



Spice up your training with stories

By Eleanor Shakiba

Part Two: Inventing your characters

In the last edition of *Training and Development*, you learned how to create a winning plot for teaching metaphors. This month discover how to develop engrossing characters - and bring your plot to life by making the most of them.

■ How stories promote learning

Characterisation is the process of developing personalities for your stories. It is worth spending time on this. Your characters will, after all, be the main focus of your story. Their personalities will spark emotional reactions. Interactions between them will bring your plot to life. Inspiration for your characters can come from a range of sources. These include:

- public figures
- friends, neighbours or family members
- work colleagues and customers
- books, films and TV shows
- personality theories
- pets.

■ Four steps to creating your characters

A character is a representation of a personality. It can be a person, animal, fairytale creature or an object that has been brought to life (e.g. Thomas the Tank Engine). There are four steps to creating characters in short stories. The initial step involves defining the role each character will play in your story. Step two is choosing

names for each personality. The third step is writing profiles for each character. Finally, you need to decide how to communicate your character's identity to your audience.

Step One: Defining the purpose of your characters

There are five basic types of characters that appear in teaching metaphors. You can use these as a simple starting point for characterisation. By planning each character's type, you are also pinpointing the role they play in your story. Being clear about this helps you to write a story that is succinct and relevant to your training outcome. Always consider which types of character will best move your story forward.

Dynamic characters are people who change during a story. They are very valuable in teaching metaphors, because they can be used to model changes in perspective or attitude that you would like your group to make. Flat characters are the opposite of dynamic characters. They don't change – and usually they display only one or two personality traits. You can use flat characters to highlight the difference between characters who move forward and those who stay stuck in old patterns of behaviour.

Stock characters are based on stereotypes that make them instantly recognisable. For example, describing a librarian as wearing glasses and saying “shush” would be a form of stock characterisation. You can use stock characters to tap into group norms. Beware of using them too often, however, as you may offend some listeners.

Heroes are virtuous characters who set examples of moral behavior. You can use them to illustrate good problem-solving skills or ethical decision-making. Villains represent evil. They also pose a problem for heroes. You can use them to add dramatic tension to your plot. By pitting heroes against villains in your stories, you can bring problems or ethical dilemmas to life.

Step Two: Naming your characters

Think of the time and effort parents put into deciding the names of their children. The same energy is often spent by writers seeking the best names for their characters. Select names that fit each character. Try not to make the names too difficult. You can find sources of inspiration for names in the phone book, from real people and in online lists of names for babies. Keep a notebook and jot down interesting names whenever you come across them.

Remember that you will have to speak your names out loud when you are telling your story. So you need to make them easy to pronounce and remember. It is also clever to choose names that sound very different to each other. This helps your audience follow your plot. When telling teaching metaphors, it is wise to avoid using the names of people in the group. It is also useful to think about:

- The sound and rhythm of each name. This can be a source of entertainment or it can carry a symbolic meaning within the story. For example, choosing three names that rhyme can link them together in the tale – this is a useful device to use when writing stories about teamwork. Using alliteration (e.g. Milly Molly Mandy) creates a fairytale context for your story.
- The first letter in each name. Using different letters to start each name helps your listeners keep track of the characters you are describing.
- The personality of your character. The sound of a name can suggest personality traits. For example, the name Hannibal Lecter conveys an ominous tone.
- Popular names in your characters' years of birth. You can quickly look this up on the internet. Doing this ensures you choose names that ring true for your characters.
- The diversity you need to reflect in your story. Australia is an ethnically diverse nation. This means that any stories you set here should reflect that diversity.
- Avoid using names that end in 's' as these can trip you up when you are telling your story.

Step Three: Creating character profiles

One hallmark of a compelling story is that its characters differ from each other. Dramatic tension can be fuelled by putting characters with conflicting beliefs or behaviours into your stories. Story characters come to life through individual traits and qualities. You can play these against each other to achieve drama.

Master writers develop character profiles before putting stories into words. They carefully plan out the physical characteristics, patterns of speech, behaviours and motivations of their

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characters. You can use the same strategy when writing teaching metaphors. Sometimes it helps to research relevant details that will make your characters believable. For example, if you are creating a character who is a doctor you might need to find out how a doctor goes about making a diagnosis. This will make your character ring true to anyone who knows the ins and outs of the medical profession.

A simple character profile should be enough to start with when you are writing stories for training situations. It will provide themes around which you can improvise when telling a story. Use these prompts to help build a character profile:

- What is the character's function in the story?
- What is their name?
- List three distinguishing physical features.
- What does their voice sound like?
- Describe any unique traits or quirks this character has.
- What is their goal or motivation?
- Why does the character want to achieve this goal?
- What strengths and weaknesses does this character possess?

Step Four: Communicating the identity of your characters

There are three main ways to convey the identity of your characters to your listeners. The most straightforward method is to describe their physical characteristics. This involves developing a set of visual and auditory descriptors - such as “dark eyes” and “jolly voice.” An easy way to do this is to close your eyes and imagine you are watching your character on a film. Make a note of their height, facial expression, posture, clothing and gestures. Then imagine you can hear your character speaking. Notice what words they use, as well as the speed and tone of their voice. The more details you include in your character descriptions, the more you will

direct the imagination of your audience.

A second way to build an impression of your characters is through dialogue. This is a wonderful tool for expressing your characters' moods, emotions and thinking processes. Write down the key phrases each character would use. This gives you a strong starting point for developing rich dialogue. Once you have a sense of how each character will speak, write snappy sections of dialogue to use at the key moments in your story. Four or five lines of dialogue are often enough to add impact to your tale. Always read your dialogue out loud after developing it. This is a handy way of checking that it sounds natural rather than laboured.

The third way to create robust characters is to describe their thoughts and feelings. You can do this by listing the main emotions and reactions each character will experience as your plot progresses. Expand upon your list by building short descriptions of each feeling state. For example, a character might feel angry at the start of your story. Anger can be described as a set of physical cues such as “hot face” or “racing heart.” These cues will make much more sense to your listener than the brief description “he felt angry”.

Once you've put these four steps into action, your characters will be ready to spring to life. Read the next edition of *Training and Development in Australia* to learn how to use stage skills to animate your characters. ■

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