



Characterization and Story Structure in a World of Danger, Using *Your Corner Dark*

This is an interactive discussion that will help students identify ways to use characterization and story structure to help write stronger scenes in their stories.

Grades: 9–12.

Materials: Computer or paper and pencil.

Duration: 30 or 60 minutes

Students will come away with an understanding of the form as well as several practical tools needed to help advance their writing.

Before the Activity:

Define story structure and characterization to make sure your students understand these concepts.

Story structure: Story structure is a series of events chosen from a life and composed in a strategic manner.

Characterization: Characterization is the process by which the writer reveals the personality of a character. The personality is revealed through direct and indirect characterization. Direct characterization is what the protagonist says and does and what the narrator implies. Indirect characterization is what other characters say about the protagonist.

Ask your students to think about both concepts by posing the following question: Which is more important in writing about danger—characterization or story?

The answer that I like to give—and hopefully one that your students will arrive at as well—is that both are important, because characterization and story are the same when applied strategically.

Then lead your students through the following discussions and writing exercises to further explore these two concepts and help them begin developing their own stories.

Discussion: The Greater the Pressure on a Character, the Greater the Choice.

Questions to pose to students: Who are you deep down inside? Do you think the choices you make under pressure are who you are?

Examples and Questions from *Your Corner Dark*:

In chapter 3, Frankie and Winston talk about Winston joining the posse. Winston is really happy about his choice to join, but Frankie wants no part of it. He also thinks Winston shouldn't be in the posse. Why do you think Frankie feels this way? Have you experienced any situations where one friend wants to join a group or go to an event while another friend doesn't? Describe the experience. What did their choices tell you about them?

In chapter 39, Frankie finally tells Leah about his choice to join the posse. Why does he choose this time to admit it? Leah chooses to walk away from Frankie after hearing his admission. Why does she choose to do so? Think about the things you've chosen to keep from a friend or family member. Was it a good choice? Did things turn out better or worse when you told them about what you were holding back?

Writing Exercise and Example: Making Choices

Example: Driving on the highway is a doctor on the way to her shift. In the next lane is a college kid on the way to a big party. A school bus carrying students crashes, and a fire breaks out. The doctor and the college student make choices; let's say they choose to stop and run into the burning bus.

What do they do before entering the bus? What scares them? What are their doubts? Do they remember something from their immediate or distant past? When skin starts to sear and lungs begin to burn, what do they do? Which child do they save first?

True character is only clear after tough choices. Fortunately, dangerous scenes allow for tough choices.

Exercise #1: Share this prompt with your students.

Choose a protagonist from something you're working on. If you don't have one handy, choose a protagonist from something you've read—maybe Leah or Frankie from *Your Corner Dark*. Now imagine them in the bus example, which is broken down into a sequence below. Quickly jot down their choices and explain why they've made them. Have at it!

1. Briefly describe your character. Whether driving on a highway on the way to work or to a party, what is your character thinking?
2. A bus full of kids crashes and catches fire. Does your character go into the burning bus to help? (If not, write that down. Then imagine that they do and continue with the exercise.)
3. What do they do before entering the bus?
4. What scares them?
5. What are their physical doubts?
6. Do they remember something or someone from their immediate or distant past?
7. Which child do they help first?
8. What do they say during all this? Or are they silent and mostly thinking to themselves? What are they thinking about?
9. Do they escape through the front where one area is aflame, or through the back door that seems to be open, but farther away?

Give students time to discuss their experiences and share their scenarios and thoughts with the class.

In their future work, students can think of the character's choices as a step-by-step outline to follow when writing about danger. This will provide them with an appropriate level of tension. Tell them to interrogate their characters as they venture through the dangerous scene or chapter. The characters will tell them what they need to write.

For Students Who Have Read *Your Corner Dark*:

Now that they've practiced a step-by-step outline for the bus-on-fire scene, take ten minutes and have them write a similar outline for *Your Corner Dark*. Step outlines work on a scene level, chapter level, or book level. Let them decide on a specific passage that speaks to them, or instruct them to write down the bigger moments in the book. Start with

Frankie's choice to fight for Winston, and end with Frankie's choice to tell Aunt Jenny that he *has* to leave the posse.

Leave time for discussion and reflection on *Your Corner Dark* step outlines, and how this adds to their understanding of the characters in the novel.

This concludes the 30-minute lesson. Using the additional exercises below, this becomes a full 60-minute lesson.

Additional Writing Exercises

Building on Choices

Share these prompts with your students.

Exercise #2: Review the choices your character made in exercise one, and then describe which choices will haunt them or empower them. Write down what action your character took that surprised them. Did their choices escalate in terms of tension?

Exercise #2A: What did your character think, but not say or do? Choose one thought and make it an action. Many times our characters think when they should act; this is your opportunity to experiment with how certain actions change the plot, the tension, and your character's arc.

Discussion: If there is no progression of pressure, will true character come out?

The answer that I like to give is probably not. The pressure must escalate with each progressive step that a character takes in order for their true personality to be revealed.

Reversing the Scene

Let's say you've just written a scene, but for some reason it's not working. You can then try to reverse the scene. This is another useful technique for finding true character in moments of danger.

Example from *Your Corner Dark*: In chapter 28, Frankie argues with Joe to get his friend Winston back into the posse. Imagine you were writing *Your Corner Dark*, and for some reason this scene didn't work for you. Suppose you reversed it? Frankie changes his mind and tells Joe that Winston should *not* get back into the posse. Now Frankie is an "unreliable" friend.

Note: If the reversal of the scene works better and propels your story, you must rewrite prior and later parts of the story to make this scene pay off. Otherwise, the characterization will be inconsistent. You would have to make Frankie "unreliable" throughout the story, and possibly consider that "reliability" is the big lesson he must learn from his journey.

Exercise #3: Share this prompt with your students.

Choose a scene where your character is in danger. If you don't have one handy, choose a scene from something you've read. Quickly outline the scene in no more than three sentences. Then reverse the scene and explain the reversal in three sentences or less.

Discussion: Consider the "Turn"

Questions to pose to students: What is the turn? Why is it important?

Answer: It is the reversal of fortune within a scene.

Consider the following:

*It can be an emotional turn: She no longer loves him.

*It can be a moral turn: The lawyer who had previously taken a bribe to throw her case suddenly starts to try the case honestly.

*It can be a physical and moral turn: Just before a dangerous battle during war, a tough-talking soldier loses his nerve and chooses to hide himself under the dead bodies of his fallen comrades to avoid being killed.

When you create a scene with danger, you *must* have a turn. If the scene starts out more positively, it should turn negative, and vice versa. A turn creates suspense, drama, excitement, and interest.

Exercise #4: Share this prompt with your students.

Go back to your bus outline or your outline where you reverse a scene. Is there a turn? If not, create one. If there is a turn already, for practice, create another turn. Maybe reverse the scene in order to do it. Do you see the effects on characterization and structure? How does it heighten the danger?

Wrap-up: Characters show their true character when you escalate the amount of pressure you put on them. A way to do this is through characterization combined with structure. Character and structure are often thought of as separate disciplines, but they can be one and the same.

Emphasize to Your Students: With character informing the structure of your scene or chapter, you can create a useful outline. Just ask your character about his or her choices, and they will tell you what to write. This is a sure way to get around writer's block.

The exercises you worked on actually created story structure for your dangerous scene by using characterization.

Share these techniques to remember with your students:

1. Use characterization to create structure.
2. If a scene isn't working, reverse it. If you want to keep the scene you've just reversed, go back and change prior scenes in your story to make the characterization consistent.
3. Always include a turn in your scene work.

Share this WORLD OF DANGER BOOKS reading list for students interested in seeing more of these techniques used in practice:

Long Way Down by Jason Reynolds

Sadie by Courtney Summers

Allegedly by Tiffany Jackson

This lesson plan was created by the author of Your Corner Dark, Desmond Hall. He has worked as a high school biology and English teacher in East New York, Brooklyn; counseled teenage ex-cons after their release from Rikers Island; and served as Spike Lee's creative director at Spike DDB. Desmond has served on the board of the Partnership for Drug-Free Kids and the Advertising Council and judged the One Show, the American Advertising Awards, and the NYC Downtown Short Film Festival. He's also been named one of Variety magazine's Top 50 Creatives to Watch.

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