

PROGRAM AREA	Literacy	FOCUS:	Language Arts Writing	RELATED SUBJECTS	Social Studies Arts / Drama / Film
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What makes a character “real”?

Using Filmmaking Techniques to Bring Characters to Life

to accompany:



Max and Mona

Directed by Teddy Mattera

South Africa, 2004

In Tswana, Afrikaans, Zulu and English, with
subtitles in English

Overview

Students work in small groups to analyze a character in the film ***Max and Mona***. Through reading and writing activities they gain a deeper understanding of the techniques filmmakers use to bring characters to life.

Time Requirement

Warm-up: 15 minutes

Film screening time: 98 minutes

Post-screening activities: 45 minutes

Objectives

1. Read and discuss an article about screenwriting to learn how to “bring characters to life” in a feature film.
2. Use descriptive adjectives to develop a profile of a character in the film ***Max and Mona***.
3. Collaborate in small groups to write a paragraph portraying an event in the character’s life that is not presented in the film.
4. Present the paragraph to the class. Participate in critiques of the work of other groups and select the paragraph that most effectively brought their characters to life.

Warm-up: How do filmmakers create “real” characters for feature films?

1. Divide the class into groups of four or five students.
2. Assign each group a major character in the film *Max and Mona*:
 - Max Bua – the main character, a professional mourner
 - Uncle Norman – Max’s uncle
 - Nozipho – Young woman Max meets on his first day in Johannesburg
 - Razor – Gang leader and drug dealer in Soweto
3. Students should then read the paragraphs on the next page, from “The Basics of Screenwriting: Character Development,” developed by Fathom.com in collaboration with The American Film Institute (<http://www.fathom.com/course/21701762/session2.html>).
4. In their groups, the students should discuss what they have read, answering these questions:
 - What is a “compelling character”? What traits make a character “compelling”?
 - What makes a character “engaging”? Give some examples of “engaging” personality traits.
5. Instruct the students to observe their characters closely as they watch the film. They will be developing a profile for their characters and exploring events not presented in the film that help to explain their character’s actions and reactions in the story.



The Basics of Screenwriting – Character Development

Creating compelling characters

Every character in your script--the doorman, the murderer, the little girl next-door-- should be special in some way. Your characters don't have to be eccentric to be engaging, but should have qualities or quirks that set them apart, and make them memorable.

Characters define themselves through large and small actions, through their words and their deeds. As in real life, movie characters have both a private and public side, the face they see in the mirror and the one they present to the world. They might say one thing and do another. Their needs might be contradictory. Villains might be likable and heroes difficult.

The behavior of fictional characters should be based on your knowledge of human psychology and your own experiences. Every character you create will be a reflection of some aspect of yourself, even those aspects you keep hidden or don't completely understand. If you try to make your characters act like characters from other movies, a common beginner mistake, they will seem flat and predictable. At the same time, characters inspired by you or the people you know should have their own identities because you and the people you know don't live in the world of your script.

You should develop as much biographical information and background details about your characters as possible before creating your screenplay. You can make a list of attributes for each character or write a brief biographical profile. Important attributes to list about your characters before writing your screenplay are the characters' physiology (sex, age, overall appearance and any outstanding physical traits), social and economic background (place of birth, occupation, education, race, religion, hobbies, etc.) and psychology (temperament, abilities, taste, ambitions, moral standards, etc.). Not all of these qualities will show up in your screenplay, but the more you know about your characters, the easier it will be to make them behave in a logical, consistent and intriguing manner.

Source: *The Basics of Screenwriting, Session 2: Character Development*. American Film Institute in collaboration with Fathom.com, <http://www.fathom.com/course/21701762/session2.html>



This excerpt is from Session 2 in "The Basics of Screenwriting," a program of the American Film Institute in collaboration with Fathom.
For the complete lesson:
<http://www.fathom.com/course/21701762/session2.html>

Activities: What makes a particular character “real”?

1. Students watch the film, *Max and Mona*, noticing especially the personality, appearance and behavior of their assigned character.
2. Following the screening, students meet again in their groups. They should begin by discussing their character in general, answering the following questions:
 - What characteristics made your character “compelling”?
 - Was your character “engaging”? If so, what personality traits did you observe that made this true? If not, what personality traits made your character seem not to be “engaging”?
 - Use descriptive adjectives to portray your character’s appearance, personality, and relationship to other characters, using the excerpt on character development as a resource.
 - How did your character’s appearance reflect his/her personality?
 - How did other characters respond to your character in the story?
 - Was your character “changed” by events of the story? If so, how? If not, why not?
3. Each group should write a paragraph describing an event in their character’s life that did not appear in the film:
 - **For Max:** describe the scene when he found out he was accepted to medical school. How did the news spread in his village? How did his parents react?
 - **For Uncle Norman:** describe the scene the last time Uncle Norman spent time with Max’s father. What was the occasion? What did they talk about? How do they feel about each other?
 - **For Nozipho:** describe her family, and her relationship with them. Does she tell them about Max? If so, how does she describe him? If not, why not?
 - **For Razor:** does Razor have friends? If so, describe the last time he met with them. What did they do, and what did they talk about? If he has no friends, describe an evening in Razor’s life. Where does he live? How does he spend his time alone?
4. The paragraph should have:
 - A topic sentence that sets the scene and explains the sequence of events.
 - Supporting sentences that describe the events, and the impact of the events on the character.
 - A closing sentence that provides a segue, or transition, from the events described in the paragraph to the character’s role and state of mind in the film.
5. Each group presents its paragraph to the class. When all groups have presented, the class discusses how well the paragraphs portrayed their characters and selects which paragraph does the best job of bringing its character to life.

Assessment and Standards

Lesson plans that accompany Global Lens films integrate international education with specific disciplines in the high school curriculum: Social Studies, Literacy, Language Arts and Humanities. Each lesson plan is designed to encourage students in grades 9 - 12 toward mastery of subject matter in a core curriculum component, such as reading and writing, while exposing students to characters and stories of the human experience in developing world cultures.

Activities in this lesson plan follow performance-based assessment rubrics. As defined by the U.S. Department of Education,

Performance assessment, also known as alternative or authentic assessment, is a form of testing that requires students to perform a task rather than select an answer from a ready-made list. For example, a student may be asked to explain historical events, generate scientific hypotheses, solve math problems, converse in a foreign language, or conduct research on an assigned topic. Experienced raters--either teachers or other trained staff--then judge the quality of the student's work based on an agreed-upon set of criteria.

Source: Office of Research, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) of the U.S. Department of Education (<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/OR/ConsumerGuides/perfasse.html>)

Assessment

1. Students are evaluated on reading comprehension and their ability to correlate screenwriting concepts of “compelling” and “engaging” with characters in a feature film.
2. Students are evaluated on their analysis of a fictional character as portrayed in a feature film, and on creative collaboration in developing an aspect of the character’s story that is outside the scope of the film.
3. Students are evaluated on their speaking and listening skills in presenting and discussing their paragraph with the class. Students are evaluated on their analytical and presentation skills for their contribution to selecting the paragraph that most effectively brings a character to life.

This lesson plan conforms to the following curriculum standards:

1. **National Council of Teachers of English Standards for the English Language Arts:** Standards 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12
(<http://www.ncte.org/about/over/standards/110846.htm>)
2. **Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) Language Arts Standards** (3rd Edition): Writing Standards 1 – 4; Reading Standards 5 – 7; Listening and Speaking Standard 8; Viewing Standard 9; Media Standard 10
(<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/Standard.asp?SubjectID=7>)
3. **California State Board of Education English-language Arts Content Standards for Grades 11 – 12:** Reading Standards 1 – 3; Writing Standards 1 – 2; Written and Oral English Language Conventions; Listening and Speaking Standards 1 – 2
(<http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/enggrades11-12.asp>)
4. **California State Board of Education Visual and Performing Arts Standards, Grades 9 – 12 / Proficient:** Artistic Perception 1.2; Creative Expression 2.1, 2.2; Aesthetic Valuing 4.2
(<http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/pn/fd/documents/visperfmarts-stnd-comp.pdf>)
5. **Florida Department of Education Reading and Language Arts Standards for 11th – 12th Grades:** Fluency, Vocabulary Development, Comprehension, Focusing and Planning, Drafting, Evaluating and Revising, Listening and Speaking, Viewing
(<http://131.247.120.90/pdf/grades/1112LASSS.pdf>)

Additional Teacher Resources

1. Discussion Guide for the film **Max and Mona**:
<http://www.globalfilm.org/documents/MaxandMona.pdf>
2. Background information about South Africa and Johannesburg from **National Geographic**:
<http://magma.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0404/feature3/?fs=www7.nationalgeographic.com>
3. Introduction to Soweto: <http://www.joburg.org.za/soweto/>
4. The Basics of Screenwriting: <http://www.fathom.com/course/21701762/index.html>
5. History of South Africa: http://www.safrica.info/ess_info/sa_glance/history/history.htm