

Activity 1A: Introduce the Unit



Students explore what makes a character, identifying favorite characters in the media and writing ideas about characters in their journals. Students generate lists of character attributes and categorize these attributes. The activity concludes with a unit overview.

Understandings

- A *character* is a person or nonhuman actor in a creative work.
- *Character attributes* contribute to the creation of believable characters.



Materials Needed

- Copies of the novel *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya (1 per student)
- **Handout 1: Journal Assignments** (1 per student)
- **Handout 2: Unit Overview** (1 per student)

1. Introduce the idea of characters in the media.

Tell students that they are beginning a unit in which they explore how writers make characters come alive. They will use what they learn to write scenes for a television series starring the main character in Rudolfo Anaya's novel *Bless Me, Ultima*. Make sure that each student has a copy of the novel.

2. Lead a discussion about what a *character* is.

Ask students what they think a *character* in a film, TV series, or novel is. Let student responses guide your discussion. Ask follow-up questions:

- Do characters always have to be human? Do they have to be living things?
- Are all characters fictional?
- Are characters always associated with stories? Are there characters in real life?

As students respond, ask them to give concrete examples or to explain their reasoning.

Use students' responses to develop and display a definition of a character. The definition should include the following ideas:

- A character is a person or nonhuman actor in a creative work.
- A character may also be a living or historical person portrayed in a nonfiction story, such as *Schindler's List* or *Into Thin Air*.

Teacher's Notes: Vocabulary Extension

This discussion offers an opportunity to look at multiple definitions of *character*. Solicit other meanings from the class, including *moral or ethical strength, a symbol used in writing, and a person known for being eccentric*. Consult an online or print dictionary for more definitions. Discuss with students how some of the definitions relate to one another.

3. Explore students' favorite characters.

Have students think about one of their favorite characters from television, books, movies, or theater. Ask:

- Who is the character, and what are two things about that character that appeal to you or make the character stand out?

Display the list of characters and their attributes named by students. Discuss the range of characters, noting in which type of media each appears. Students will use this list in Step 6.

Sample student character list with character attributes

Characters	Attributes
Bart Simpson	mischievous, rebel, disrespect for authority, prankster, underachiever
Nemo	imperfect (small fin), trying to be fearless, curious, lovable, impressionable
Frodo Baggins	Brave, selfless, thoughtful, wise, observant, polite, inner strength, youthful
Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore	wise, eccentric, leader, brave, good, legendary power, courageous, elderly, tall
Darth Vader	intelligent, powerful, evil, vile, physically intimidating, ominous, feared
Arthur "Boo" Radley	recluse, troubled, gentle soul, secretive, kind, believed to be dangerous, quiet, ghostly

4. Have students write about creating characters.

Distribute **Handout 1: Journal Assignments** and have students complete Journal 1: Developing Characters.

5. Discuss students' journal responses.

Call on volunteers to share their responses to the following questions:

- Think about your favorite characters. How do their authors or creators make them so distinctive or appealing?
- Why is it important for characters to be believable and compelling?

***Possible answers:** The reader will care more or identify with the character; the character will be more interesting to read about; the reader will be able to tell when a character does something unusual or "out of character"; the reader will be able to tell one character from another and not be confused.*

6. Help students categorize character attributes.

Ask the following questions to help students identify and categorize important character information from the student-generated list of characters and attributes:

- When you encounter characters in a book, a play, a movie, or on television, what kinds of things do you learn about them?
- Do some of these characteristics seem to be related? If you had to list every character attribute under just four categories, what might those categories be?

Come to a consensus on four categories. Tell students that they will use these categories to help identify character information in the next activity.

***Possible four categories:** Physical traits, family and cultural background, speech and actions, personality traits.*

7. Introduce unit activities.

Distribute **Handout 2: Unit Overview** and direct students to What You Will Do in This Unit. Explain that some of the work they will do is similar to what a screenwriter does in translating a narrative work of fiction for television or film.

Tell students that Vocabulary Used in This Unit contains important terms that will be introduced in the unit. They can refer to this list throughout the unit.



Handout 1: Journal Assignments

Complete the following journal assignments when you are instructed to do so by your teacher.

Journal 1: Developing Characters

Answer the following questions in your journals:

- Think about your favorite characters. How do their authors or creators make them so distinctive or appealing?
- Why is it important for characters to be believable and compelling?

Write as many reasons as you can think of in your journals. Be prepared to share them with the class.

Journal 2: A Character in My Life

Follow the steps below to create character studies with your partner.

Telling the Story

1. Think of a true story, in which someone you know is the main character. This person could be a relative, a friend, or someone else from your neighborhood or daily life. The story should show something about the person's character or personality. The story can be from childhood or much more recent, but it should be one you know well and can tell in detail.
2. Before you begin, jot down some notes in your journal to help you tell the story. Your notes should include the parts of the story you have to tell for the story to make sense, as well as details that will make the story and the character come alive for your listener. Include details from all four categories of the character attributes you identified in the previous activity. The story should take no more than two or three minutes to tell.
3. Tell the story to your partner. Answer any follow-up questions your partner may have.

Creating the Character Study

In your journal, create four columns, using the categories of attributes you identified in the previous activity as column headings.

1. As your partner tells his or her story, listen carefully for the attributes of the main character. Write each one mentioned under the appropriate column heading.
2. When your partner finishes the story, ask yourself: *Are there any details about the story that I'd like repeated or clarified?* If so, ask now.
3. Look over the filled-in table. Then write a character study, one or more paragraphs long, in your journal describing the character in your partner's story. Include details to describe the character fully and make him or her come alive for your reader. Share your character study with the class.





Journal 3: Character Video Observation

As you watch the video, focus on what the main character says when he or she appears to be speaking directly to the audience rather than to other characters. Consider the questions below:

- What are the character’s attributes? Consider all four categories you established in the first activity.
- What clues does the character give about any problems or conflicts he or she might face later in the show or series? Is there anything the character is unhappy or fearful about? Does he or she have issues with other characters or anything unresolved in his or her past?

In your journal, make a table like this:

Character Attributes	Conflict Clues

Record all the attributes and clues you notice in the video. Be prepared to share this information with the class.

Journal 4: Vocabulary Bank

As you reread the first chapter, focusing on character attributes and conflict clues, look for specific vocabulary that describes and characterizes Antonio. Remember, since the story is told through Antonio’s eyes, the language he uses also reveals his character.

- What words does he use to refer to or describe himself, his friends, and members of his family?
- What are the names of places in his life?
- What nouns does he use to name his surroundings? What adjectives does he use to describe them?

Copy all these words and phrases into a section of your journal. Continue to collect vocabulary in this section throughout the unit, as you read the book.

Refer to this Vocabulary Bank as you write your character study, monologue, and dialogue.





Journal 5: Character Study

Write a character study of Antonio that is one or more paragraphs long, drawing on the following sources from your character investigation:

- **Character Attributes table:** Include attributes from all four categories you used in your character studies in Journal 2. You don't need to use every attribute, just the ones you think most strongly characterize Antonio.
- **Conflict Clues table:** Choose two or three of the possible conflicts that you think will be most important in defining Antonio's character.
- **Vocabulary Bank:** Refer to these words or phrases to select accurate and descriptive language for your character study.

Share your character study with the class and listen to the character studies written by your classmates.

- Do they sound the same or are there significant differences?
- If there are differences, what are they?

Talk about why your classmates might have characterized Antonio in different ways.

Hearing a range of character studies will help you solidify your views about Antonio in preparation for writing your monologue.





Handout 2: Unit Overview

Casting a Novel Character

Complex, believable characters are essential to effective storytelling. Characters must have recognizable traits and plausible motivations. But they must also be multi-dimensional—capable of defying expectation and surprising you. To sustain your interest, characters need to grow and change over time, whether in a novel, a play, a movie, or a television series.

In this unit, you will examine what makes a character real, identifying information such as physical appearance and dress, family and cultural background, speech and actions, and personality traits. You will look first at people around you as characters and then explore characterization in a novel, looking at how the author establishes characters and shows their development.

For the unit project, you will imagine that the novel's main character has been cast in a television series. In Part 1, you will write an opening monologue for the series. In Part 2, you will work in a team to write a key scene of dialogue in script form to be used in an episode of the series.

As you carry out the unit activities, you will explore the following questions:

- *How do authors and scriptwriters create believable, multi-dimensional characters?*
- *What roles can monologue and dialogue play in establishing and developing character?*
- *What scriptwriting techniques can I use to bring a character from a novel to life on the screen?*

What You Will Do in This Unit

Probe the sources of characterization. Carry out character research by sharing and examining stories from your own life to identify character attributes in real people.

Discover what gives a character star quality. Identify character information about Antonio, the main character in the novel *Bless Me, Ultima*, and then write a speech introducing Antonio in his own voice.

Track moments of character change. Work with your team to identify key passages from the novel showing character growth and transformation.

Write TV scripts. Examine excerpts from actual movie and TV scripts and use scriptwriting techniques to write a scene for your own TV series based on the novel.





Vocabulary

Aside: In the context of theater and media, this refers to lines spoken by an actor as if to him- or herself or to the audience, which other actors onstage pretend not to hear.

Attributes: Qualities or aspects of a character that distinguish him or her from other characters, including physical appearance and dress, family and cultural background, speech and actions, and personality traits.

Back story: The experiences of a character that occur before the action of the story takes place.

Character: A person or nonhuman actor portrayed in a story, such as a novel, movie, play, or television show. Characters are found in fiction and nonfiction.

Dialogue: A conversation between two or more characters in a literary or dramatic work.

Monologue: A speech by a single person, often used in literature or media to introduce a character or to reveal the character's thoughts. Long, poetic monologues in theater, such as some speeches in Shakespeare's plays, are referred to as soliloquies.

Motivation: The reason or reasons behind a character's actions.

Pilot: A television show produced and taped as a sample of a proposed series, usually the first show in the series.

Script: The written text of a play, movie, television show, or radio broadcast.

Stage directions: The part of a script that tells the characters how to move or how to speak their lines, or describes other action on the stage or set.

Trait: A characteristic feature or quality of a person or thing. While similar to attributes, *character traits* often refer specifically to personality.

