-lesson, which is a long one.



The lists of problems you created for your short stories are intriguing and wonderful. Working from a plot premise that you like, one you’re interested to imagine, will go a long way toward easing the challenges to come. A problem is one of two scaffolds that will help you build your short story; the other supporting scaffold is your main character.

A main character questionnaire will help you develop a person you can become when you write your story and your readers can become when they read it. By nudging you, right from the start, toward details of character, toward *facts*, I’m hoping you’ll meet and conquer probably the biggest challenge of writing good fiction.

MAIN CHARACTER QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What's your name?
2. How old are you?
3. What's the problem you're facing?
4. What's your family background?
5. Where do you live?
6. What do you like to do?
7. What's different about you?
8. What do you care about?
9. What do you fear?
10. What are your dreams?
11. Who are the important people in your life?
12. What are the important things in your life?
13. How will you change through confronting your problem? Possibilities:
14. What will you understand about yourself and your world at the end of the story? Possibilities:

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MAIN CHARACTER QUESTIONNAIRE LESSON 30

30

Reproducible and Overhead**Main Character Questionnaire**

Last night I narrowed down my own list of potential fictional problems to one. I'm interested in this premise: what if a boy who is passionate about art and history—in other words, a humanities nut—has a father who wants a different kind of son? The situation intrigues me because I know two boys who experienced childhoods with similar conflicts, and because I've been reading Homer Hickam, Jr.'s trilogy of Coalwood memoirs, about Sonny, who wants to be a rocket scientist and his dad, Homer, Sr., who wants Sonny to work with him in the coal mines.

So I've got some rough sense already of who my main character will be. Now I've got to flesh him out—to invent and develop the details that will bring the boy and his problem to life.

I've reproduced a blank copy of a main character questionnaire as a transparency. I'm going to think out loud as I fill it in, and I'd love to have your input. [See Figure 30-1 for an image of the questionnaire I completed during this demonstration.]

First, I've already decided that the boy's name is Ben. My setting is going to be rural, because the father will be a hunter, and the rural setting I know best is New England, so Ben seemed like a good New England name, plus one that wouldn't call too much attention to itself and take over my story, like, say, Stone or Seymour.

How old would you make Ben if he were your character? . . . Well, I appreciate that it would be fun for you to imagine the life of an eighteen-year-old, but I don't believe you can do it convincingly, folks. Let's get real. As seventh and eighth graders, what's the outside age you could credibly imagine? . . . Fifteen sounds realistic to me, too. I think Ben is going to be fourteen. No, make that thirteen and in the eighth grade. I'm beginning to like the idea of the conflict with his father manifesting itself around a decision about where Ben will go to high school next year.

What specifically is his problem? Okay: Ben isn't—he can't be—the kind of boy his father wants. The father is a hunter and maybe a high school baseball coach. No, make that football—the ultimate macho sport.

I've already said the setting is rural New England. Now I'll sketch Ben's family. Let's see . . . what if he has a younger sister who's an incredible tomboy, so there's an even greater contrast, in the father's eyes, between who Ben is and could be? Ben *could* have other siblings, but for

Main Character Questionnaire

1. What's your name? *Ben*
2. How old are you? *Fourteen Thirteen - 8th gr.*
3. What's the problem you're facing? *I'm not - can't be - the kind of son my father wants. He's a hunter and a ~~baseball~~ football coach.*
4. Where do you live? *Rural New England*
5. What's your family background? *Tombay sister
Comfortably middle class* *Father: runs a John Deere franchise
Mother: prod. man. at local paper BUT was a fash. illus. in Boston*
6. What do you like to do? *Draw Paint Birdwatch
Read Research history*
7. What's different about you? *I like things rural guys aren't "supposed" to; I'm drawn to the humanities*
8. What do you care about? *Oil painting, etc...
High school: attending a private arts h.s. w/out team sports*
9. What do you fear? *My father & his disapproval; confronting him; having to go to the local h.s. (no art program)*
10. What are your dreams? *To find a community - people like me. To go to "Walnut Hill." To have my father's approval.*
11. Who are the important people in your life? *Father Girl he paints with (Hannah)
Mother Friend in the Young Historian Club (Tom)*
12. What are the important things in your life? *Set of oil paints Sketchbooks Binoculars
History & art books Expensive camera*
13. How will you change through confronting your problem? Possibilities: *I'll become stronger in my self-confidence; accept myself; acknowledge my mom; understand I have to endure my dad*
14. What will you understand about yourself and your world at the end of the story? Possibilities: *This father cannot be pleased. The best to hope for: maybe we'll make peace when I'm a grown-up.*

Figure 30-1 Main Character Questionnaire from Nancie's Demonstration

now at least I think I'll leave it there, because I don't want to bring characters into my story that I don't know what to do with, that I don't have a purpose for.

I think I want Ben's family to be comfortably middle-class, so if it's a private school Ben wants, money for tuition won't be an issue. What should the father do for a living? . . . Frankly, I don't think an English teacher at the school where he's the football coach will work for my story: he won't make enough money, and if he's an English teacher, I've lost the basis for his disapproval of Ben's interests. I know—I'll make him the owner of a John Deere franchise.

Okay. Now, what about the mother? . . . Great idea. She'll have had an interest in art when she was younger—it's *her* humanities gene that Ben is carrying. I think I'll give her a colorless job—production manager at the local newspaper?—but when she was in her twenties and living in Boston, she was, let me think, a fashion illustrator.

Now, you tell me what Ben likes to do. . . . Great list. In addition to drawing, reading, and painting, I'm going to add that he enjoys researching history. And what about this: he's a birdwatcher, like Tyler. So there's another reason he doesn't like hunting. . . . No, I won't add going to video arcades as something Ben likes to do. It doesn't fit with the character I'm creating; it's not consistent with *Ben*.

Question 7: What's different about you, Ben? I think we already know. You like to do things that rural, outdoorsy guys aren't "supposed" to; you're not macho in this way; you're drawn to the humanities.

Next, what does Ben care about? We know what he likes to do. This question is more about what he *wants*. I think Ben wants to go to a private boarding school like Walnut Hill in Massachusetts, one that doesn't have sports or teams and that emphasizes the arts.

What does Ben fear? . . . I agree: his father's disapproval and having to confront him. And I'll add having to attend the local high school, which doesn't offer an art program.

What's Ben's dream for his life? . . . To go to Walnut Hill, yes. Beyond that? I think he'd like to feel that his father loves him and approves of him.

Next, we already know that Ben's father is important in his life. I'm going to say his mother is, too. I think she'll be his quiet advocate. And he's going to need some people his own age to talk with about his problems, so I'll be able to use dialogue to develop his character and the plot and themes of the story. Let's see . . . I think I'll give him a girl he likes, whom he paints with—Hannah?—and a guy friend, too—maybe a bud in the Young Historians Club. His name will be Tom. . . .

Wait a minute. You're telling me there should be a subplot about how

Tom's family wants *him* to go away for high school, but Tom wants to stay home and play football for Ben's father? I'm afraid that as Ben's creator I'm going to have to put my foot down. First of all, that's too much coincidence. Secondly, I'm writing a short story. I only have twenty or so pages. I've got to keep my plot focused on Ben's character and his dilemma.

Next, the objects that matter to Ben? . . . Great: a set of oil paints—how about if his mother spent her own money to buy them for him for his birthday? What else? History books. Art books. Sketchbooks. Tyler, what would Ben own for birding? . . . Okay: binoculars and a good camera for photographing birds he sights.

Now come the two big questions, the ones that will help me find and develop my theme or *So what?* One hallmark of fiction is that over the arc of the narrative, the main character changes. How might Ben change? . . . Hmm, I don't think Ben is going to gather his courage and have a fist-fight with his father. I'm trying to develop a consistent character here, and however much you might enjoy this father taking a punch, my Ben is not that kind of boy.

Let me think: what *is* realistic and consistent? I think maybe Ben is going to understand that he can't change his father, that he has to learn how to endure his dad *and* stand up for himself. And maybe he's going to accept and acknowledge his mom as his closer parent, in some conscious way that he hasn't before.

I know: what if the climax of the story is Ben watching and listening as his parents argue about where he'll go to high school? What if he and his mother sent in an application to Walnut Hill, Ben was accepted, and the father found and opened the letter of acceptance? And now Ben's mother stands up for him in a dramatic, convincing way? That sounds like it could be plausible and interesting.

Finally, what else will Ben understand? Maybe it's that his father can't be pleased, as least for now. But maybe Ben can hope that he and his dad will make peace, meet each other on their own terms, when Ben is a grown-up? Maybe his mother can help him with that realization and cushion the blow?

I am ready to write Ben's story. Can you see how this exercise prepared me? Turn your attention to these two quotes. Margaret Banning wrote that "Fiction is not a dream. Nor is it guesswork. It is imagining based on facts, and the facts must be accurate or the work of imagining will not stand up." And Virginia Woolf said, "Fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners."

Do you see how hard I've worked to imagine my facts, to construct my spider's web? I like this quote by John Irving, too: "I believe you have constructive accidents en route through a novel only because you mapped a

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—Virginia Woolf

"I believe you have constructive accidents en route through a novel only because you mapped a clear way. If you have confidence that you have a clear direction to take, you always have confidence to explore other ways . . . The more you know about a book, the freer you can be to fool around. The less you know, the tighter you get."²⁴

— John Irving

clear way. If you have confidence that you have a clear direction to take, you always have confidence to explore other ways . . . The more you know about a book, the freer you can be to fool around. The less you know, the tighter you get."

I'm going to require that you complete a main character questionnaire and flesh out your own main character and his or her situation before you draft one word of your short story. Gather your facts, attach your spider web to life, map your way, and build your confidence. But before anyone begins to write short fiction, I have one more assignment for you.

Tonight for homework, would you make notes about what you learned from my demonstration today? Turn to the next clean page in your writing handbook and copy this heading:

Considerations in Creating a Character

Under the heading, please list everything you noticed that a writer of fiction has to do, think about, and remember when inventing a main character. I'll do the same. Tomorrow we'll compile a group list of our discoveries.

Comments? Questions? Observations?