

ROALD DAHL'S  
**Matilda**  
THE MUSICAL



## Character Resources

# Character

This resource focuses on how we develop *character*. It has been designed to work alongside the web-page and the videos with our creatives, not only to support and enrich students' writing experience in school but to get them thinking *outside the classroom* into the world of theatre.

Through a selection of practical games and activities, students will build up their exploration of character, both from a performer's perspective and that of a writer.

*"When I write my character I kind of believe they're real... If I don't believe in them, then you won't."*  
Dennis Kelly, in his video on Character.

## Useful tip before starting:

Before beginning the exercises in this Character resource, invite your students to name their favourite characters from *Matilda* and why they stand out: *Are they extraordinary? Are they believable? Can you identify with them in any way?*

As a group, watch and discuss the videos on this website about Character. Dennis Kelly and Tim Minchin talk a lot about "making characters real". What Roald Dahl, Dennis and Tim share as writers is an ability to create compelling characters who are larger than life, but still *believable*.

Another tip that Tim and Dennis talk about, is that characters can be inspired by your own memories and from things you notice about real people around you. A writer may begin with a rather ordinary idea and then exaggerate it little by little until he has created something altogether different.

The activities outlined below can be used to help students develop a rounded character and find the language to give their creation meaning and colour.

These activities can be used in isolation, or in steps to create a scene or song for [The Writer's Challenge](#).

# Part A: Exploring & Capturing Ideas

## What you will need:

- A reasonably large space in which students can stand and move
- Something that can represent a school bell which can be sounded at appropriate moments.
- Several sets of cards numbered 1 to 5

## 1. Becoming Revolting in 5 Steps

***Invent a new pupil from Crunchem Hall & explore the development of this character (inspired by the song, 'Revolting Children'). This activity encourages students to physicalise how characters change throughout the course of a scene or a play, or how one character can be subtly different to another.***

- Organise students into pairs. Explain that they are going to explore how to become 'Revolting Children' just like in the song from *Matilda The Musical*. They are going to move from 'nice' to 'naughty' on a scale from 1 to 5 (with 'really nice' being 1 and 'really naughty' being 5).
- Explain that they are going to add an extra ingredient of disgustingness in order to move from 1 to 5 so the change is gradual and clear.
- In their pairs, ask students to number themselves 1 or 2. 1 will be the director / sculptor and 2 will be the clay model to be shaped. 1 can do this using words to 'direct' their model or, if the students are confident with drama, move them directly into shape.
- Explain that you will ring Miss Trunchbull's school bell five times and each time they hear it, they must work together to add an extra revolting quality. Remind them that to start with – when the first bell is rung – the clay model must be completely 'nice' and by the 5th bell, they must achieve maximum level of revolting.
- After this, encourage students to swap so that 2s sculpt or direct and 1s are the models.

## Useful tips:

To kickstart this activity, you may wish to give the students the following example. (You can talk through or demonstrate these 5 steps yourself or ask for volunteers):

1. The model stands with a straight back, perfectly prim and 'nice'
2. The model chews gum
3. Chews gum then burps
4. Chews gum, burps and wipes nose on sleeve
5. Chews gum, burps, wipes nose on sleeve, picks nose and flicks it. Revolting!

## 2. Character Reactions

***Explore how characters interact with each other. Students introduce another character to their pupil and begin to consider how each character may react to the other's behaviour.***

- When the pairs have each had a turn creating their five steps from 'nice' to 'naughty', ask the 1s to stay in character as their 'nice to naughty' school child and invite the 2s to choose another character for themselves (e.g. a snooty teacher, new student, stressed parent).
- Ask the 1s to go through their transition, 1-5 and see invite the 2s to react to each stage as a frozen image.
- Eventually, the 2s will develop a scale of 1-5 reactions of their own.

## Useful tips:

Following on from your earlier example, you can suggest the following development:

1. Child stands with a straight back, perfectly prim. Teacher smiles proudly
2. Child chews gum. Teacher puts hand over their mouth in disgust
3. Chews gum then burps. Teacher puts hand over mouth and points at child with other hand ... and so on.

This activity can prompt some interesting discussion points such as:

## Reflection:

- How did 'character 1' feel as 'character 2' reacted?
- Did this make your actions more or less obvious?
- What does this tell us about the character we are going to create for stage?
- What sorts of characters might work well together on stage?
- Was there a point where it got 'too silly' and not believable?
- Can you think of an example of characters from either *Matilda The Musical* or the novel that are particularly interesting to see together because of the way they react?

### 3. Finding Words in Faces

***Capturing and recording ideas for facial expressions. A quick-fire writing activity where students notice how facial features can change with the their characters' feelings. They can then describe these changes using their own choices of exciting language. (Leading into the activity: A Symphony of Words.)***

- Dennis Kelly talks about "writing with relish" (in his film on Character Rhythms, Dialogue page). Discuss this idea with your students. *What do they think that means? What is it when we 'relish' something? How much more effective is the word 'relish' to the words 'like' or 'enjoy'? Why is this?*
- Explain to the students that this next activity is to explore noticing detail, especially in facial expressions and to explore the most effective words to describe these details.
- Split the class in half. One half will be reporters who quickly jot down details they see; the other half will be *Revolting Children*. Explain to students that when the bell rings, the Revolting Children are going to have 30 seconds to make a still image of a class of very naughty children.
- Explain that you will ring the bell three times, and each time they can form a different still-image.
- During the time between the bells, the reporters must note down information about a particular feature, which you call out (see below).
  - Bell 1:** What do you notice about the eyes and the eyebrows? Look at as many as you can.
  - Bell 2:** Look at the different shapes that the mouths make. Can you describe them exactly?
  - Bell 3:** What do you notice about the position of their noses? What expression are they making?

- Encourage students to avoid writing general words such as ‘angry’ – ask them to look for specific details such as ‘round scary eyes’ or ‘deep wrinkly frown’ and to use words that they *relish!*
- After you’ve rung the bell three times, ask students to swap over, so that they have an opportunity to be both a reporter and a Revolting Child.
- When they have written down a range of ideas, ask the students to choose a few that they particularly like, and give them a few minutes to tweak the language so they are happy with their choices of words.

## A Symphony of Words!

- Form a circle and ask the students to bring with them their written observations from the previous activity.
- Firstly, invite the students to call out some of the character names from *Matilda the Musical*. As a group, play with how those names sound when repeated. *e.g. Bruce Bogtrotter, Agatha Trunchbull, Jennifer Honey*. A writer can choose wonderful words that make brilliant sounds and have particular rhythms.
- Discuss with the students what they understand by the word ‘*Symphony*’. Explain that they are now going to explore the sounds and rhythms of their own words and create their own unique Symphony.
- Using the descriptions they have written, ask them to choose some words or phrases to call out.
- Choose a pointing implement that can be used as a conductor’s baton. Say to the students that when it is pointed upwards there is silence but when the baton is pointed to a person, they must call out one of these words or phrases and repeat it until you ask them to stop.
- For example, you point to someone in the circle and they might start to repeat the phrase ‘*widening eyes, widening eyes*’. They will start to recognise that even the most ordinary of words has an interesting rhythm.
- Allow them to carry on repeating this and point to someone else in the circle. They might say ‘*eyes round as plates, eyes round as plates*’. The two phrases will sound interesting layered one on top of the other. And you can keep adding and adding.

- You may choose to continue to point to one person after another so that their phrases layer one on top of another. You can even spin all around the circle with the baton and hear everyone's phrases all at once!

### Extension:

- If you fancy getting really ambitious (and depending on the range of material the students have written), tell students that you are going to play again in different 'movements', like in a musical symphony. Each movement will be about a different part of the face. e.g. For the first movement, they must repeat any words or phrases about characters' eyes.
- To start each movement, call EYES! MOUTH! NOSE! etc. And then start to 'conduct'. Complete the movement by pointing your baton at the ceiling - Symphony complete

### Reflection:

- Discuss with the students what they were able to hear about their own and other people's words. Did any particularly stand out and why?
- Are there any words or phrases that has a particularly strong or interesting rhythm and might be useful to have in a song for example? Sometimes a simple phrase repeated over and over can be a good starting point for a song.

## 4. Gang of 'Like Minds'

***Further exploring the reactions of more than one character on stage. Students are given a number (from 1-5) which depicts a certain level of behaviour from 'nice' to 'naughty'. They hunt around for other people with the exact same number to form their gang of 'like minds.'***

- Invite the students to name some particularly strong characters from *Matilda the Musical*. How important are strong characters in a story? e.g. *Do they make scenes or moments memorable? Funny? Shocking? Dramatic?*
- Explain that the next activity will explore what might happen when strong characters come together and interact.
- Have a selection of cards ready, numbered from 1 to 5. Shuffle them and give a card to each person. Explain that their number refers back to the first game, where each step depicted a

gradual change from nice to naughty. (So if the person has number 5, this represents the most naughty or *revolting* character! And if they have a 1, this represents the ultimate in *nice*!)

- Explain that it is VERY IMPORTANT that students keep their number secret from the rest of the group.
- Invite students to move around the room – acting as their number – trying to form a gang by matching up with others who they think are the same level of naughtiness/niceness as themselves. In other words, if they are a 3, they must try to find others who might be 3 too, using behaviour as a clue.
- It might be helpful to give all of them a phrase to say to each other as they move around the room. For example, *‘Miss Trunchbull is an unholy terror’* or a similar line from the book or the musical.
- Give students a time limit of around two minutes to try to find their **gang of ‘like minds’** without showing their numbers. At the end, students show their card to the others in their group to check for accuracy.

## Reflection:

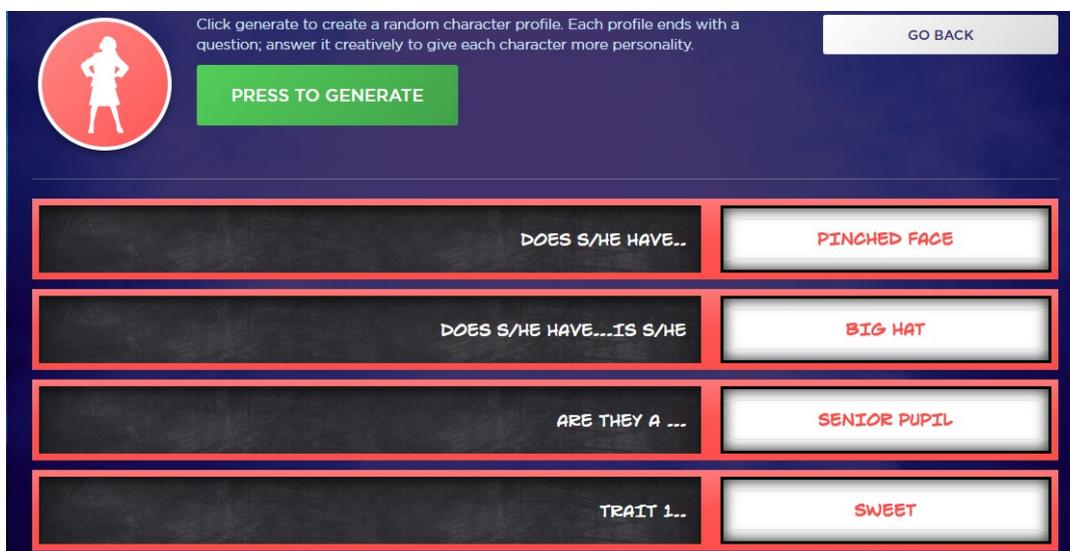
- Discuss with students how easy or difficult this task was. Were they exaggerating their character too much on the scale of 1-5? What could you have added in to be more like a four than a three? Why do you think you were mistaken for being ‘nice’ when you were supposed to be ‘naughty’?!

## 5. The Character Generator

***Exploring a range of ideas for the creation of a new character. Using the online tool alongside some further in-class guidance, students will consider a range of possibilities for creating new characters they would like to write a scene about. This scene could be the starting point for a whole new play or musical, just like Matilda.***

- Show the students the Bruce Bogtrotter chapter from Dennis’ film on the [Character](#) page. Ask students to listen to what Dennis says about Bruce Bogtrotter. He really enjoyed writing the scene about Bruce and the cake. Why do you think this is?

- Now have a look at our Character Generator. Explain to the students that this is a helpful online tool that spins up an assortment of details about human personalities. Because it mixes up all the details, you will never end up with the same character.
- Go on to explain that this can be used as a starting point for creating a new character for a scene in their very own play, just like Matilda starring in her own Musical, as many of the Character generator ideas have been written in the style of Dennis, Tim or Roald Dahl.
- As a class (either on the whiteboard or on individual computers) use the Character Generator as inspiration to create their BRAND NEW CHARACTER.
- Show students that as you click on each section, the generator will spin up a range of possibilities. You can see the way the Generator is organised into different sections, below:



- In this example, you can see we've generated a teacher who is short with blinking eyes. They are both bitter and proud, and the final 'key question' in the Generator prompts students to use their imagination to create something about them, in this case, their hobby. *(An interesting detail as the hobbies characters have in Matilda The Musical make them very memorable. Miss Trunchbull is a hammer-thrower; Mrs Wormwood is a dancer; Matilda is a book-reader and story-teller.)*
- When students have had a chance to explore the Character Generator, ask them to choose one character and to fill in a fact-file about them that could be shared with the actor who will play this character in their new scene.

## Example Fact File

**Name:**

*Miss Marionetta*

**What their character is like and why:**

(this requires students to look at the two different personality traits in the Generator and make a connection between them. Why is the teacher above proud and bitter? What has happened?)

*She appears very proud and straight-backed because as a youth she was training to be an Olympic runner. Unfortunately she has a great bitterness inside because she was hit by a hammer while practising on the running track. Although people know about her injury they do not know this last detail. She believes that it was Miss Trunchbull who threw the hammer that injured her as she was training for the hammer-throwing event the same day. She has vowed to get her revenge on Miss Trunchbull one day for taking away her hopes and dreams. This is why she has started teaching at Crunchem Hall.*

**Describe their appearance:**

*Tall, athletic, always in running gear, but walking with a limp.*

**Their closest ally:**

*Miss Honey*

**Their greatest foe:**

*Miss Trunchbull*

# Part B: Developing Character

## 6. Character Back-stories

***Inventing background details about individual characters. Using a picture selection of possible characters in a school, students create background details to build this person up into a real three-dimensional character for the stage.***

- Show the students the Believable Character chapter from Tim's film on the [Character](#) page and ask them to listen to what Tim has to say about two-dimensional characters.
- What do they think he means by this and what does he want to see added to characters in a musical? e.g. How important are songs in learning more about characters?
- Now show Lauren's film on the Character page asking the students to pay attention to Lauren's views on character's back-stories. Ask: what did Dennis and Tim do to help Miss Honey become more interesting to watch and to play?
- Discuss the meaning of 'back story' and what the students understand by it. A whole class of students is full of personalities who all have different backgrounds that shape who they are.
- Discuss with the students what they learn about the past of some of the characters in *Matilda the Musical*. e.g. *Miss Trunchbull was an Olympic hammer-thrower when she was young and that Miss Honey was a very happy child until her father died*. How does this help us understand this character? Does it affect how we feel about them? Does it affect how they behave?
- Explain that in this next activity, students are going to explore making their characters 3-dimensional and real by creating their own unique BACK STORY for them.
- Print out the character picture sheet of the class of children (see page 16). Ask your students to look at the pictures of the children and imagine a simple detail about their background. e.g. *it might simply be a detail such as 'lives with their grandmother', which on the surface might sound like an ordinary idea, but with a little exaggeration we might turn the grandmother into a*

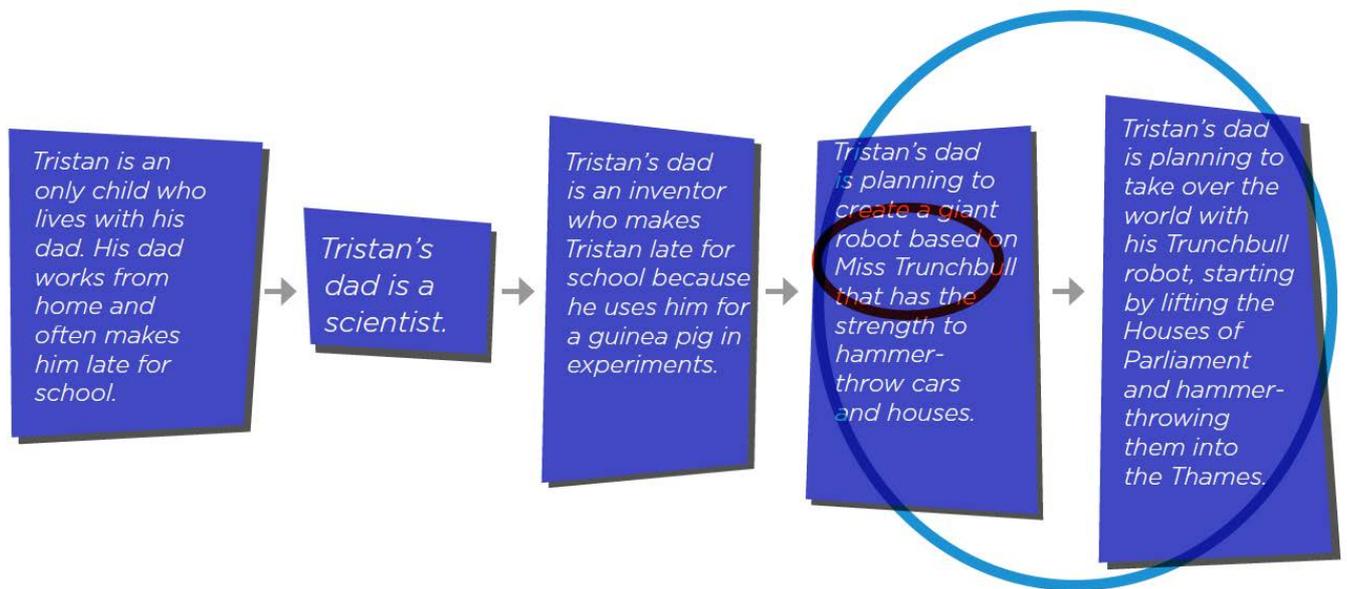
world champion ten-pin bowler. Sometimes even the most ordinary observations can lead us to something more extraordinary.

- If students are finding it difficult to think of simple ideas, encourage them to refer back to their work on the Character Generator.
- We've also supplied a range of blank faces for possible adult characters on page 17 – print this out and ask students to draw onto the faces a range of different people, and next to the faces, to write a small detail about them.
- In the next activity – [the Exaggeration Game](#) – students will choose one of those characters, give them a name and get a chance to develop them further.

## 7. The Exaggeration Game

***Creating a character that is big and memorable but not too over the top! Students consider all the characters they have created and choose one they particularly like and who they think would work well in their own story. This activity allows students to play with extremes - taking a character too far, then deciding how much to rein it in.***

- Referring again to the Believable Character chapter from Dennis's film on the Character page. What does he say about *caricature*? Discuss the meaning of the word '*caricature*' with the students. *Do they know anyone in life that is an 'over the top' character? Would an audience believe this person as a character onstage?! As writers, do we have to be careful that a large character doesn't become too over the top? Why is this?*
- With Dennis' comments in mind play ask students to choose a character from the Back-stories activity that has an interesting detail that they particularly like. Explain that ideally, it needs to be quite an ordinary detail that can be exaggerated little by little.
- Explain that they are allowed to keep exaggerating their details up to five steps, and they can allow themselves to exaggerate as much as they want to.
- When they have done this, ask each student to take 2 different coloured pens. Ask them to use one colour to put a ring around things they want to keep, and the other colour to ring details that won't work because they are too unbelievable (see example on the next page).

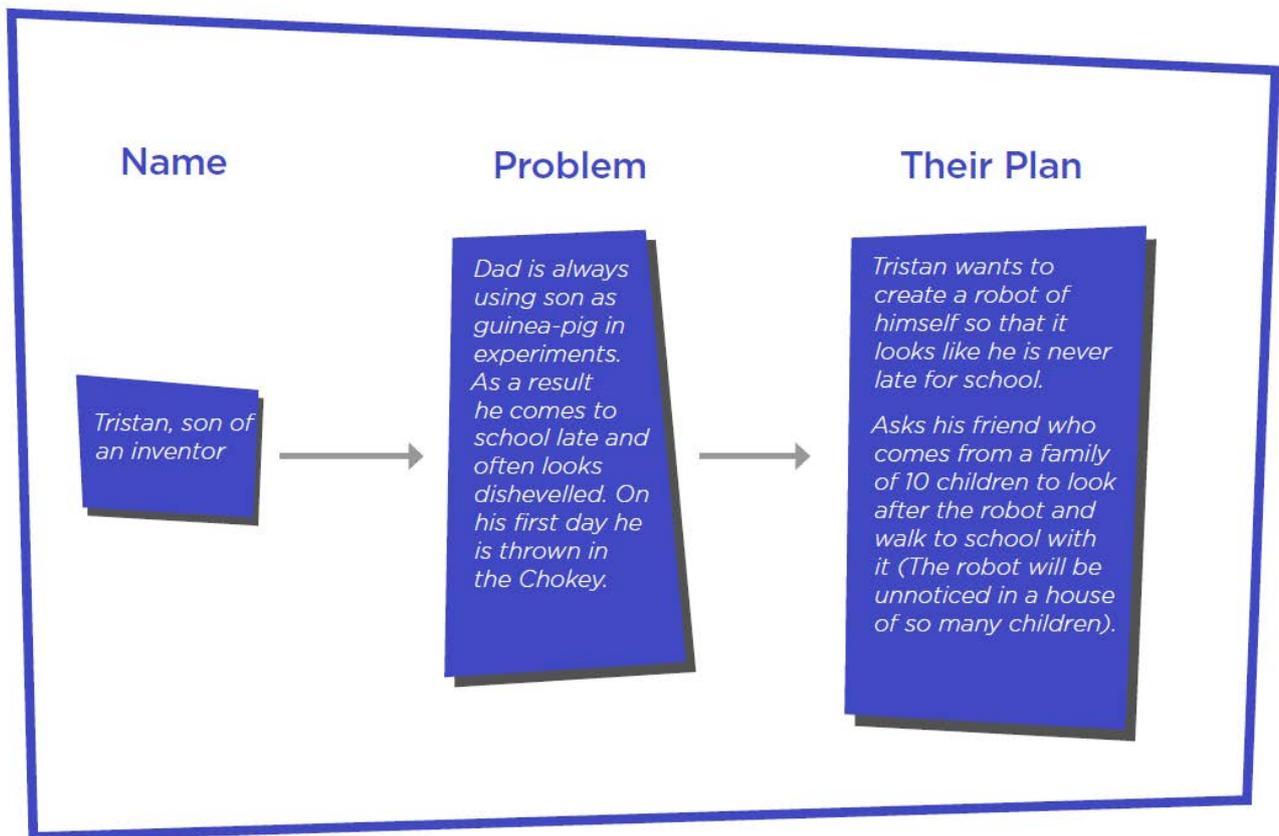


- Explain that in this example, the **blue** ring indicates the steps that have gone a bit too far. As Dennis Kelly explains in his film, a scene is a small part of a much bigger play and that part can't detract from the rest of the story. *In this example, an inventor taking over the world belongs in its own story.*
- They also need to consider that they are writing their scene for a *stage production*. This means that whatever happens in their scene must be possible to do in a theatre!
- Ask the students to look at what happened when this story example was exaggerated. Discuss whether this is a good way to make a story exciting or to generate ideas.
- In this case, a **red** ring has been drawn around the section that mentions creating a robot. Although a giant robot of Miss Trunchbull might not be appropriate, perhaps another robot of a child could be created? This is something that could be acted rather than needing a special effect.

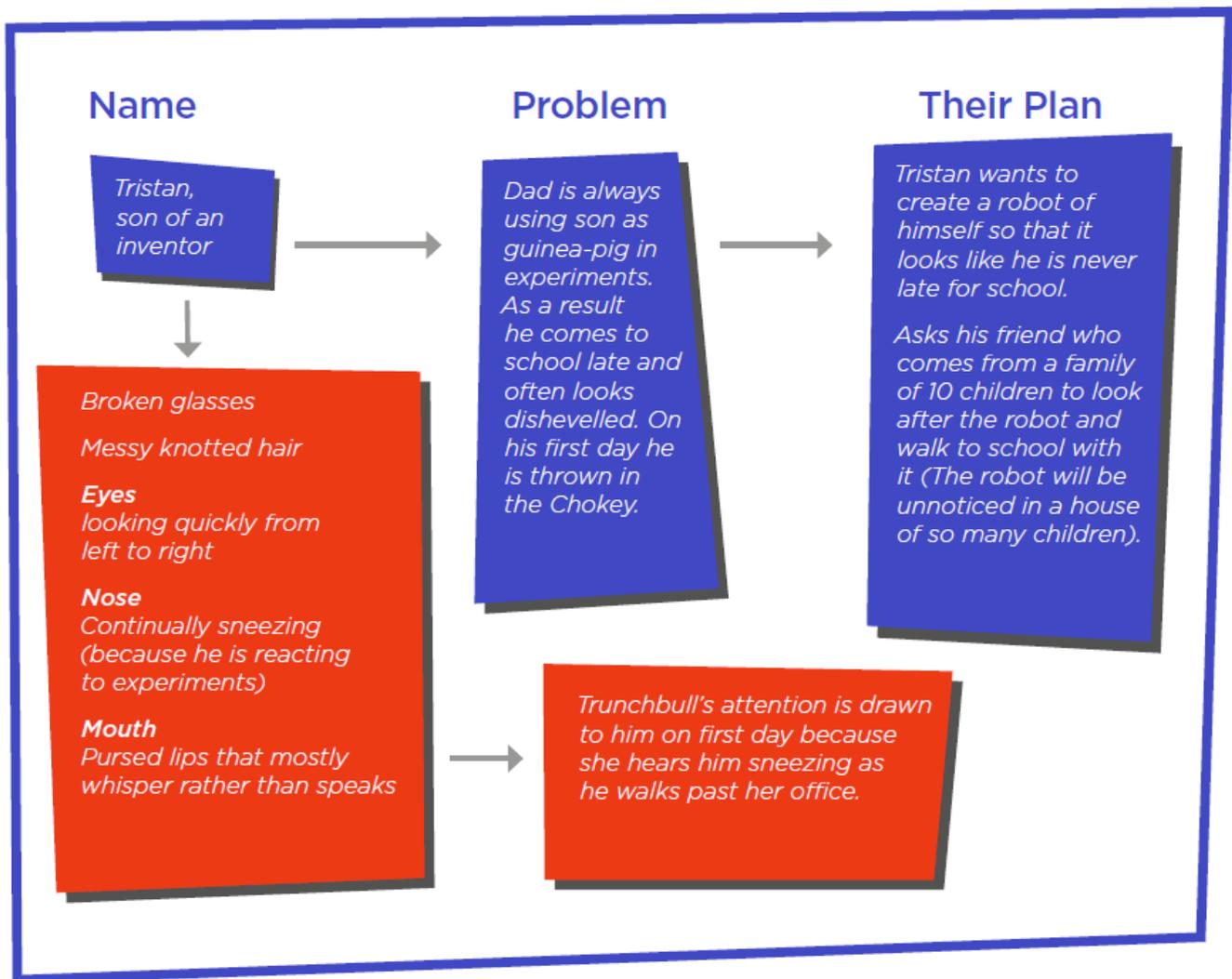
## 8. First Steps of a Story

***This is the first opportunity for students to plot a possible scene for their character. Using the details they have created about their new character, they create a three-step scene - using a beginning, middle and end: a first introduction to story structure.***

- Discuss with the students what they understand by the terms 'plot' and 'story'. All stories have a beginning, a middle and an end. Why do they think this is? Does the story of *Matilda the Musical* have a good plot?!
- What are the beginning, middle and end of the story of *Matilda*? These might be harder to pin down than an actual scene as there are many more steps in the plot of an entire play. What about one scene? Every scene of a play is like a mini-story in itself. Taking the example of the Bruce Bogtrotter CAKE scene, what is the beginning, middle and end of that?
- Explain that in this next activity, they will test ideas to plot ONE SCENE in their character's story. To do this, they will look at the character they have chosen, consider the details that they have created about them, and invent 3 steps (beginning, middle and end) that begin to tell a story about that character in the scene.
- Give students large pieces of paper (for example A3) for them to write their 3 steps. These need to be spread across the page so extra details can be added afterwards in another colour.
- Ask them to start by writing three simple things: the name of their character and who they are; a problem they have, and their plan for overcoming the problem.



- After this, using a pen of another colour, students can start to build in extra details to make their character more rounded and real. For example, they may introduce information about their appearance:



- As you can see above, in our example, the writer has started adding details about appearance. They have drawn out ideas from the activities they have done in class, focussing specifically on what we might notice about eyes, noses and mouths (like we did before.)
- They have also used this as an example of how one character's reaction to another may shape the way the story develops. It is because Miss Trunchbull reacts to Tristan's sneezing that he is caught for being late.

## Reflection:

- Discuss the activities the students have experienced in class. How has this prepared them for deciding who their character might be? How colourful their personality is, how their appearance, background, problems might interest an audience. And how other characters might react to them.

- Explain that the next step to writing their scene will be to add more detail, add more steps in their plot and thereby expand their story further.

The activities linked to the Plotting page will move them onto this next stage

