



LESSON 2:

Many Bens: Character Revealed in Writing

OVERVIEW

As a printer, publisher, scientist, politician, and civic-minded citizen, Franklin had a lot of things to say and the means to say it. Though he had only two years of formal schooling, Franklin read avidly and taught himself to write by copying essays from newspapers. By the age of 16, Franklin was a published author, albeit under an assumed name and character—the witty widow Silence Dogood. This lesson explores a range of Franklin’s writings as a way to better understand both the complexity of Franklin’s character and the complex ways in which he skillfully used persona, voice, and genre as strategies for making his point in his writings. Students will read short pieces by Franklin and discuss the author, his intentions, and his character.

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Explore aspects of Franklin’s character through his writing.
- Investigate the concepts of persona, voice, and genre.
- Understand how an author may use different personas, voices, or genres to achieve different purposes.
- Practice adopting a perspective other than their own in their writing for a particular purpose or audience.

TIME

This lesson and activity require three to four class periods.

MATERIALS

- Silence Dogood, letter in *The New England Courant*. (Boston: James Franklin), April 2, 1722. Available at www.ushistory.org/franklin/courant/ (click on “Silence Dogood”) OR *Franklin Writings*, edited by J.A. Leo Lemay, pp.5–6.
- Richard Saunders, selection from *Poor Richard Almanack*, 1733, available at: www.ku.edu/carrie/docs/texts/prichard33.html OR *Franklin Writings*, edited by J.A. Leo Lemay, pp. 1185–1186.
- Replies by “Betty Diligent” and “Mercator” in *The Pennsylvania Gazette*. (Philadelphia: Benjamin Franklin), December 3, 1730. Available at www.historycarper.com/resources/twobf2/pg29-30.htm OR *Franklin Writings*, edited by J.A. Leo Lemay, pp. 161–162.
- “Questions for Group Reading” worksheet
- “Adopt a Persona” writing prompt

McREL STANDARDS

Language Arts

Standard 1. Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process

Standard 6. Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts

LESSON AND ACTIVITY

1. Discussion

Introduce the lesson by discussing the meaning of genre. Discussion should reveal that there are many types of writing used for many purposes and audiences. Students will have examples from their own work and reading to which the teacher can add.

2. Group Work

Divide the class into small groups of three to four students. Each group then receives the packet of three of Franklin's writings but the author is not revealed. Instruct the students to read the packet(see Materials) and then respond to questions on the "Questions for Group Reading" worksheet for each of the readings. Students may read individually or together but the worksheet is to be filled out as a group.

3. Each group reports on its interpretation of the readings, what genres students assigned to the readings, why the authors wrote the pieces, and what the points were. Make sure that the students note the use of satire. Ask the students if they think that the same person could have authored all of these writings. The ensuing discussion reveals that Franklin is the author of all the different writings and the lesson concludes with the questions:

- What do these writings say about Franklin's character/personality?
- In what ways was Franklin most true to himself when he adopted another persona in his writing?

4. Writing

Distribute the "Adopt a Persona" writing prompt. Brainstorm some ideas with the class. For example, students may adopt the following personas:

- a parent requesting a stop sign at an intersection
- a professional athlete defending his performance/actions
- a criminal requesting leniency from a judge

Remind students that they may also attempt to use satire to make their points as they adopt the positions of their chosen personas. Allow students plenty of time to complete their writing in class and at home. You may choose to use peer evaluation as part of the writing process for this assignment.

5. Ask students to read their finished work aloud to the class or to otherwise share their writing. Discuss whether the strategy of adopting another persona made their essays more or less effective.

ASSESSMENT

Students are assessed on the quality of their cooperative work including the worksheet, participation in the discussion, and the quality of the written work. An established rubric may be used to evaluate the final drafts of the students' writing assignment.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

- Instead of having students simply read their essays to the class, ask students to perform their work. This will require acting and perhaps costumes and props to truly adopt the persona/character of the supposed "author" of the piece.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Japiske, Carl, ed. *Fart Proudly: Writings of Benjamin Franklin You Never Read In School* (Columbus: Enthea Press, 1990).

Questions for Group Reading

1. What genre is this piece of writing?
2. Give three reasons why you think this piece was written:
3. What is the main point?
4. Describe the author.



Adopt a Persona Writing Prompt

Think about the many personas that Franklin adopted in his writing, and how he used these different perspectives to communicate his points, sometimes using humor or satire.

Write an editorial, letter, or other type of opinion piece in which you adopt the position of someone whom you are not. Be sure to make your point forcefully and use the voice of the persona/character you are assuming to do so.
