

Key Stage 3

English Career Resources for Teachers

(Career Education Guidance Objective 1)

Personal statements in fiction

The first Key Stage 3 target for careers education requires students to 'undertake a realistic self-assessment of their achievements, qualities, aptitudes and abilities and to present this in an appropriate format'. In school, students of ages 11-14 might be asked produce a **personal statement** to accompany annual subject reports or they might undertake a review with their form tutor or mentor. Personal statements are often an integral part of PSHE.

“Please sir, don’t know what to write about!”

The production of a personal statement is usually part of a review where students are asked to stand back from themselves to identify their achievements, skills and qualities. Many students find the process of self review quite challenging and so teachers must aim to make it interesting to overcome some students' perceptions that they have done nothing worth recording. Students are usually aware that when they construct a piece of writing they need to have a clear idea of the audience the writing is for. Creating a personal statement does not immediately identify an audience although we can suggest that it might be for the student, the teacher, an employer or parent. It will need to address abstract concepts such as achievements, skills and qualities. What do they mean? Finally, the actual task of drafting the statement might take place in the form room, at home or even on the bus to school.

Class texts as real contexts

The English teacher can offer both a context and support for the process of writing a personal statement. The real strength for English teaching is that the statement can be explored by using characters from a text read as part of the English curriculum. Macbeth's 'My hopes for 10 years from now' section might contain such gems as: "I hope to have settled down as King of Scotland and to have a son and heir to the throne" or: "I need to employ some more reliable political advisers and arrange planning meetings at a five-star hotel rather than that blasted heath!"

Sample tasks and approaches

This unit on personal statement writing within the English class text takes as its example the novel 'Skellig' by David Almond. However, all the tasks and approaches could equally well be applied to any novel, play or poem being studied in a Key Stage 3 English lesson. In fact, you will find a list of

commonly used Key Stage 3 texts which will provide excellent contexts for writing personal statement.

There are three stages in the process of writing personal statements for fictional characters:

- active reading to retrieve and record relevant information from the text
- interpretation to analyse and sort the information
- writing to re-present a character through a personal statement.

Have a look at Mina McKee's Personal Statement to see what kind of challenges it presents to the young writer!

Why write personal statements?

During Key Stage 3 pupils will be asked how they see themselves performing in different subjects, and sometimes a formal statement will be drafted which outlines what a pupil has learned and what needs to be improved, this often includes attitudes as well as skills and knowledge.

Personal statements are likely to reinforce cross-curricular links. But, using fictional characters as a focus provides a powerful opportunity for the English teacher to help students to get 'under the skin' of fictional characters. Significantly it also offers them a purpose for undertaking close re-reading of texts. It also enables students to model their own personal statements on the evidence drawn from texts.

Finally, there is no reason to limit the work to the characters. English HMI have argued for years that students should know more about the writers behind the texts they study. Why not get students to research the author and then write their personal statement, which will show how they came to write in the first place?

For more information, go to the '**Resources Chart**', which suggests books, authors and characters.

Stage 1: Active Reading

The way in

Discuss with the students the range of documents that record, review, assess and communicate information about them in school. Students will come up with a list which includes: emails; reports; targets; memos; letters; file notes; text messages; grades in mark books. Then you can move on to looking in more detail at:

- the purposes of a personal statement
- its main features
- its audience(s).

Finding the right information

You can tackle the close reading in a number of ways. Certainly it would be an enormous task to just give students all 170 pages of 'Skellig' and expect them to track and collect information for the personal statement. Here are some suggestions for making such reading manageable:

- Select just one part of the text that is especially rich in detail on the character being focussed on.

OR

- Allocate different characters to groups of students and ask them to research and report back on their findings.

OR

- Use plenaries from reading lessons to write down what we have learned about a character today that we could use in their personal statement. Do this on flipchart sheets which can be stuck on the walls with Blu Tack around the classroom.

OR

- Provide short extracts from the class text and ask pupils to highlight information about a character which is relevant. This works well for less confident students.

Rough notes

Whichever way they work, students will need to collect together rough notes based on the close reading, which they can use to produce their personal statement.

The '**Notes on Mina for her Personal Statement**' are rough notes on Mina McKee who helps Michael rescue the strange character in David Almond's 'Skellig'. The edition used is the Hodder paperback and all page references refer to that edition. Show the students what these notes should look like. Explain how **they** can start to tentatively categorise the information. In the example, you will quickly spot information about Mina's education and some of her skills.

Stage 2: Interpretation

This is the stage at which students make sense of what they have found out and sort the information into the categories that feature prominently in Personal Statements:

- achievements and experiences in education
- outside interests and achievements
- personal qualities

- hopes for the future.

Remember that by asking students to write fictional Personal Statements they are also rehearsing the skills needed to write their own.

This research, reflecting on what they have found out and then writing, actually leads the students into a close reading of characters and so deepens their understanding of the class text.

The students are also learning all about writing for specific purposes and addressing the needs of their audiences. These are English objectives in themselves.

Finding the words

Don't let the students rush on to use their notes as a basis for a Personal Statement, because they may produce undigested clumps of material which they have never really made their own.

You can raise the standard of their interactions with the fictional character in a number of ways. Look at the resource called '**Personal Qualities: Prompt Sheet**'. Students can sort through these (with a dictionary to hand for new or unfamiliar words) and decide which apply to their character on the basis of the evidence in their notes or from their wider reading of the book.

A more structured way of doing this same interpretative work is to provide students with the '**Character Profile**' resource, which challenges students to provide quotations to support their ideas and uses the character Mina McKee to develop a sample profile.

As you can see, this kind of work moves the student away from simple information retrieval - but not very far. Students need to be able to deduce, to read between the lines, to speculate; in short to provide their own commentaries on the characters they are reading. When using the Character Profile sheet, teachers must be prepared to push for interpretation by asking: "So what?"

Digging deeper

As an English teacher you will know many ways of deepening your students' understanding of character and its portrayal through language. The moment students are asked to do something with the given information or to change it, then the learning challenge is raised significantly.

Hot-seating

One way of challenging students to explore a character's qualities is to hot-seat that character. This approach is particularly useful in providing a learning style which may appeal to students who prefer to go into action. For detailed guidance on hot-seating go to the resource '**How to use hot-seating**'. Here is a clip of an interview with Mina:

Int.: *What would you say is your biggest achievement in school?*

Mina: *Ah well. I don't actually go to school. My mum and I think it is bad for children and that it harms their imagination.*

Int.: *If you don't go to school, how do you learn anything?*

Mina: *Oh, that's easy. My mum teaches me. What was the question again?*

Int.: *What would you say is your biggest achievement in school?*

Mina: *Well, I am really into drawing. It's birds at the moment and I have learned all about birds' skeletons and about ossification and stuff like that ...*

... ..

Other ways to explore character

Another way of exploring Mina's character would be to write key quotations onto cards and then lay them out on a desk, organising them under big headings such as: education; home; hopes and so on. If you want more information on this approach there is an example based on Mina in this unit.

Alternatively, students could be asked to create a **coat of arms** for Mina. Symbols and images (birds, pen, monkey, bones, paint brush) which best sum up the character are placed in one of four quadrants on the shield. Students may be familiar with this approach from PSHE. In fact, if you go to this link [Coat of Arms](#) you can download a coat of arms template and teachers' notes.

Stage 3: Composition and re-presentation

Fun with genres

If time permits, students can have a lot of fun creating other 'official' documents which explore aspects of their chosen character. Look at the examples of school memos and students' emails. Get students to generate ideas for other personal documents which will offer different perspectives on a character. Items of personal literacy might include: telephone text messages; diary entries; blogs and posts on websites. If time permits, you could explore the differences between 'public' documents such as personal statements and 'private' documents like the ones listed above.

Writing the Personal Statement

Although you could go straight into writing a Personal Statement it is likely that the results will be disappointing. Students need to consolidate their understanding about how personal statements are organised and worded. So spend time with the students reminding them about the conventions of the Personal Statement genre. This can be done by sharing real examples or by showing them one for a fictional character. An example of Mina McKee's Personal Statement is provided as part of these resources. It is worth

studying it with the students to compile the criteria for a Personal Statement, which might look something like this:

What makes a good Personal Statement?

- Write in the first person e.g. I me my
- Write in the present tense e.g. I am, I have
- Give clear examples to support each statement.
- Choose positive qualities to write about.
- Aim for 3-5 things per statement box.
- Keep the language simple and clear.
- Explain yourself – that means using words like ‘because’.
- Qualify ideas by using words like ‘but’ and ‘however’

De-constructing the Personal Statement

Another way of ensuring the students learn how to write their character’s Personal Statement is to demonstrate the main features by annotating it on the interactive whiteboard. See the resources entitled ‘**Mina’s Personal Statement –annotated to show features of this text type**’.

Not to forget - alternative styles!

Finally, don’t be boring. Although the Personal Statement is originally a school document you can still offer students the chance to enjoy their own creativity.

A character like Mina would probably in real life rebel against the straitjacket of a Personal Statement writing frame. With her visual awareness and artistic skills she would be far more likely to choose a graphic representation of her achievements mixing words with pictures.

Alex Rider’s Personal Statement would probably resemble an MI5 document headed up ‘TOP SECRET’ and with a photo pinned to it.

Look for inspiration too in Tracy Beaker’s book which does actually start as a Personal Statement writing frame which she triumphantly bursts out of.

Harry Potter. The J. K. Rowling books might be covered with spider’s webs with the paper itself having been aged with applications of vinegar or judicious (and adult-supervised) use of the grill!

Achievements and experiences in education

My mum teaches me at home. This has enhanced my natural curiosity and creativity. I have learned a lot of science especially about birds and evolution by studying books for myself. I feel that studying at home has stopped my mind from being shuttered up and I think that learning is about opening your mind. I also think that because I am home-educated I am more of an individual.

Outside interests and achievements

I enjoy reading and my favourite poet is William Blake. I read him a lot. I like drawing a lot; I have a folder full of pictures of birds which are my favourite subject. I think that drawing makes you look at the world more closely and to see things more clearly. You could say that in my spare time I am fixated on birds just now. I have learned how model birds in clay and mark in their feathers with a knife. By studying from nature and from books I have learned to understand evolution. Another of my hobbies is climbing things, especially trees. Some people call me 'monkey girl' because I am always climbing.

Personal qualities

I think I am quite extrovert and I like to be a leader and take charge of things. For example, my friend Michael and I have been doing work in the community with an elderly person who suffers with arthritis. I am a good listener as well as being a good talker and have managed to teach my friend Michael about birds and evolution. Being home-educated has made me confident and creative. I have shown the helpful side to my personality by helping out this Skellig man. We have recently helped him re-locate and it almost took my breath away when I realised that we could help him. I think having to sort out Skellig's problems has shown that I can be intelligent and resourceful. I have shown my reliable side by sticking by Michael, my best friend, because he has faced a lot of problems at home recently.

My hopes for 10 years from now

I think I would like to be a mixture of a scientist and an artist. Scientist because I like to understand stuff like evolution and phenomena like 'pneumatisation'. Artist because I just love to draw and sculpt - I think these activities are almost like a science because they help you see and understand things very clearly. I think I could be a good teacher; I have taught Michael loads of quite difficult things. I hope that Michael and I are both still friends in ten years' time but not necessarily in a sappy or romantic way. Funnily enough, I think I could end up working in education but better not let mum read that!

Resources Chart

Where to look for information about the author or a character in one of their novels.

Author	Websites to search for information	Novel and characters
David Almond	www.davidalmond.com/	'Skellig' Mina and Michael
Nigel Hinton	www.nigelhinton.net	'Buddy' Buddy Clarke
Louis Sachar	www.louissachar.com	Stanley Yelnats; X-Ray; the Warden; Mr Pendanski
Jacqueline Wilson	www.jacquelinewilson.co.uk	'The Story of Tracy Beaker' – Tracy Beaker
John Boyne	www.johnboyne.com	'The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas' - Bruno
Frank Cottrell Boyce		'Millions' - Damian
Morris Gleitzman	www.morrisgleitzman.com	'Two Weeks with the Queen' – Colin Mudford
Meg Cabot		'The Princess Diaries' – Mia Thermopolis
J. K. Rowling		Harry Potter series – any of the student wizards
Antony Horowitz	www.alexrider.com	'Stormbreaker' – Alex Rider

Notes on Mina for her personal statement

Notes on Mina for her personal statement (Skellig by David Almond)

Page 23: seems to know a lot about birds; likes to draw birds using pencil

Page 24: Mina says: "Drawing makes you look at the world more closely. It helps you see what you're looking at more clearly."

Page 47: Her mum teaches her at home because "schools inhibit the natural curiosity". So Mina is different from most kids...

Page 56: Mina tells Michael: "I'm drawing, painting, reading, looking. I'm feeling the sun and the air on my skin. I'm listening to the blackbirds song. I'm opening my mind. Ha! School!" Get the impression that she thinks school stops you doing all the things that you enjoy.

Page 57: keeps quoting from this poet called William Blake

Page 58: she is an expert on bird skeletons and evolution. So although she does not go to school, she is still very well educated

Page 68: she really is into birds in a big way. Her mum says: "Mina's fixated on birds just now...sometimes it's things that swim..."

Personal Qualities: Prompt Sheet

Extrovert	Introverted
Loud	Quiet
Boisterous	Reserved
Leader	Follower
In charge of things	Behind the scenes
Talker	Listener
Adventurous	Shy
Assertive	Manipulative
Ebullient	Passive
Confident	Nervous
Ambitious	Creative
Considerate	Caring
Sporting	
Kind	Energetic
A good friend to people	Considerate
Helpful	Attractive
Pragmatic	Certain of yourself
Understanding	Intelligent
Talented	Sociable
Resourceful	Erratic
A good laugh	Thoughtful
Pensive	Sensitive
Good at...	Popular
Getting better at...	
Calm	Highly-strung
Moaner	Apologetic
Eloquent!	Verbose!
Outspoken when...	Expresses themselves well...
Analytical	Self-effacing
Introspective	Knows people well
Loveable	Romantic
Charismatic	Takes risks
Strong	An achiever
Dynamic	Efficient
Reliable	Co-operative
Sophisticated	Flexible
Precise	Tidy
Systematic	Cool
Non-evasive	Demanding of others...

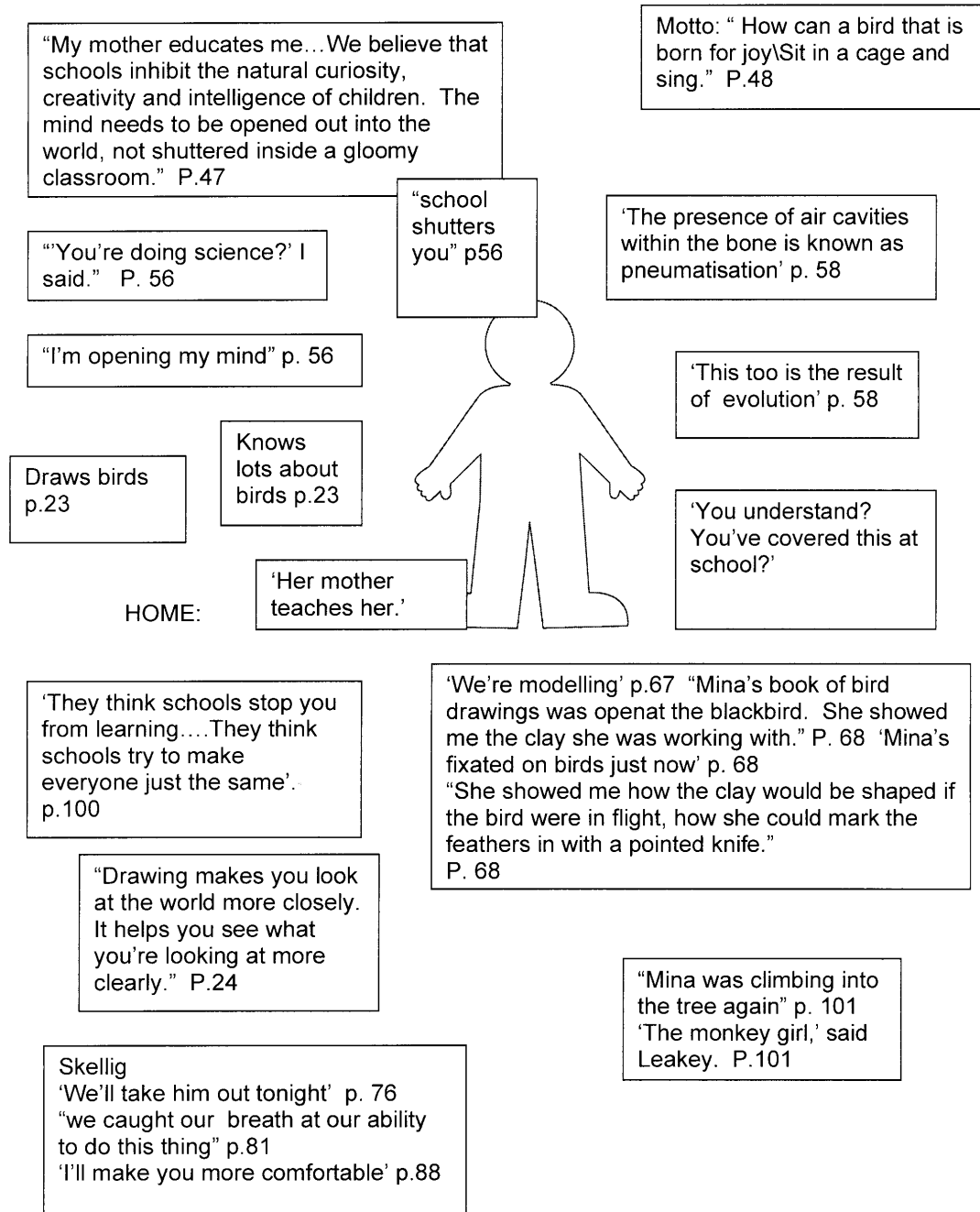
Character Profile

Character's name: Mina McKee

Choose ten characteristics which you think your chosen character displays.
Give evidence e.g. a quotation.

EDUCATION:

HOPES:



Brave - selfish - polite - thoughtful - strong - independent - cheerful - sad - generous - clever - imaginative - angry - unhappy - patient - kind - honest - sad - lonely - fragile - reliable - unselfish - timid - caring - resourceful

Characteristic	Evidence
<i>independent</i>	<i>p.76 decides "We'll take him out tonight"</i>
<i>clever</i>	<i>p.74 knows about things like "ossification"</i>
<i>caring</i>	<i>p.88 with Skellig "I'll make you more"</i>
<i>strong</i>	<i>p.110 Coot and Leaky call her "Monkey Girl"</i>

DRAMA PROMPT CARDS 2 Hot-seating

This session follows on neatly from the tableau/caption work on card 1.

Stage one

In your group, agree which character from the book you would like to interview. Also agree on the point in the book at which you want the interview to take place. You might even want to decide on two separate points in the book to hot-seat the character.

Stage two

You can't skip this bit and just rely on your memory. Re-read the part of the book and make notes on your selected character under these headings:

- what they say
- what they do
- what other characters say about them
- what other characters do to them
- how other characters react to them
- how their mood alters.

Stage three

Re-read these notes and try to think of reasons which the hot-seated character might give for each point. Then try to think of alternatives. Then think how you would have reacted if you had been in their situation.

Stage four

Plan to ask open questions. An open question gives the interviewee an opportunity to explain themselves. Examples of good open question beginnings are:

- How did you feel when
- Why did you say
- How have you changed in your attitude to
- Why has your attitude changed
- What was your deepest fear/anxiety/hope at this point and why?
- What is your opinion of and why?
- What did you mean when you said "....."?
- If you could change one thing about your character, what would it be and why?
- Which character do you most hate/respect/like/distrust/trust and why?

Mina's Personal Statement – annotated to show the features of this text type

First person

Present tense

Mina McKee: Personal Statement

Achievements and experience in education

My mum teaches me at home. This has enhanced my natural curiosity and creativity. I have learned a lot of science especially about birds and evolution by studying books for myself. I feel that studying at home has stopped my mind from being shuttered up and I think that learning is about opening your mind. I also think that because I am home-educated I am more of an individual.

Example to support statement

Outside interests and achievements

I enjoy reading and my favourite poet is William Blake. I read him a lot. I like drawing a lot; I have a folder full of pictures of birds which are my favourite subject. I think that drawing makes you look at the world more closely and to see things more clearly. You could say that in my spare time I am fixated on birds just now. I have learned how model birds in clay and mark in their feathers with a knife. By studying from nature and from books I have learned to understand evolution. Another of my hobbies is climbing things, especially trees. Some people call me 'monkey girl' because I am always climbing.

Positive quality

Personal qualities

I think I am quite extrovert and I like to be a leader and take charge of things. For example, my friend Michael and I have been doing work in the community with an elderly person who suffers with arthritis. I am a good listener as well as being a good talker and have managed to teach my friend Michael about birds and evolution. Being home-educated has made me confident and creative. I have shown the helpful side to my personality by helping out this Skellig man. We have recently helped him re-locate and it almost took my breath away when I realised that we could help him. I think having to sort out Skellig's problems has shown that I can be intelligent and resourceful. I have shown my reliability by sticking by Michael, my best friend, because he has faced a lot of problems at home recently.

Use of 'but' to qualify a comment

Use of 'because' to explain

Clear, friendly tone

My hopes for 10 years from now

I think I would like to be something a mixture of a scientist and an artist. Scientist because I like to understand stuff like evolution and phenomena like 'pneumatisation'. Artist because I just love to draw and sculpt - I think these activities are almost like a science because they help you see and understand things very clearly. I think I could be a good teacher; I have taught Michael loads of quite difficult things. I hope that Michael and I both still friends in ten years' time but not necessarily in a soppy or romantic way. Funnily enough, I think I could end up working in education but better not let mum read that!

3-5 ideas per box