



Fantastic Characters
by Glen Grunberger
Poetry Center Elementary School Poet-in-Residence 2010

Grade Level:4-5

Duration: 1 hour

Topic: Fiction – fantastic characters

Objective: Introduce children to basic elements of fiction and have them write fictional stories that flow from character.

Supplies: sisal rope (optional)

Prior Knowledge: None required

Arizona Language Arts State Standards Addressed (Writing):

Strand 1: Writing Elements

Concept 1: PO 1, PO 2, PO 5, PO 6;

Concept 2: PO 1, PO 2;

Concept 5: PO 1, PO 2, PO 4;

Strand 2: Writing Elements

C1: PO 1, PO 2, PO 3;

C2: PO 1,2,3,6;

C3: PO 2, PO 3;

C4: PO 1;

C5: PO1, PO 2, PO 3;

C6: PO 1,PO 2, PO 3, PO 6, PO 7, PO8, PO 9, PO 10, PO 12, PO13;

Strand 3: Writing Applications

Concept 1: PO 1

Sequence of Activities:

I. Introduction: 10 minutes

What makes a story:

Talk about three aspects of stories (use sisal rope to demonstrate the 3 aspects of story). Ask kids if they can tell you what things all stories have – what makes up a story. (Character, setting, plot.)

And then something interesting: tensions/conflict – problems to be solved.

Setting: Sometimes, the main thing that drives the story is the setting. Alice in Wonderland.

Plot: Sometimes, the setting is normal – maybe a bunch of kids at school, and then suddenly there’s an eclipse and the lights go out ... is that when the aliens landed?.

Character: Sometimes the part that’s interesting comes from the nature of the character – something about the main character that leads to all sorts of interesting ideas and things that can happen. (**Give example – Pinocchio, most comic book heroes – aquaman, superman, etc., Honey I shrunk the kids**) There’s some odd combination of qualities that create questions or odd combinations.

TODAY WE’RE FOCUSING ON CHARACTER. This is often how stories are written, by a writer coming up with an idea for a character and then imagining what they’re like ...

II. (5 mins) Read the story of the glass man – from Rodari. Strange pairings of characteristics – create interesting possibilities. Notice how we have a general description of his **qualities**. His **strengths/powers** – glass is hard and can cut, can read his thoughts and don’t have to speak, and **weaknesses** – is fragile and needs special person to repair. Notice how we could have **situations** that come to mind where glass man could be helpful or ones that would be funny or maybe dangerous. Does glass man have an **arch-enemy**?

Optional: Read some examples from **exquisite corpse/autobiographies of lies collaborations**, an earlier exercise that also creates fantastic characters. Ask questions as you go – point out how the strange juxtapositions of qualities and characters create questions. For example “Hot Cheetos” girl – what does she look like? Does she spread magic yellow dust everywhere? Does she get chased by cheetahs? Or “The girl who sleeps 87 years every century?” How old is she? What does she remember? What years is she awake?

III. Brainstorming/Group writing (10-15 minutes): Now let’s think of any more you can come up with. Write potential characters on board (hot cheetos girl, Antarctic broccoli boy, laser man, etc.) You’ll probably get more than you can write on board – but that’s okay b/c you tell the kids you couldn’t call on that if they’ve got a great one, to hold onto it. Play with some of the qualities of character and their world. What are their special abilities and weaknesses. Imagine them in unique situations. This is really a practice in Rodari’s ‘fantastic binominals’ concept.

IV. Writing Activity: Character sketch: 15-20 mins.

Students select a character to do a sketch of – from ones already on the board or one they’ve made up. **NOT already in comics or video games.** Describe the character, some of their qualities, maybe their world. Give their special strengths or powers. How can they help the world? What is their weakness (like kryptonite or fire)?

Closing Activity: 5-10 minutes

Share student stories with the class.

Required Resources: Piece of Sisal Rope. Strongly recommended: Rodari ‘Little Glass Man.’ (from: Gianni Rodari, The Grammar of Fantasy. Trans. Jack Zipes. New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 1996)

Optional Resources: Other fairy tale examples, perhaps – maybe even comic book characters. The problem with relying on existing comic book characters is that they are existing realities for the kids in terms of their characters and characteristics. Giving them examples of fantastic binominals they’ve never heard of helps them be involved in the creative process in a non-passive way from the beginning. Prior examples of characters created by class in earlier collaborations (see Imaginary Autobiography of Lies lesson and examples, below).

Exquisite Corpse Lesson plan

- I. We're going to write a **collaborative** poem called an Imaginary **Autobiography**. (30 mins)
Here are the rules: We will have different groups (arrange students tables/chairs in groups of 4-8 students depending on class size).

Each student will start with one piece of paper – **use attached form**. “You will get the first few words of a line and then you will fill in the rest of the line, one at a time. Each student will do one line at a time and then fold their paper so that the next student can only see the most recent previous line and pass the paper to their left. Then we go to the next question and everyone will write an answer to that and again, pass the paper to their left. And so on. **Be careful to explain that these papers do not belong to the person who starts it off, but to the whole group. It's COLLABORATIVE.** It may also help to pre-fold the form, but either way, ask them not to look at more than the most immediate prior line.

Here's the most important rule: you have to lie. Whatever you say, you have to make it up. That's why it's called an *Imaginary* Autobiography

- II. Read student poems. (10-15 minutes)

IMAGINARY AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF LIES

MY NAME IS: _____

I COME FROM: _____

ALL DAY LONG I: _____

AT NIGHT I: _____

MY FAVORITE FOOD IS: _____

I SLEEP _____

I FEAR _____

I WONDER WHY _____

I BELIEVE _____

I WISH _____

Examples of characters produced from Imaginary Autobiographies by 4th graders:

**My name is Airborn Dirt
I come from Africa
All day long I go swimming**

**My name is Jay Zenlik
I come from the refrigerator**

**My name is Ashele
I come from New Mexico
... I sleep for 87 years each century**

**My name is Hot Cheetos girl.
I come from Cheetoworld**

**I come from Antarctica
All day long I eat Broccoli**

**My name is peanut miniman.
I come from Mexico ...
At night I fight a bear.**

Samples of Student Work created through Fantastic Characters Lesson Plan

Poison-ivy Girl



She lives in a hollow tree. She lives on aphids. Poison-ivy Girl has to watch out for dry spells. Her weakness is Herbivores. She can spread ivy to villains, make leaf hats (not from ivy), and can plant plants with the touch of her spit. She can glide through the wind. Also Poison-ivy girl can fit through tiny holes like this ☒. She could camouflage. A situation she could be in is having to pass through the desert without being dried up, to get to the villains. Another is

maybe to lure a group of elephants away from people without being eaten.

- Teresa Pham, 4th grade, Corbett Elementary, Tucson

Chain Man

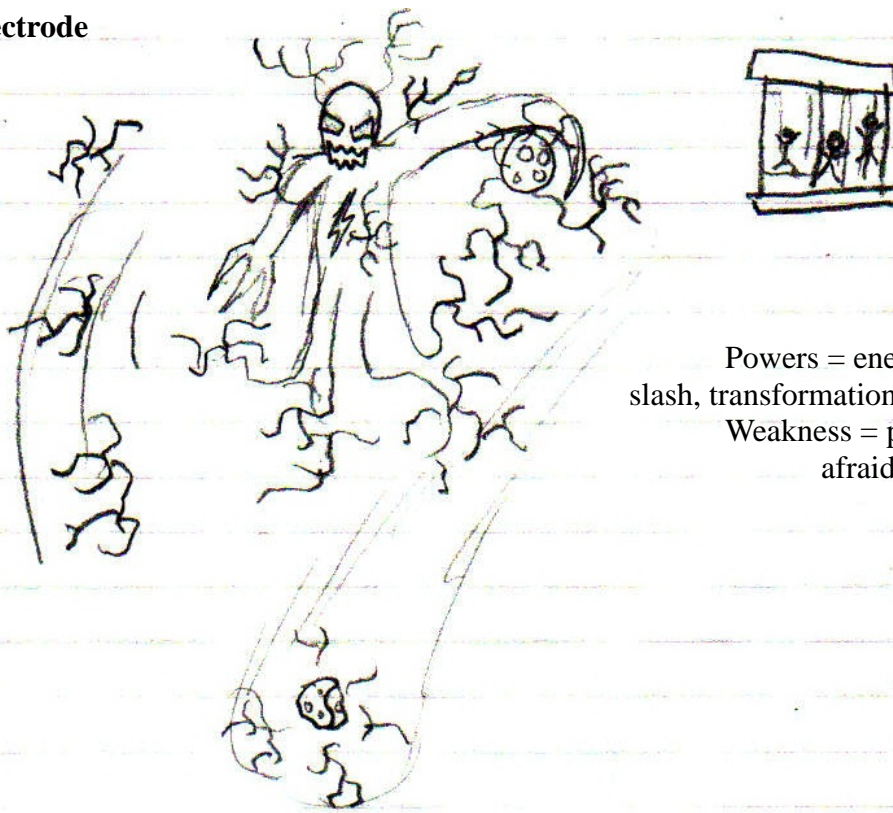
He lives in a dinosaur park. He's a 250 foot tall fence. He can see evil from a mile away and feed the villains in with the T-Rex. Chain man lives on cage 22, T-Rex cage. Some people claim to see him talk, but every time they scan for heart beats he can turn off his heart so he doesn't end on TV -- because they try to climb him to see if they can get him to talk and end up over the fence because anyone touches him he throws them in the T-Rex cage. Because he hates people to tell about him and if they get tape of him he could lose his secret of his life.

Chain Man was created by magic dino-spit, by the magic water that the T-Rex spits at the fence. He must keep his identity a secret because they will take him away and stop him from stopping the magic spit. He doesn't come out during the day, and he never had friends or family.



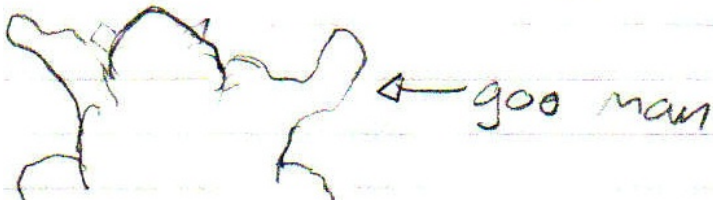
- Matthew Bol, 4th grade, Corbett Elementary, Tucson

Electrode



Powers = energy ball, super nova, energy slash, transformation, lightning bolt

Weakness = plugs, water, rubber
afraid of = mice, pictures

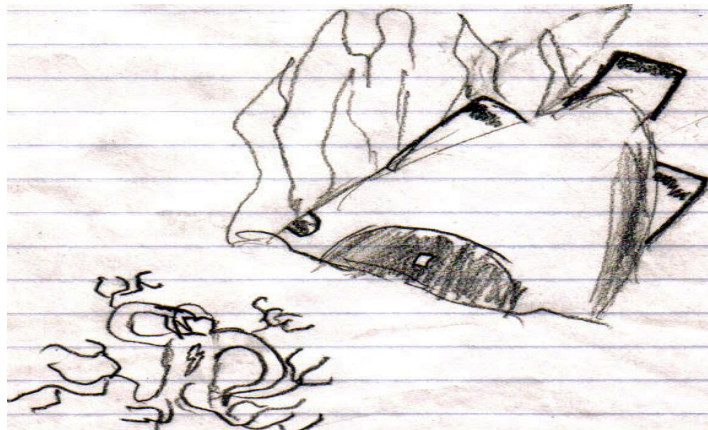


Electrode's Secrets

He was on an information gathering mission. His comrades tried to contact him that the mission backfired but he couldn't get the message. His ship couldn't do its duties and crash landed on Earth! Now Rubber Goo man was from the Planet Glagoo, and their race was in a battle with the eletron race.

Electrode doesn't have a family. None of the eletron race does. When a spark of energy mutates, that's when an eletron is born. Electrode doesn't have a secret identity. He has a mouth but doesn't use it. He talks by mind; he reads minds and people read his.

reads



- Adin Belnap, 4th grade,
Corbett Elem., Tucson