

Say
What?

Developing
Characters
Using
Dialogue
in Stories



Presented by:

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CHARACTERS ARE DEVELOPED BY SHOWING WHAT THEY SAY AND WHAT THEY DO – BY THE WAY THEY ACT, INTERACT, AND REACT.

Yo! Yes? By Chris Raschka

Dialogue / characterization activity, development of form and extensions.

Read aloud “Yo! Yes?” It is a vignette of two boys forming a friendship, where the development of the story is conveyed through short clips of dialogue. The phrases are 1 – 2 words long.

When completed ask students to analyze the messages and to consider what the dialogue reveals about the characters.

i.e. one is shy, one is friendly

Consider: What evidence in the stories, or what inferences are you drawing that supports this claim?

When completed, ask students to get into pairs and to develop a similar dialogue. Place restrictions on the number of words each character is allowed to use at a time. I typically restrict this to four. This forces them to be selective about how they communicate the scenario and to use contractions and slang (and actually is a good simulation of how some people tend to converse with a peer). Part of the emphasis here is on trying to create realistic, natural sounding dialogue. Provide students with chart paper to record their dialogue. I use chart paper cut in half vertically to really convey the importance of brevity by restricting the width of the chart paper. Ask students to focus on creating a realistic situation and relationship to convey through simple dialogue.

Have students write each character’s dialogue in different coloured markers. This will become more relevant later as we move towards writing in prose format and this will help convey the understanding that each time the speaker changes in a story, the author must begin a new paragraph.

Have students perform the dialogue. Ask audience members to be acutely aware of expression, gestures, facial expressions, posture and other body language that will help convey the relationship and situation. This will become more relevant as you transition into the next activity.

Once students have performed their dialogues, they can go back to writing their dialogue in proper prose form. They will be supplementing their original dialogue with descriptive sentences that attempt to capture the “emotional” aspect of how things are said and the gestures that help convey the emotion.



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Characters become most vivid when students are able to show what they say and what they do. In this series of activities, they are being asked to combine simple dialogue with sophisticated descriptions of facial expressions, gestures, and body language to create a complete picture.

When students have completed this process, you can demonstrate proper formatting with appropriate indenting and paragraphing. Having the characters written in different colours will help students recognize where paragraphing should occur.

Student samples are attached.



Session #1

Can I have ice cream mom?

Not until you clean your room!

But I like my room the way it is!

No buts go clean your room!

Why can't I have ice cream first?
What's your problem?

*Just go clean your room
NOW!*

But but but but...

No buts go clean your room.

I'm running away!

Fine you can have ice cream but then clean your room

Whoo hoo! I get ice cream

Ugh!

I win you lose!



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Session #2

Can I have ice cream mom? **Richa whined slowly walking to her mom.**

*Not until you clean your room! **her mom stated as she washed the dishes***

But I like my room the way it is!
Richa yelled looking into her room.

*No buts go clean your room! **her mom yelled looking at Richa sternly.***

Why can't I have ice cream first?
What's your problem? **Richa complained walking towards the freezer.**

*Just go clean your room NOW! **her mom yelled walking towards Richa.***

But but but but... **Richa begged backing away from her mom.**

*No buts go clean your room **her mom commanded clenching her teeth.***

I'm running away! **Richa threatened running into the living room.**

*Fine you can have ice cream but then clean your room. **Her mom warned opening the freezer door.***

Whoo hoo! I get ice cream **Richa cried happily jumping up and down**

*Ugh! **Her mom sighed crossing her arms.***

I win you lose! **Richa teased happily eating her icecream.**



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Session #3

"Can I have ice cream mom?" **Richa whined, slowly walking to her mom.**
"Not until you clean your room!" **Ashleigh, her mom, stated as she washed the dishes.**
"But I like my room the way it is!" **Richa yelled, looking into her room.**
"No buts. Go clean your room!" **Ashleigh yelled looking at Richa sternly.**
"Why can't I have ice cream first? What's your problem?" **Richa complained, walking towards the freezer.**
Just go clean your room NOW! **Ashleigh yelled, walking towards Richa.**
"But but but but..." **Richa begged backing away from her mom.**
"No buts. Go clean your room," **her mom commanded, clenching her teeth.**
"I'm running away!" **Richa threatened running into the living room.**
"Fine, you can have ice cream, but then clean your room," **Ashleigh warned opening the freezer door.**
"Whoo hoo! I get ice cream!" **Richa cried happily, jumping up and down.**
"Ugh!" **Ashleigh sighed crossing her arms.**
I win you lose! **Richa teased, happily eating her ice cream.**



ALTERNATE STRATEGIES TO FOCUS ATTENTION ON DIALOGUE.

Phone a Friend

I like to take out my cell phone and pretend to make a call. Students are obviously only hearing one side of the conversation. I like to pretend I'm phoning one of their parents to complain about or discuss a humorous problem about their child with them. By using a combination of dialogue, nodding, and responding, I can typically get a fair number of students convinced that I am actually in a call. We then debrief by talking about what they perceive the likely response of the parent was and what reactions or comments that I made lead them to draw those conclusions. I inevitably get students who want to take a turn and make a call. Once, the student who was the subject of my original call, decided to call my mother to complain about my behaviour, resulting in a rather creative and amusing conversation.

What I'm trying to achieve with this strategy is to get students to be really aware of realistic responses and to think critically about how we respond to each other in person and on the phone. Again, it is the combination of the body language, conveyed through descriptive language and the specific words spoken by the character is reveals significant traits about them. In a short story, using the one-sided phone conversation can be a great device to reveal information without having to develop another character.

Trapped Story

I challenge students to write a story where they are trapped in a situation with someone they don't like and they have to co-exist with that other person until they are "released." I have had stories ranging from siblings "trapped" in the back seat of a car on a road trip, characters trapped in an elevator, to a character "trapped" babysitting a trouble-making toddler (so the definition of trapped is quite broad). The characters are not allowed to fight or argue. This often leads to some sophisticated writing where the body language and the dialogue are conveying conflicting feelings. (Sample attached – The Horror)

Student Sample: The Horror

"Ding." The elevator door opened. I found myself standing beside someone with a sly grin on her face. I quickly moved three steps to the left and faced the other way so she wouldn't recognize me. My teeth were clenching together. My



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eyes were as big as basketballs and I was shaking all over. I heard a voice from behind me call my name.

"Candace," she said. "What are you doing? Waiting for someone to come to your rescue? Are you afraid of elevators?" She grinned.

"No," I said in a low voice.

"Chicken, chicken, chicken... Bock bock bock," she chuckled. I turned around and stared into her eyes. They were like little slits that could barely see. I saw jealousy beneath that grinning face.

"What are you staring at, you loser?" she complained.

"Nothing," I answered with a sly grin on my face. I heard the "Ding" of the elevator and the door opened. I walked past her quietly and breathed a sigh of relief.

It was over. I had survived the horror.

Told You So

Put phrases on chart paper like:

- My dad told me I was grounded.
- Mom was angry.
- My teacher yelled at me.
- She told him to leave her alone.
- My mom said she was going to take away my phone.
- My dad said I couldn't play the game.

Ask students to replace the phrases with specific words the speaker would have used. The objective is to create effective scenarios that have familiar and relatable dialogue. Multiple examples help writers to understand that there are many ways to convey personality traits and situations, thereby creating a variety of characters and their dispositions accordingly.

i.e. "How many times do I need to ask you to take out the garbage. Maybe you can think about how to get your act together while you sit in your room for a week," Dad snarled. I headed up the stairs to my bedroom, my head drooped in frustration. "And I'll be up to unplug the PlayStation in a minute," he hollered after me.



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