

**Writers at Play: Building Literacy Through Creative Writing  
Western IRA Regional Conference  
Portland, Oregon**

**February 18, 2010**

Mary Adler  
Associate Professor of English  
CSU Channel Islands  
One University Drive, BTW 1295  
Camarillo, CA 93012  
Phone: 805-437-8486 Fax: 805-437-8864  
[Mary.Adler@csuci.edu](mailto:Mary.Adler@csuci.edu)

Material drawn from:  
Adler, Mary. *Writers at Play* (Heinemann, 2009).

## Avoiding Creative Red Tape

*Some character development worksheets ask for as many as 17 characteristics for one character; some plot development worksheets ask students to develop every plot point. All of this before a word of the story has been set down.*

*My research suggests that these approaches stifle creative play—or frustrate students, who tend to set aside these worksheets and start over. Instead, why not provide help more strategically?*

**Before drafting:** Ask students to jot down ideas and/or talk with a partner about possibilities for:

- 2 or more characters
  - Key features (age, gender, appearance, relationships, interests, quirks or behaviors)
  - Someone, real or imagined, upon whom this character may be loosely based (if applicable)
- Conflict
  - Wants of each character and reasons why
  - Possible clashes between characters
- Setting
  - Sensory description of a location
  - Somewhere, real or imagined, where this story may take place

**During drafting:** When students get to a stopping point and are not sure where to go next, ask them to jot down ideas and/or talk with one or more partners, considering the following:

- Who are your characters so far? Describe them to me. Who has surprised you? Why? Who are you still figuring out?
- Who is telling your story? Is this the only/best person who can tell the story? If not, what other options do you have?
- What has happened so far in your story? Why?
- Given what you know so far, what might still need to happen? When?
- What questions do you have about your story? How might you answer them?

**After drafting:** When a draft is completed, invite students to:

- Get written commentary from readers both in and outside of the class; e.g., the desired audience.
- Ask for readers' in-the-moment reactions and questions rather than specific suggestions.
- Revise either with pen on a printed copy of the story or electronically on a saved second copy so that writers are free to play with alternatives without worry about saving the original text.
- Save editing for the last bit, after the story has been ironed out.

### Topic generation questions for fiction

*Write the first thing that comes into your mind at the prompt. Don't worry if you don't have something for every item.*

1. A place that you find inspiring, beautiful, or moving
2. A line of dialogue you overheard and remember
3. An odd or unusual person you know or met
4. Something strange that happened to you or to someone you know
5. Something that happened that you will never forget
6. A place you find frightening, disturbing, or mysterious
7. A reason for an argument or fight
8. A situation (real or imagined) that creates tension or conflict in you or in someone you know
9. A quest (something you are in pursuit of, during your life)
10. Something that is on your mind a lot these days
11. A "What if" situation
12. Another "What if" situation
13. An old memory you've never written about (or not satisfactorily, anyhow)
14. A title for a short story

*When you finish, put a star by the items that you think have potential for play—in fiction, in film, in music, art, theater, poetry.*

*Talk with a neighbor about one of your starred items. What might you do with it? What questions is your neighbor wondering about?*



### Guided Generation of Elements for Fiction

*Fold your paper in four and label one square with each of the following: Setting ideas; plot ideas; character ideas. Save the last square for any questions or associations you make as you listen and connect ideas.*

- Writers *set* their stories in a specific place. Take a minute to think about, and then jot down, territories and places you know well. Indoors and outdoors. Think about images from those places, things in them. Jot them down in a list. Get as many down as you can think of.
- Now let's think about *characters*. Let's start with states of being—*emotions*—try to list as many as you can, not just love/hate/anger. Then try to think of people you associate with those emotions. List as many as you can. People who inspire strong emotions can become really good material for character development.
- Finally, let's think about *plot*, which often grows out of particular *conflicts*. List particular kinds of conflicts you've experienced, small or large, physical or mental or social. Consider relationships that have caused conflict for you, or even some conflicts that may be unresolved. You can change, reimagine, or embellish these in your stories.

**Thoughts:** What is my character thinking about?

**Others:** What do other people say or think about this character?



**Appearance**

What does my character see in the mirror?

**Action:** What does my character do?