

Teacher's Guide: Personification: Cowbirds

Recommended Grade Level: 5-8

(also applicable to grades 9-12 for students requiring significant support in learning)

Suggested Time: About 50-60 minutes spread over one or more class periods, plus additional time to complete a writing assignment

Goals

Following are the big ideas that students should take away after completing this lesson:

- Personification in literature gives human characteristics—including behaviors, emotions, and motives—to nonhuman beings and things.
- Personification helps people create an emotional connection with nonhuman beings and things.

Vocabulary

(See definitions on page 6.)

- behavior
- characteristics
- motive
- personification
- personify
- species

Key Literacy Strategies

Following are the primary literacy strategies students will use to complete this activity:

- Making inferences (screens 4, 5, 7, 8, 9; writing assignments 1 and 3)
- Determining important information (screens 7, 8; writing assignment 3)
- Comparing and contrasting ideas (screen 11)
- Constructing summaries (writing assignment 2)

Note: In addition to the key literacy strategies listed above, students will also use each of these strategies to complete this lesson:

- Monitoring comprehension
- Synthesizing
- Making predictions
- Developing vocabulary
- Connecting prior knowledge to new learning
- Developing a topic in writing
- Identifying and using text features (photographs, captions, diagrams, and/or maps)

Overview

Personification in Fiction and Nonfiction is a student-directed learning experience. However, while students are expected to work through the lesson on their own, teachers should be available to keep the lesson on track, organize groupings, facilitate discussions, answer questions, and ensure that students meet all learning goals.

The following is a summary of the lesson screens:

- Screen 1: Students think about how we humans often see animals, plants, or machines in human terms.
- Screen 2: Students read a brief summary of what personification means, with some examples. They then learn that they will see how brown-headed cowbirds are personified in a story about their nesting habits.
- Screen 3: Students learn what the goals are for the lesson, which strategies they will be using to complete the lesson, and the important vocabulary words they will use during the lesson.
- Screen 4: Students read about the cowbirds' unusual practice of laying eggs in songbird nests for the songbirds to raise. This practice may put the songbirds on a path to extinction. They then watch a video illustrating this practice and why it harms songbirds. After watching the video, they list words or images from the video that personify cowbirds.
- Screen 5: Students watch a video that shows how scientist Jeff Hoover removed cowbird eggs from warbler nests, only to discover that the warbler eggs in these nests were later destroyed. At the end of the video, it is suggested that the cowbirds destroyed the eggs, possibly out of revenge. After watching, students write whether they feel this personification of a vengeful bird is appropriate.
- Screen 6: Students read about and consider why personification is used in the videos to describe the cowbirds and their actions, and why it may help to make the story more interesting to use personification.
- Screen 7: Students watch a video showing Jeff Hoover's experiment to create warbler nests that the cowbirds could not enter, saving warbler eggs from cowbird attacks. They then write down the result of the experiment with the nest boxes, and explain how the language used in the video ("ransacking" and "retaliation") makes them feel about the cowbirds.
- Screen 8: Students answer three multiple-choice questions to show their comprehension of the cowbirds' actions and the way they are personified in the videos.
- Screen 9: Students read a PDF text describing personification and its uses in fiction and nonfiction.
- Screen 10: Students complete an interactive vocabulary activity, and then choose two words from the vocabulary list and write a new sentence for each word. These tasks demonstrate their understanding of the meanings of the words.
- Screen 11: Students use an interactive activity to categorize descriptions of animals and things based on whether they are examples of personification or objective descriptions.
- Final
Assignment: Students select and complete a writing assignment about the lesson topic.

Before the Lesson

- ❑ Go through each screen of the lesson, including all the interactive activities, so that you can experience ahead of time what students will be doing. As you go through each screen, jot down your own expectations for students' responses.
- ❑ Determine if students will be working individually or in pairs on the lesson. Some students may be able to work independently with little or no support. Students who are less familiar with the subject area or who struggle with literacy skills may benefit from working with another student. An effective way to do this is to pair a stronger student with a less able reader. You can also have students work individually on certain tasks and in pairs on others, depending on their experience and needs. If students will be working in pairs on any portion of the lesson, let them know if they will be expected to type in their notes individually or together.
- ❑ Provide instruction on key vocabulary (vocabulary words are defined in the lesson on screen 3, and on page 6 of this guide).
- ❑ Determine what students already know about personification, and how they may have used it themselves to describe animals or things. (You may want to provide some specific examples to start the discussion.) Record their ideas on a chart, highlighting the words that personify the animal or thing. This will give you a sense of students' possible misconceptions and the background knowledge they have before beginning this lesson. If time allows, return to the chart after students have completed the lesson to add new learning and correct misconceptions. Note: You may want to record their new learning in a different-colored ink so they can see how much they've learned.
- ❑ Arrange computers with Internet access so students can work individually or in pairs.
- ❑ Before students begin, suggest a timeline for completing the lesson, mention the different types of media they will encounter, and let them know how you expect them to submit their work. You may want to provide an outline of this information on a chart, chalkboard, or whiteboard, or as a handout.

Lesson Assessments

The following are descriptions of the lesson features that will be part of the packet of materials that students will submit. Students will use the packet for reference when writing their final assignment. It also serves as a formative assessment tool to monitor students' work as they are progressing through the lesson.

- **Notes** - Students write their ideas in response to a prompt on screens 4, 5, 7, and 9. If time allows, review their notes before students begin their writing assignment.
- **Multiple-choice questions** - Students complete the three questions on screen 9. Walk around to make sure students answer all three questions before they continue. If students click to go to the next page before they finish, their work will not be saved.
- **Match It!** - Students complete an interactive vocabulary activity on screen 10. They begin by dragging the vocabulary terms into the correct sentences. After they finish and save

their work, they will be able to check their answers against an answer key. When they are done, they will be asked to choose two vocabulary words and write a new sentence for each word. Sentences should demonstrate a clear understanding of the meaning of each word. An inappropriate response would be “There are many species.” An appropriate response would be “Cowbirds are a species of bird that lays their eggs in songbird nests.”

- **Compare It!** - Students complete the interactive comprehension activity Compare It! on screen 11. Students determine whether descriptions of animals and things are examples of personification or objective descriptions. Students will not be able to check their answers online, so you will need to provide them with correct answers when they are finished with the lesson. You can choose to review the answers as a class or return the corrected packet of materials to students before they begin the final assignment.

The following are the appropriate categories for each phrase:

Personification

- Birds were singing joyously
- My dog was trying to make me laugh
- A breeze sighed through the leaves
- The horses stubbornly remained in the pasture in the evening
- Kittens miss the sunshine on a rainy day
- A tree stood proudly on the hill

Objective Description

- Antelope are most active in the morning
 - Lions need to eat once a day
 - The old wooden boards are rotting
 - Female turtles do not raise their young
 - Skunks release a terrible-smelling odor when attacked
 - It was cold in the house during the winter
- **Final Assignment** - Students complete one final writing assignment. You can choose to let students make their own selection, or assign one according to your goals for the lesson. Use the rubric on page 7 to assess the writing assignments.

Lesson Aids and Extensions

Use the following suggestions to help students if they are stuck on a particular screen, as follow-up discussions to reinforce learning, and to prepare students for completing their writing assignments.

- **Watching Videos** - Encourage students to watch the videos more than once. After the initial viewing, provide students with a specific content focus to frame their next viewing(s) of the video. This will help them draw connections between the main topic and the information that the videos have to offer. To learn more about best practices for viewing videos in the classroom, check out *Effective Video-Based Lessons* (<http://www.teachersdomain.org/resource/vtlpd.pd.hints.frfofo/>).
- **Participating in Discussions** - Organize class discussions or encourage students to talk about their questions in pairs. You may want to use the following discussion starters:
 - o Why is it so common to use personification to describe animals and things?
 - o How does personification affect the way you think about an animal?
 - o If the cowbirds are personified as evil, what does that make the songbirds? Is that fair?
 - o How could you tell the story of the cowbird without personification? How would that change the story?
- **Reading the PDF Text** - Before they read the PDF text on screen 9, ask students to make predictions about which events will be the hardest for Julian to overcome.
- **Sharing Student Work** - It may be motivational, and a further learning opportunity, for students to post their final essays so that their classmates, peers, and/or parents can see them. This may also provide an opportunity for students to comment on and discuss each other's essays.

If you do not already have access to an online writing community, Teaching Matters™ provides TeXT, free classroom publishing tools that allow teachers and students to create and publish their own online eZine. More information and a free signup are available at Teaching Matters: TeXT (<http://text.teachingmatters.org>).
- **Reflection and Self-Assessment** - After students have turned in their writing assignments, you can choose to have them assess their learning. Bring students together as a whole class or in small groups to discuss the questions below. You may want to return to the chart of their ideas developed before the lesson and record their new learning. You may also have students respond individually to the questions, and then convene the class to discuss the chart.
 - o What did you learn?
 - o What was surprising?
 - o What questions do you still have?
 - o What was the easiest for you to understand and do?
 - o What was the most difficult?

Vocabulary Definitions

behavior

The actions of a living thing.

characteristics

Things that describe or help identify a living or nonliving thing, including how it looks and how it acts.

motive

The reason for a person's actions.

personification

The representation of objects or non-human living things using human qualities, like motives or emotions.

personify

To give human qualities, such as motives and emotions, to objects or nonhuman living things.

species

A group of living things that can reproduce with each other.

Final Assignment Rubric Personification: Cowbirds

- The warblers are only personified once or twice in the story. If you were to personify them further, what words or phrases would you choose, and why?
- How would you tell the story of the cowbirds without personification? Write a paragraph describing the problem they create without using personification, and then explain whether it is as likely to get readers interested in the cowbirds as personification would.

4	3	2	1
<p>Provides a clear and accurate response to the question. Ideas are elaborated, with three or more relevant supporting details from the reading passage, video, and other materials in the lesson.</p>	<p>Provides an adequate response to the question. Topic and ideas are generally well organized, with two relevant supporting details from the reading passage, video, and other materials in the lesson.</p>	<p>Provides a generally accurate response, with one supporting detail from the reading passage, video, and other materials in the lesson.</p>	<p>Provides an inaccurate response to the question or fails to address the question. May include misinterpretations. Understanding of the topic is not apparent.</p>
<p>Uses at least three vocabulary words (or a form of the vocabulary words) from the lesson, and uses them all correctly.</p>	<p>Uses two vocabulary words (or a form of the vocabulary words) from the lesson, and uses them both correctly.</p>	<p>Uses one vocabulary word (or a form of the vocabulary word) from the lesson, and uses it correctly.</p>	<p>Does not use any vocabulary words, or uses vocabulary words incorrectly.</p>

Scoring the Rubric

Here are two suggestions for scoring the final assignment rubric. Select the option that best meets your needs or develop your own grading system.

Option 1: This option provides one score for each submitted assignment.

Assign a score of 4 or below for the written response (first row of the rubric) and a score of 4 or below for the use of vocabulary (second row of the rubric), for a total maximum score of 8. The interpretation of scores is as follows:

Score	Grade	Narrative Interpretation
7-8	A	Excellent
5-6	B	Good
4	C	Adequate (Fair)
3 or below	D	Minimal

Option 2: This option provides two scores for each submitted assignment: one for written content and one for the use of key vocabulary. An advantage of separate scores is that you can weight students' comprehension and composition differently than you do their knowledge of vocabulary. It can also help you identify specific needs for future instruction.

Assign a score of 4 or below for the written response (first row of the rubric) and a score of 4 or below for the use of vocabulary (second row of the rubric) and then score them separately. The interpretation of scores is as follows:

Score	Grade	Narrative Interpretation
4	A	Excellent
3	B	Good
2	C	Adequate (Fair)
1	D	Minimal

The final grade may look like this: A/B (A for content and B for vocabulary use).