Story Writing Impulses

Working with settings

Good, realistic (or fantastic) settings are the backbone of every good story. They help set the atmosphere. Describing settings can be learned fairly easily. You need two main ingredients: <u>specific vocabulary</u> and a basic understanding of the <u>usage of the past progressive form</u>.

List of Ingredients

The class agrees on a type of setting (e.g.: for a spooky story). Then brainstorm typical elements of this setting on the board. Ss copy the elements (new vocab) on their worksheets and/or on their vocab cards.

example: spooky story: cemetery, dark forest, midnight, full moon, owl is hooting, storm is howling, old building, old castle, ghosts, dead body, leaves are rustling,

Sorting Ingredients

Prepare a long list of useful story ingredients for different settings. Cut into pieces and mix.
Groups sort the ingredients into different categories/settings and copy them on their worksheets.

Background + Past Progressive

Practice the use of the past progressive form to describe the background. (Newby, Grammar for Communication)

Little Bird Dictation

Use short text as an example to show the use of past progressive in describing the setting

The Taj Mahal exercise

Prepare short core-text of a place. Ss expand , adding lots of adjectives.
Variation: Secretly half the class is told to describe the place in positive terms, the other half describes the place as an awful one. Then they compare their descriptions.

Drawing the scene

Ss read a story and draw the place (picture or map). They might also label their drawing.

Pictures of typical story settings:

spooky places: castle, cemetery, dark streets...
beautiful places: beach, palm trees, landscapes, mountains
dangerous places: wild ocean, rivers, steep mountains, cliffs, highways...
cozy places: nice home, cat, romantic garden...

Groups choose a setting and describe it in detail. They could also bring their own pictures or ideas for settings. Ss use dictionaries and teacher for vocab help.

After doing these exercises the Ss will SEE, HEAR, FEEL and SMELL the place of their choice. They are ready to think of characters for their story.

Story Characters

Describing realistic, plausible characters is not an easy task. Help students by reducing the number of characters in their stories (not more than 2 main characters and a few minor characters if necessary). Characters always need

a name: play with different names and your students' associations with them. Is John any different from Charley or Sammy? Is Susan the same as Rebecca or Martha? What about Harry, Tom, Charlotte, Max, Judith...?
an age and a profession: Ss define their characters' jobs and age
an outward appearance: Ss describe their characters' looks and clothes, they might also bring pictures of film-stars or ads... that resemble their characters.
personal qualities, likes and dislikes: Ss list some of the likes and dislikes of their main characters and find at least 5 adjectives describing their characters. Ss use their dictionaries for this purpose.

Exercises that help create multidimensional characters:
Tip: Build on students' personal associations and emotions to help them create plausible characters.
- **buttons:** Buttons have lots of qualities that help define characters. They are old or new, they are large or small, they are made of plastic, glass, wood, metal, they have a smooth or rough texture, they may be shiny or dull, translucent or opaque. They have bright colors or dark colors. All these qualities can be linked to story characters.
Task: Ss choose a button from a large collection and describe it. The button then becomes a character with a name, an age, a profession, likes and dislikes... a whole life of its own. Ss can either choose any button they like, then define a character around it; or they have a certain character in mind and find a matching button to represent their character. Button characters of different students then meet in a story.

- **pictures/faces**: You need a collection of photos or clippings from magazines. Ss choose an interesting face and create a character portrait as above. Ss then work in groups, their characters meet in a story.

The problem:
Every good story will develop around some kind of conflict. Ss decide what problem their main characters run into. (Students might suggest a whole list of problems – make them focus on ONE problem only.)

The main events:
Things will happen to the main characters. Stories tend to fall apart and become implausible if two many things happen. Remind students to focus on one or two main events. What is going to happen to the main characters?

The effects:
The main events will influence the characters. Realistic characters show real feelings. How do they react to these events?
Are they scared, shocked, happy, sad, excited, curious...?
Use the "faces and feelings" sheet (or a reduced version) to help Ss choose appropriate emotional reactions.
Tip: Laura Cornell, *Today I feel silly,* Harper Collins (a children's book on feelings, available at amazon.de or amazon.com)