



Ethnic Studies  
Educator Support

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## Research to Write: Creating Historically Grounded Characters

**Essential Question:** *How do history, culture, and lived experiences shape a person's voice, choices, and identity?*

### Learning Goals

Students will:

- Conduct historical and cultural research.
- Analyze how identity is shaped by social and political contexts.
- Develop a historically grounded fictional character.
- Practice empathy and ethical representation.
- Write from a researched perspective.

## HOOK

Project the quote: "Human beings make themselves known through their tones, gestures, movements" – Dr. Myriam J.A. Chancy. *Please see <https://esresources.org/educator-bulletin/> June 2026 (Issue no. 2) for the background and relevant quotations used in this lesson/activity.*

Ask students:

- What can you learn about someone without knowing their name?
- How does a person's history influence the way they speak, move, or interact?
- What stories are hidden behind someone's actions?

Have students do a quick-write.

# PART 1

## ETHICAL REPRESENTATION MINI-LESSON

Use inspiration from the question posed to Dr. Chancy: "What ethical choices do you make when writing about someone or imagining futures?"

LESSON PLAN ACTIVITY

*WHAT ETHICAL CHOICES DO YOU MAKE WHEN WRITING ABOUT SILENCE OR MARGINALIZED FIGURES?*

Dr. Myriam J.A. Chancy in Conversation with Maya Gwynn | KVCOR | "Black Perspectives"

“

I take that question really seriously ... I'm Haitian by birth. Both my parents are Haitian from different class background ... having that background enables me to really think through when I'm creating a character. Not only who are they in the world, you know, what is their background, but also what do I need to learn in order to make sure that I'm fully representing that person? So I do my research, and I take it very seriously, because my readers, whatever their background, but especially if they're Haitian, especially if they're Caribbean, especially if they're Black, queer, or come from lower income backgrounds, will say "that does" or "does not reflect my background."



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Follow with Chancy's interview statement about learning history as a way to represent individuals and communities accurately, responsibly, respectfully, and creatively. Engage a classroom discussion on norms, expectations, and both community and authorial accountability.

### **Discussion:**

When writing about communities and histories:

- What is the difference between representation and stereotype?
- How can research help us write responsibly?
- What stories are often missing from textbooks?

Students create an "Ethical Writer's Checklist."

Examples:

- ✓ Base details on evidence.
- ✓ Avoid stereotypes.
- ✓ Represent complexity.
- ✓ Acknowledge systems and historical context.
- ✓ Show humanity before labels.

## **PART 2**

### **HISTORICAL CONTEXT RESEARCH**

Assign or let students choose a topic connected to your Ethnic Studies unit.

Examples: Caribbean migration; Japanese American incarceration; Chicano Movement; Black organizing / community programs; Filipino farmworker organizing; Indigenous displacement, movement, and revitalization.

#### **Students Research:**

| <b>Historical Snapshot</b>                                                                                                                                         | <b>Everyday Life</b>                                                                                                                                                                                | <b>Sources</b>                                                                                                      |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Time period</li><li>• Location</li><li>• Major events</li><li>• Political conditions</li><li>• Social challenges</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Family structures</li><li>• Education</li><li>• Work opportunities</li><li>• Language(s)</li><li>• Cultural traditions</li><li>• Community spaces</li></ul> | Require at least: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 2 primary sources</li><li>• 2 secondary sources</li></ul> |

## PART 3

# CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT THROUGH RESEARCH

Students create a fictional character who could realistically exist within that historical context.

### Character Research Sheet

|                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Identity</b>                                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Name</li><li>• Age</li><li>• Gender</li><li>• Ethnicity/Cultural background</li><li>• Languages spoken</li></ul>                                                                           |
| <b>Historical Position</b>                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Where do they live?</li><li>• What major historical events affect them?</li><li>• What systems, structures, or daily realities shape their life?</li></ul>                                 |
| <b>Voice</b>                                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What phrases might they use?</li><li>• What topics matter to them?</li><li>• What emotions do they carry?</li></ul>                                                                        |
| <b>Movement &amp; Gesture</b><br>Inspired by Dr. Chaney's quote: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How do they walk?</li><li>• What habits do they have?</li><li>• What gestures reveal their personality?</li><li>• What physical actions communicate things they never say aloud?</li></ul> |
| <b>Conflict</b>                                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What obstacle are they facing?</li><li>• What choice must they make?</li><li>• What allies or support do they have?</li></ul>                                                              |

## PART 4

# CHARACTER VOICE WRITING

Students write one of the following:

### Option A: Diary Entry

*A day in the life of the character.*

### Option B: Letter

*Written to a family member, friend, or future generation.*

### Option C: Monologue

*The character explains a difficult decision they must make.*

Require students to incorporate:

- Three researched historical details
- One cultural detail
- One challenge connected to historical circumstances

## PART 5

### GALLERY WALK - "THE VOICES WE INHABIT"

Post character profiles around the room.

Students circulate and leave notes:

- What historical influences are visible?
- What makes this character feel authentic?
- What questions do you still have?

### Extension Activity: "Character Interview"

Students pair up.

One student becomes their character while the other acts as a journalist, historian, or community researcher.

Questions:

- What do you fear?
- What do you hope for?
- What do people misunderstand about your community?
- How has history shaped your life?
- What future do you imagine?

## ASSESSMENT RUBRIC

| CRITERIA                         | EXCEEDS                          | MEETS                | DEVELOPING            |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Historical Research</b>       | Rich, accurate, multiple sources | Accurate research    | Limited research      |
| <b>Character Development</b>     | Complex and nuanced              | Clear and believable | Surface-level         |
| <b>Use Of Historical Context</b> | Deeply integrated                | Present throughout   | Minimal connection    |
| <b>Voice &amp; Perspective</b>   | Distinct and authentic           | Consistent           | Inconsistent          |
| <b>Ethical Representation</b>    | Demonstrates care and complexity | Generally respectful | Relies on assumptions |

## REFLECTION EXIT TICKET

Ask students: *Which part of your character came directly from research, and which part required imagination? How did you balance both responsibly? Do you see yourself in your character?*

This reflection helps students understand a central Ethnic Studies skill: using research not just to learn history, but to understand how people experience and live through history – as well as our situatedness inside interconnected stories.