



TalkforWriting

Talk for Writing Home-school booklet

Villains

Working at greater depth

by Jamie Thomas



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Introduction

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a villain as ‘an unprincipled or depraved scoundrel; a man naturally disposed to base or criminal actions, or deeply involved in the commission of disgraceful crimes.’ Almost every great story has a truly great villain. Some are exceedingly sly and cunning; some are malicious and evil; and some are simply out to cause trouble. However, no matter how unprincipled and depraved they are, they all have a shared goal – to wreak havoc on their enemies. It is therefore no wonder that they are such fascinating characters to read and write about.



Throughout this unit of work, we will explore how we, as authors, can tune into language that brings a great villain to life. We will connect with the inner emotions that drive and fuel criminal actions, as well as delving into the back stories, from where such malice is born. By the end, I hope that you love villains as much as I do.

Preparing to write

As an author, it is highly recommended that you keep a jotter or notebook, otherwise known as a *magpie book*, by your side to capture any ideas you may have as the unit unfolds. This book can be used to make notes, jot down ideas and draft initial thoughts.



Throughout this unit, we will be playing with language and sentence construction in order to create new, innovative ideas. Great writers understand how to manipulate writerly tools for a desired effect. Having a magpie book will therefore be an essential part of the writing process as it will allow you to test out and rework your ideas.



And don't forget – great writers are influenced by other great writers, so raid your wider reading and become inspired by all of the amazing authors there are out there.

Activity 1: The makeup of a villain...

In order to open up our minds to the world of possibility, it is important that we allow ourselves time to think creatively. As a writer, I have learnt a great deal from the poet Ted Hughes. He tells us that, when writing, we have to allow our minds to wander and explore the world of possibility. We must not worry about what comes out or fear that it may be wrong. The joy of writing is that it allows us to explore our thoughts, our interests, our imagination. This activity is designed to let you lose your inhibitions and explore the world of possibility.

★ Step 1: Find a stimulus

Before you begin, make a list of as many villains as you can. These could hail from novels, comics, TV series, films, even everyday life. You may like to think about your favourite books and movies and identify the villains in those. Remember, there are many shades of villain and they are not necessarily human!

★ Step 2: Prepare to write

Set yourself up in a quiet space with your jotter and a timer. When you begin to write, make sure you follow Ted Hughes's guidelines: write hard, fast and in silence. Give yourself around 10 minutes to complete this task.

★ Step 3: Starting to write

The purpose of this task is to let everything that is inside of you spill out onto the page. There is no wrong or right response. There are no pre-determined ideas about what you may write. All you need to consider is what the makeup of a villain is, i.e. how are they made? What is their physical, mental, and moral constitution?

Let your imagination run wild and free. Whatever pops into your head, jot it down. Don't worry about spelling, punctuation, grammar or sentence construction. Just focus on the words that spill out of you and find themselves assembled on the page.

Here is my own version, which you may like to read to give you ideas:

The Makeup of a Villain

Hatred swells from inside.
Envy taints every impure thought.
Fiery obsession roars from within.
Self-importance masks frailty.
A tinted impression of the world.
Power: the only prize.
Domination: the only pathway.

Spindly fingers curl and plot.
Nails, as sharp as knives, poised.
A steely stare, filled with malice.
A discoloured grin, charged with intent.
Each tenuous movement, calculated.
Each twisted word, planned.

Top Tips:

Remember – do not overthink this – let the ideas run free.

When I sat down to write this, I began by asking myself what words I associated with the word villain. The word *hatred* instantly popped into my head and I was away. I could have continued with single words as they came to me, but I found myself writing short poetical phrases. This was not pre-planned, it is just a style I am familiar with and enjoy writing.

Be true to yourself as a writer. Write down whatever comes naturally.

Activity 2: Vocabulary – Word Waiter



This activity will show you how to add depth to a character by exploring their inner emotions. This is such a great tool as it takes language and turns it on its head, creating new and intriguing descriptions that delve into the makeup of a character.

The idea behind a word waiter is that you spend time building lists of words that you can then manipulate for meaning. The importance is to try our fresh, new

combinations, not look for the natural fit. It is often the juxta-positioning of words that lead to the most interesting description.

★ Firstly, brainstorm and capture lists of:

- adjectives associated with colour
- abstract nouns (feelings and emotions)
- verbs
- prepositions

Do make sure that you have a large bank of ideas before you move on. You may like to use a dictionary or thesaurus to generate words, as well as magpieing from this example.

The next step is to begin manipulating the words, creating poetical phrases and sentences to describe a villain. Choose a word from each column that you feel connects with your character and then play around with them to create your sentence. You may find it helpful to have a particular villain in mind when you begin this activity.

Adjective of colour	Abstract Noun	Verb	Preposition
Fiery	love	staggered	beneath
flamboyant	hatred	diced	behind
azure	mischievous	hissed	within
golden	jealousy	traipsed	between
crimson	weakness	smear	under
emerald	reluctance	beamed	inside
scarlet	curiosity	roared	around
rusted	greed	merged	across
bleached	sorrow	sprinted	amongst
vibrant	fury	darted	before
verdant	happiness	assembled	through
radiant	sadness	harassed	in between
vivid	boredom	scolded	about
mellow	envy	drifted	into
sombre	anger	executed	throughout
royal	determination	stretched	towards
harsh	obsession	berated	on top of

Here is a worked example:

Rusted greed hissed inside his sick mind.
 Rich cruelty resonated through his callous scowl.
 Tainted happiness smeared itself across his weathered face.
 Smoke-grey anger burned in his dark, suspicious eyes.
 Fiery obsession assembled within.
 Scarlet spite stretched within his soul.
 Bleached sorrow strangled all hope.
 Blazing orange spite ruled.

★ Now have a go at creating your own 'word waiter' sentences. Remember, the art of playful writing is having a go and manipulating the ideas until they fall into place. Have fun playing with the words as you create your own villain-inspired descriptive sentences.

To help you get started, you may find it helpful to ask yourself:

- What is the emotion you see in the character?
e.g. greed
- What colour do you associate with that emotion?
e.g. rusted
- Where do you see it or associate it as being?
e.g. inside his mind

Activity 3: Short-burst writing - narrative

Let's now have a go at building a short piece of narrative, drawing on the word waiter to enhance the description of our villain. As a reader, it is often an author's turn of phrase or attention to detail that I adore. It is the moment when you read something and almost have to pause and contemplate its meaning as it holds depth and needs to be digested.

- ★ Choose two or three of your favourite lines from your word waiter. I have listed mine below:



Rusted greed hissed inside his sick mind.
Fiery obsession assembled within.
Smoke-grey anger burned in his dark,
suspicious eyes.

- ★ Now let's turn these into a short narrative. I find that it helps if you picture your villain in a setting that you know and can describe well (e.g. school hall, a shop, a park, etc.) Remember, you are only raiding the word waiter for ideas – you don't have to use the whole sentence.

Karlov scanned the foyer, a fiery obsession assembling within. It would soon all be his and there was nothing they could do to stop him. He chanced a quick look at his watch - 11:59. In one minute, he would become the most powerful man on the planet. Rusted greed hissed inside his sick mind - too long he had waited for this day.

Suddenly, the room was plunged into darkness. Pulling on the mask, all that could be seen were his smoke-grey eyes, burning with anger.



- ★ Have a go at writing your own narrative paragraph, drawing upon your own word waiter for inspiration.

Activity 4: Focus in on the unusual detail

This is one of my favourite activities to explore with any character, especially a villain. The idea is that, rather than describing the general appearance of a character, you tune in to the intricate details: the mannerisms, facial expressions, strange objects or possessions.

To do this, focus on one element of a character and become it. The only way you can do this is by looking at it closely, so a visual stimulus is really helpful. To become it, you just need the sentence stem: I am the ... then extend the idea with action or detail. For example: I am the *eyes*, staring menacingly at my next victim.

The simple pattern and structure really helps focus on the language choice, whilst bringing something specific to life.

Here is my 'I am' poem, based on Lord Voldemort from *Harry Potter*:

Lord Voldemort

I am the **eyes**, filled with anger,
glaring with malicious intent.

I am the **mouth**, rotten to the core,
poised with fatal words to attack.

I am the **nose** - snaked slits,
sensing impure blood and weakness.

I am the pallid **skin**, void of warmth,
tainted with bleached spite.

I am the gnarled **fingers**, twisted in hate,
charged with greed.

I am the **mind**, sinister and severe,
plotting devastation.

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Top Tips:

Notice how each sentence addresses one feature, such as the eyes, the mouth, the nose, etc.

First, name the feature of the character, *e.g. I am the eyes.*

Then, add in detail to describe or to bring the feature to life:

filled with anger (describe)

glaring with malicious intent
(adding action)

- ★ Have a go at writing your own 'I am the ...' poem, based on a villain of your choice. This could be an established villain from a book of film, or it may be one from your own imagination. You may like to use this great photo as inspiration.



Activity 5: Short-burst writing - poetry to prose

Poetry is a great way of generating figurative language. The trick is then to raid the poetry in order to strengthen the narrative.

I find that it helps to initially explore this in the first person. Imagine you are facing your villain. Describe what you can see, what you notice, what you feel. Let the **words** unfold in front of you, drawing upon the poetry for inspiration.



Here is a worked example. I have underlined the lines I magpied from the poem:

Finally, we found ourselves face to face, locked in a deathly stare. His eyes were filled with anger, glaring with malicious intent. A vile smile spread across his face as fatal words swelled inside - poised, rotten to the core. His pallid skin was void of warmth and tainted with bleached spite. He sniffed the air with snaked slits, enjoyment surging through him. I watched as his gnarled fingers twisted in hate and toyed with his wand. Waiting. Anticipating. The sinister mind plotting devastation. Then he struck.

- ★ Now have a go at turning your 'I am the ...' poem into a piece of prose. Remember, it helps to imagine that you are there, face to face with your villain. You may like to use my opener to get you started:

Finally, we found ourselves face to face, locked in a deathly stare.

Activity 6: Illustration and animation



One of the things I love about many villains is their extreme appearance. Many authors choose to capture the villainous attributes of a character through their facial features, their stature, their movement ... even their clothing. This makes villains great fun to draw.

★ Follow this link for a tutorial with art specialist, Mrs. Gallagher, on how to draw evil faces and enhance features in order to capture the personality of your villain:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=youtu.be&v=5ioWkkUjFW4&app=desktop>

Activity 7: Exploring character flaw

A flaw in someone's character is an undesirable quality that they have. This quality is often the thing that we despise as a reader. Great villains are often plagued with flaws, such as greed, jealousy, vanity, spitefulness or vengeance.

It is sometimes fun to challenge story convention. In this activity, we are going to consider how we can build empathy for a villain by tuning in to their backstory. A backstory is defined as 'a history or background created for a fictional character' (Oxford English Dictionary). It forms the foundations of a character and often helps to explain their desires, fears and motivations.



Every time you create a new character, think about their history. What could explain the way they are now? For example, if your character is driven by greed, what may have happened in their life that created this flaw? What atrocities may they have experienced themselves?

Now let's look at how we plan to reveal a character's backstory.

★ Step 1: Decide the character flaw

It is important that you begin with a clear impression of your villain. What is their flaw? As an example, let's explore the idea of greed.

★ Step 2: Brainstorm the backstory

Make a list of all the things that may have happened in that character's life that may have had a lasting effect on them. Character flaws are often in relation to a strong personal experience.

For example, greed is the tendency for selfish craving, grasping and hoarding. A character fuelled by greed may have been deprived of love, care and nurture as a child. They may have grown up in poverty, or where poverty was forced upon them. They may be fighting for all that they can achieve because of an injustice that they feel has been forced upon them. They may be acting out of revenge, driven to conquer all no matter the cost.

★ **Step 3: Drip-feed the backstory into the narrative to enrich the character**

There are many ways to drip-feed a backstory into a narrative. In some ways, the most simple is through a flashback, where the reader is taken back in time to see what happened in the past that affected the character so deeply. Flashbacks can also be subtly sewn into the story line, slowly piecing the backstory together over time. Have a look at how I have sewn the backstory into the narrative we explored earlier in activity 3.

Karlov scanned the foyer, a fiery obsession assembling within. It would soon all be his and there was nothing they could do to stop him. **They had been responsible for stripping it from his life; they were to blame. The nightmares of his childhood still plagued him. He could still see his father's tears; he could still hear his mother's screams.**

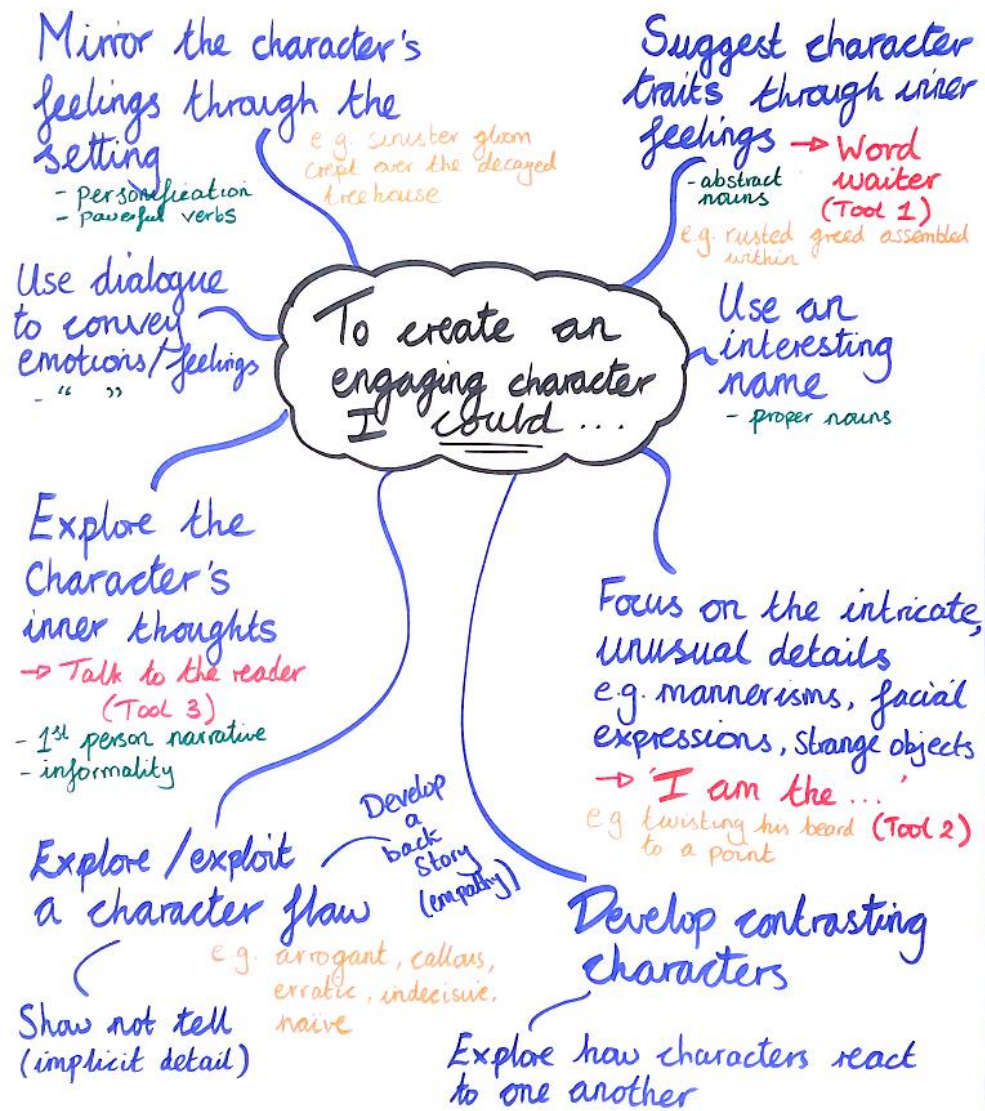
He chanced a quick look at his watch - 11:59. In one minute, he would become the most powerful man on the planet. Rusted greed hissed inside his sick mind - too long he had waited for this day. **Revenge would be his.**

The trick is to not reveal too much at once. Tease the reader by revealing snippets at a time. This technique builds the suspense and intrigue; it allows the reader to begin to question their motives and connect with them on a deeper level. This can be quite an uncomfortable feeling, especially where the character is plotting something of malice or revenge.

★ **Have a go at writing a narrative where you drip feed the backstory to build your character. You may like to go back and use your narrative paragraph from activity 3 as I have done. Remember to follow the three steps to ensure you engage deeply with your character.**

Activity 8: Exploring the character toolkit

We have now explored a number of great writerly tools that we can use to develop character, as seen in this toolkit below.



★ I have added in a few other great tools that you may like to explore. Read through the toolkit and familiarise yourself with them.

Let's now see these tools in action. Below is an extract from the story Aladdin, describing the meeting between Aladdin and the Moor.

★ Read through the text, analysing it almost line by line. How many tools can you identify that help develop the character for the reader? You may like to highlight them or annotate the text as you go.

★ You can listen to this being read aloud here:

<https://soundcloud.com/talkforwriting/aladdin/s-Q2uO9N2grWQ>

Extract from Aladdin

I spotted him in a nearby coffee-shop, twisting his beard into a point and listening to everything that was going on. His pencil-thin moustache twitched with excitement when he heard my name. I should have noticed the way his ears pricked up, his sharp eyes glittered, and his long fingers curled like claws - but I didn't. I didn't because, for the first time in my life, someone had taken an interest in me. Staring into his hypnotic eyes, I could see a passageway to a life far more exciting than my own.

'Bring me the lamp and the world is ours!'

My instructions were clear. I dived into the hole like a terrier, felt my way along the passage and opened the cast-iron door; I could hardly breathe for astonishment. There, in front of me, lay a garden of wonders, luring me in. In the distance, I saw the lamp: the key to owning the world. My fingers trembled in anticipation as I lifted it down; my life was about to change.

As I approached the mouth of the cave, my mother's words echoed once more in my mind: 'Naïve scoundrel!' Staring into the moor's devilish eyes, I could see that he now thought the same.

Discoloured greed grew sinisterly across his face, whilst tormented talons reached in desperation. That's when I knew it was a trap.

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Activity 9: Retelling the story from another perspective

The extract from Aladdin above is written in the first person, with Aladdin narrating the story. The advantage of this is that we can see the character through Aladdin's eyes and connect with the first-hand description.

Throughout this unit, we have looked at the complexities of villains. The one thing lacking from this extract is any empathy built up around the Moor – we are not aware of anything in his back story.

★ **Have a go at reworking the story of Aladdin, but this time telling it in the third person. Drip-feed elements of the Moor's backstory, explaining the motives for the decisions he makes. Remember to make reference to the toolkit in order to develop the characters in as much depth as you can.**

Here is an example of how you may open this retelling:

Aladdin stared intently at the mysterious man, twisting his beard into a point and listening to everything that was going on. He noticed how his pencil-thin moustache twitched with excitement at what he heard. But he was naive and unaware that the Moor was on the prowl for information. He was searching for the answers that tore him up from inside; he was searching for the key to fuel his greed. That key was Aladdin.

Activity 10: Writing your own narrative

You now have all of the tools required to write your own narrative, exploring powerful villainous characters. You may like to have a go at re-writing a childhood classic, such as Aladdin, or you may prefer to tune into a genre that you enjoy writing. Whatever you decide, reflect on all of the skills we have discussed throughout this unit and see if you can entwine them within your writing.

To recap on all the key points we have learned:

- a. **Build description that connects with a characters feelings and emotions.**
Reflect back on the word waiter and consider how feelings lie at the heart of a character's motivations. Play around with new combinations to engage and interest the reader.

- b. **Focus in on the intricate detail.** Think about what makes a villain different or unique. This could be through their appearance or through their manner. Spend time focusing in on the interesting features, turning yourself into it in order to bring it to life for the reader.
 - c. **Develop a backstory to explain the character flaw.** Villains are charged with a desire to do wrong or seek retribution. Delving into the backstory that lies at the heart of this will deepen the connection for the reader and fuel the motives in the story.
 - d. **Draw upon the toolkit.** Keep referring to the toolkit we created and try out new ideas. Raid your reading to see how other authors do this.
 - e. **Enjoy it.** Writing is all about sharing a passion for words, stories and the world of possibility. If you love the story you are writing – so will your reader.
- ★ **Now write your own villain-inspired narrative, drawing on all that you have learned. Don't forget to share or publish your work – great writing deserves an audience! I would love to read any of your finished, published work!**

Extension tasks: other writing opportunities

Whilst I have mapped out ten activities that you may like to explore above, there are many other writing opportunities that you may like to engage in.:

★ Villain Wikipedia Profile

Draw a picture of your villain and create a short Wikipedia entry, capturing the key facts surrounding their early life, career and misdemeanors.

★ Diary writing

Write a series of diary entries for a named villain. Make sure you think about how they would be feeling and how they may capture this in their diary.

★ Graphic novel

Change your narrative into a graphic novel. Focus on making sure the illustrations represent character description created through the writing.

★ Newspaper articles

Write a newspaper article explaining a recent trial of villainous events. Refer back to the previous home-schooling booklet (Cave of Curiosity) for the tools and structure.

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**Jamie Thomas, Deputy Head and Head of Warren Teaching School Alliance,
now works with Talk for Writing to help schools develop the approach.**

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