

# CREATING CHARACTERS

Age Range: Middle & High School (Grades 7-10)

Activity Time: 45 minutes



## TRISTAN STRONG PUNCHES A HOLE IN THE SKY

By Kwame Mbalia and published by Disney Hyperion

### THE FESTIVAL

Welcome to the Beautiful Blackbird Children's Book Festival! Where is the festival happening? Right here in your space, in your hands. By writing a piece of your own inspired by *Tristan Strong Punches a Hole In The Sky*, you are taking part in a celebration of books and book creators from across the African Diaspora. Your writing joins theirs in creating poems and stories built on roots, identity, and resilience.

### THE BOOK

Look for the reading from *Tristan Strong Punches a Hole In The Sky* on [BeautifulBlackbird.com](http://BeautifulBlackbird.com). The novel is full of memorable characters: from West African gods and African American folk heroes to the central character himself: Tristan, who discovers that he has fantastic powers too. Like in all great mythology, complex characters are what drive the story forward, their talents and foibles creating nerve wracking moments of tension and suspense.

### 1. Character Sheet

For this writing workshop you are going to create your own mythical characters, using collage and some tried and true techniques by Telling Room teachers. This character sheet can then be used to develop a story, a tale, a game...wherever your imagination takes you!

### Overview

Sometimes characters don't drop down out of the sky and fall, fully formed, into your waiting story. Sometimes you might need to kickstart your imagination! We'll start by creating a Character Collage that lets you *find* characters instead of inventing them. Then you'll ask yourselves some questions about your character to get to know them better. Lastly, we'll invite you to weave these together in a creative portrait.

### a. Character Collage

For this you will need a stack of magazines that no one minds if you cut up, scissors, glue sticks, and a piece of big paper (poster board, paper bag, construction paper.) You can also use a picture you already have, as long as it's of someone you don't know too much about.

When you find a picture of someone interesting to you, cut out their picture and with your glue stick plop them right down in the middle of the poster board. From here on out you're scouring the magazines for other interesting pictures, anything that you think belongs with your character, either as an object or an idea or dream they have, someone in their family, or their best friend, whatever. If you see a picture you think belongs with your character, cut it out and glue it somewhere around your central photo of the character. It's okay if the pictures overlap. Try to find lots of stuff. When you decide you're finished, you probably are.

### b. Character Development

When you feel like writing, sit down and take a long look at your collage, and then take a look at the questions below. Pick a few to answer and make some notes about your character. These questions are from Maine writer Lewis Robinson.

### 2. Character Development

This activity was created by award-winning writer and Telling Room teacher Lewis Robinson.

1. What's your character's name?
2. How old are they?
3. Where do they live? What kind of landscape? A kind of place – a house, an apartment? What does the street look like?
4. Do they live with anyone or have family?

5. What's their love life like? Do they have a big crush or a partner? Are they married? Divorced?
6. What color is their bathroom?
7. What's their favorite tv show?
8. What's in the refrigerator? What is a typical lunch or dinner?
9. What did this person do on Tuesday? Does this person have a job or go to school? Are they retired, unemployed?
10. What did they do last night?
11. What did they do last Saturday night?
12. How do they get around?
13. What are two unique habits that are part of their daily routine? (an idiosyncrasy, ex: they put lipstick on to drive home from work)
14. What's a bad habit of theirs?
15. What's a good habit of theirs?
16. What's a secret about them they haven't told anyone?
17. Describe something small that frightens them, ex: spiders, dogs, swimming, flying, losing an important object)
18. Describe something big that frightens them.
19. What is a gift that someone gave them that they loved?
20. What is the last thing they made for someone?

### 3. Portrait Paragraph

Now that you have a strong idea of who your character is, you get to write a descriptive portrait! Visual artists get to paint portraits of characters using artist tools like

brushes and markers. Writers get to paint portraits with words. Before using your collage and character questions to write a descriptive paragraph, think about how you want to write it. You could write in first person, like Kwame Mbalia did in **Tristan Strong**, saying "I battled monsters big and small, with powers I didn't know I had, with gods I didn't know existed." Or you could write in third person: "Seventh grader Tristan Strong feels anything but strong ever since he failed to save his best friend when they were in a bus accident together."

**Finally**, put all of this together to create your Character Sheet. You could have your collage on one side, your paragraph on the other. Or perhaps you want to showcase them side by side? If you are inspired you could make a whole deck of characters and use them to tell a story, plan a novel, play a game, etc. Let your imagination run wild!

**Share your Experience!** If your family, guardian, or teacher agrees and if you can protect your privacy, share your writing and images with us online with the hashtag #BeautifulBlackbirdFestival.

Thank you to Telling Room for designing this writing activity as part of their support of the Beautiful Blackbird Children's Book Festival!