

Visiting with Your Characters

Note: For the most part, my examples will come from a story I'm developing with a working title of *Stealth Students*.

Origin: When I left the classroom I heard from three students who were losing patience with how much instructional time was being lost due to student misbehavior.

And so I pulled the ol' 'what if...?' and started writing about three girls who choose to do their own learning at school.

Visiting with Your Characters Character Conversations with the Author

- I have found their character starts to emerge more easily once I start talking to them.
- I often don't know what they're thinking until I start talking to them.
- I have found that some of these conversations reveal more about a character than I had planned.
- They have sometimes come up with better plot points than I have already explored.
- Their voice emerges more easily when I am talking to them.
- I have found that through these conversations, they 'take ownership' in the story.

Character Conversations with Each Other

- 'Character roundtable' works well later in a story, but I have used it early on to introduce the characters to each other.
- I really like this technique at the end of my stories. Some of the conversations remind me of some of the extras that accompany movies on DVD.

Topic: A Perfect Day at School

Author: Emily, what would be a perfect day at school for you?

Emily: Distance from Steven. Maybe he's conveniently absent. I wouldn't want him to be sick or anything, but anyway, he would be absent.

Author: Why is that?

Emily: Well, he sticks his nose into everybody's business. And he's kind of a leader so what he does a lot of other kids think it's okay to do as well.

Author: Okay, so Steven isn't here. What's next?

Emily: Well, we would have a time when we would make things. We would have different projects going and we would have tons of materials to experiment with. Some kids would probably be sketching [I would hire Gina to lead a group doing that.] I think Maren should learn to make a book, not just write the book, but make a book with cardboard covers or whatever. And there would be construction kits with stuff like Legos and Lincoln Logs and, my favorite, Contraptions. Kids could build things, even if they want to see what they can build in a short period of time. Later in the day, there would be art with watercolors and other kinds of paint.

Author: Would there be reading and writing and mathematics?

Emily: Yes, but first, back to art. Origami would be neat. Okay, in math, I think we should do more geometry and we could even practice our multiplication and addition by drawing buildings or whatever and we would have to figure out the area and perimeter of the designs we create.

Author: Maren, tell me about your perfect day at school.

Maren: I think it would start with journal time, just like Gina suggested.

And I think in the middle of the morning we would get a morning recess outside. I get all kinds of antsy during the morning and it just seems like it would be good for us to get outside and shake things up. It just seems like we feel a whole lot better after we've been outside.

Author: What else?

Maren: And then we would get a snack break while the teacher reads aloud to us from a book that doesn't have anything to do with what we're doing during our reading and language arts classes. And I would want to be moved to somewhere else in the classroom.

Author: What about the afternoon?

Maren: Each day we would have a library period and an afternoon recess and each day there would be at least 20 minutes when we can work on something that each of us is interested in.

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Topic: A Visit with Steven

Steven: Hi, what's going on?

Author: Well, for one, I want to know why you're so nosy and are so locked into everybody else's business.

Steven: Well, I think school is kind of boring and I don't like how they make reading a time when we don't do as much reading as we work on all kind of other skills like phonics and they don't let us read what we would like to read and I think we should have science and art.

Author: So what does all that have to do with the way you behave?

Steven: Well, since I don't get to do many of the things I like to do, so I start doing some of the other things I like to do like bug kids and see what they're doing.

Author: Even if they don't want you there?

Steven: I don't know. Most kids don't mind.

Author: Did you ever think they DO mind, but don't want to tell you?

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Character Round Table

Author: So what do you girls think of the principal?

Gina: Kind of a cold fish, if you ask me. She's too formal and she doesn't seem to get to know us unless we're in the office for being in trouble.

Author: Maren, what do you think?

Maren: I agree with Gina, but I want to know why Gina knows so much about the principal since she's new here.

Author: Good point. Gina?

Gina: She used to be the principal at my other school and my older sister had some visits with her in her office.

Author: Your sister had an office?

Gina: No silly, the principal's office, but you know what? I wonder if Mrs. Lucchesi would let us use some corner of her back room for an office so we could store stuff there and not have to drag stuff around and make everybody suspicious.

Emily: That's a good idea! I always have too much stuff.

Author: Whoa, whoa, whoa. I thought we were talking about the principal.

Maren: I would rather she not be in our story. I want it to be about us and the ladies who help us.

Author: That's too boring. There has to be conflict in the story.

Gina: He's right, Maren. We have to have some kind of enemy.

Author: I wouldn't exactly put it that way, but we do need you to overcome obstacles.

Emily: So what kind of obstacles? I don't want to struggle or anything.

Author: But Emily! What fun will there be if you don't outsmart people or circumstances?

Emily: Yeah, I guess you're right, but I still want to be able to do fun stuff in the classroom, even if other people's time is being wasted.

Gina: I've watched you, Emily. You seem to keep pretty busy, if you ask me.

Emily: I try to keep lots of marking pens and pencils nearby.

Gina: I'm kind of jealous. I just have my sketching pencils.

Emily: But you do great work with them. But if you want some color, you can borrow some of my pens.

Gina: That would be great. I have been wanting to try some new tools.

Author: See, Emily? Those were little problems or obstacles and you are overcoming them. Gina had an obstacle and you helped her out.

Emily: Yeah, but that was easy. I'm scared you're going to involve Steven more than I would like you to.

Author: Welllll, he does add a little interest to our story. He is a walking talking bundle of conflict possibilities, isn't he?

Maren: Uh, oh, I don't like the way this is going. Our author is thinking that we'll be dealing with Steven a whole lot more than any of us would like to.

Gina: He IS so annoying. Can't you ship him off to an island or something?

Author: But then his family would miss him.

Emily: I even like that island idea. How about every other month, or every other story, you can send him away?

Author: I won't promise anything, but I will check out a world atlas just in case I get inspired or he ends up being too mean to you.