

Time Needed: 2 – 5 class periods (if all steps followed)

Supplies:

- Digital brainstorming and bulletin board tools, such as
 - [Wordle or Wordcloud](#) (or whiteboard/poster paper if you don't have access)
 - [Padlet](#) (or post-it notes if you don't have access)
- Digital graphic design tool, such as [Canva](#) (or markers and poster paper if you don't have access)
- [Duke TIP Storyteller Survey](#)
- The following materials, all available [here](#):
 - Duke TIP Creative Writing Story Rubric
 - Duke TIP Bingeworthy Show Pitch Rubric
 - Duke TIP So What? slideshow
 - Duke TIP What's a Logline? Slideshow
 - Duke TIP Query Letter Guidebook
- Duke TIP Creative Writing videos, all found [here](#). Specifically you will use in this lesson the
 - Duke TIP Creative Writing: Adventures Through Time [trailer](#)
 - Duke TIP Creative Writing character [What If? premise video](#)

Content Objectives: Students will know:

- Strong and viable story ideas in the professional world of storytelling include a meaningful So What? + a plausibly implausible What If?
- The definition of a logline
- Neuroscience theories about storytelling
- The concepts of plausibility and implausibility

Skill Objectives: Students will be able to:

- Identify meaningful “points” or themes in their lives
- Identify meaningful “So What” themes in mentor texts
- Generate a viable story idea based on these themes
- Use digital tools to generate, express, and critique others’ ideas while creating a story bank

See the end of the lesson for standards alignment.

Essential Understandings: Students will understand:

- There is neurological evidence that stories captivate us and keep us enthralled.
- Stories teach survival skills--in particular, skills of social survival.

- Stories must have a point in order to engage readers; otherwise, we're dealing with illogical and random surprises, and the audience will lose interest.
- Concepts--abstract, one-word themes--drive a good "So What?" or point of a story.
- Professional authors experiment with many ideas before settling on a point, or theme.
- If I've survived childhood, then I have a story to tell.

Essential Questions: Students will explore:

- How do professional authors generate ideas for stories?
- What stories are fascinating to me? Why?
- How do you write a story that readers want to read, or viewers want to see?
- What story could I tell that is a story about surviving?
- What's the point of my story?

Formative Product or Performance

- Option 1: Students will generate ideas for story events and a theme for a mentor text, in preparation for a literary analysis essay
- Option 2: Students will generate ideas for story events and a theme as part of a "pitch to producers" who want a binge-worthy show for kids. This formative task is in preparation for a larger creative writing summative project, a short story that might be
 - pure fiction,
 - autofiction (fiction with strong connection to an author's real life),
 - or creative nonfiction/memoir (personal essay or memoir story)
 - that will be assessed by some or all elements of the Duke TIP Creative Writing Story Rubric, found [here](#).

Bingeworthy Show Pitch:

So you need to wow the producers at Netflix, Amazon, and Disney with a story idea for a new kids' TV show series that they will adore. This series needs an entertaining story for ages 8-10, based on a cool What If? that also has a meaningful Point, or So What? You'll design two eye-catching posters for your pitch using a graphic design tool. Each poster has a one-sentence pitch. In the business, this is also known as a logline. These particular producers need to know that this show is going to be meaningful. They don't just want humor or drama; they want MEANING. So you are also pitching the Point, or the So What? You will do this through two posters:

- A **What If? Poster** that expresses the actions of the plot and characters
- A **So What? Poster** that expresses the point of the story.
- You will have two minutes to make your pitch to us, and all eyes will be on your posters as you argue to the producers why your story has interesting events/people and why it has a meaningful point.
- This can be an original story that's never been seen before, or, it can be based on a mentor text.
- See the rubric for the Bingeworthy Show Pitch, found [here](#).

Notes for the Teacher

- All of these activities and rubrics can be adapted to mentor texts. We recommend that you blend these creative writing skill activities with mentor text analysis.
- If you decide to allow students to write a full short story—whether flash fiction (under 1500 words) or longer short fiction (up to 25 pages), note that the summative writing rubric for a short story is comprehensive, representing multiple areas of skill. You might wish to break this rubric into multiple ones, as sections apply to certain skill development. Gifted high school students who are juniors and seniors might be able to achieve the full rubric for a final writing assignment after a semester or more.
- If a student is already writing a novel, the student may choose to submit some of that material in lieu of these assignments.
- The final writing project can be modified to be digital, as in a film, animation, etc., or a hybrid project (graphic novel, etc.).
- [Foreshadow](#), a serial YA digital anthology, is seeking writers of all ages. Your most gifted writers might consider submitting.

Preparation Activities

Pre-Work

- If you want to provide differentiation for a range of storytelling abilities, give the Storyteller Survey to students so you can gauge the range of readiness levels and interests in your classroom. Introduce it as a low-stakes survey to help you become a better teacher and differentiate instruction. You may decide to keep it anonymous, or, you might adapt the Google form to include a name field. Students should receive straight credit for simply completing it.

Introduction: What's a Storyteller? Am I a Storyteller?

- Ask questions to help students see they are already are storytellers. Expand the definition of what it means to be a storyteller. You can use these questions below, or adapt questions from the Storyteller Survey.
 - Who here considers themselves a "storyteller"?
 - How do you tell stories? Through what mediums?
 - Honor any answers where someone could argue that a story is involved. Example: dancers tell stories with their bodies. Sculptors tell stories with marble or clay.
 - If you gave the Storyteller Survey, share interesting data from the class.
 - Let students know you'll ask them this question more than once throughout the unit and maybe later in the year: How am I a storyteller?
- We're writing stories together. Don't worry—you'll find something to write about. As the American author Flannery O'Connor once said: "The fact is that anybody who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days. If you can't make something out of a little experience, you probably won't be able to make it out of a lot."
 - In other words: *we all have something to say.*

- [Just for fun: she had a chicken that could walk backwards when she was five years old, and she got famous for it. Here's the story and the [video](#).]
- In this unit I'll be challenging you to do a variety of creative writing exercises [throughout the term/every once in a while]. These should be fun, low-stakes activities that help you be a better reader as well, and see the professional authors' techniques in the literature we read. By practicing these techniques, you'll be better able to see them in the literature. You also may discover you're a very creative writer!
 - Today and over the next few days we will identify the So What? and What If? of stories—ones we've read, and ones we may want to write. We'll brainstorm and play with ideas as we discuss why stories fascinate us and why we want to follow them to the end.
 - You may not know this, but we tell stories to survive, and since all of us need to survive, we all have a story to tell. You're going to tell a story that matters to you.
 - By the time we've done all the exercises, we'll have enough material for stories, and each of us will choose from that pile of ideas to write a story. The story can be based on something that happened to you, or it can be completely made up.
- Preview the summative product and the formative performance. The formative performance

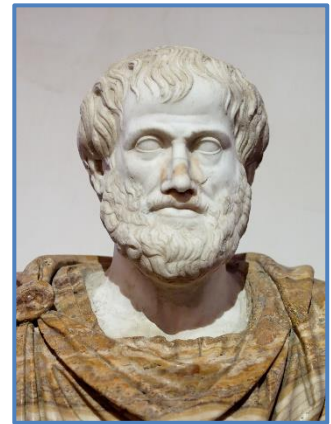
(Optional Warm-Up) Truth and a Lie: Ratchet it Up

You and your students may have played the Two Truths and a Lie game before. This time you will play it with a purpose of creating plausible yet implausible story concepts—ones that an audience would find irresistible. This warm-up game generates a story bank of ideas that all students in class can use for formative and summative assessments. No one can say, “I have no ideas!”

Directions:

Tell each student:

- Write one two-sentence truth and one two-sentence lie on post-it notes or a class bulletin board tool (such as Padlet) or discussion board if you work in an LMS.
- Rules for writing:
 - The truth has to be the whole truth and nothing but, while the lie can be slightly true and slightly not (partial is okay).
 - Each truth and lie must be two sentences long.
 - The second sentence must be a rich detail that makes us think this is true—it should paint a picture in our mind of some aspect of the story.
 - Both the truth and the lie should be both plausible and implausible (believable and unbelievable). Or as Aristotle once said, “probable impossibilities.” You want your situation to be slightly weird but also slightly possible.



- You're going for believable mini-drama. So while your story doesn't have to have a beginning, middle, and end, it needs to have a cause and effect or more than one event.
- Model your truth and lie.
 - Here are some for you to use. (Note, we're not telling you which are truths or lies. That's a bit beside the point of this activity, as will be explained later.)
 - "Immersed and seemingly floating in rich wood and red velvet, I nervously approached the stage, felt the warmth of the lights and the gaze of hundreds of people -- and my performance at Carnegie Hall began. I was only 17 years old."
 - "While attending (as a groundling) a performance of *King Lear* at the Globe in London, Lear exited the front of the stage and knocked me over. The actor graciously paused and helped me to my feet before continuing his forceful exit."
 - "One time, I was traveling in Ghana, and I saw a land snail that was huge, bigger than my fist. Later I ate that land snail in a soup made especially for me, and it was delicious."
 - "One time, when I told my cat not to body slam my bedroom door to demand his food, he actually winked at me."

After students have composed their truth and lie and posted them (anonymously is fine), ask students to turn to a partner or work in triads or quads to answer these questions. Or, you can play a guessing game where you interview a volunteer who wants to put their truth and lie out there for discussion.

- Where are there rich details that make you picture things, "see the scene"?
- Which ones seem most plausible? Why? What follow-up question do you want to ask to confirm plausibility?
- Which ones seem most implausible? What follow-up question do you want to ask to confirm implausibility?
- Which ones make you want to hear more? Why?
- Select one that you think can be developed into a bigger story.

When the activity is over, you can explain to students that what they've done is generate a whole bank of story ideas that have good hooks. Explain to them some rules of the professional writing world:

If you want to be a successful storyteller in the book or film world, agents and editors and filmmakers are often searching for "high concept" stories. Think of *Hunger Games*. Here's the premise: what if in the future, reality shows were life-and-death contests that citizens are forced to compete in? It's plausible in that we have reality shows now, and some of them are ones where people actually punch each other. It's implausible in that we believe (hope!) laws and civil society will stop us before we get to that point. But it's this mix of plausible and implausible that made agents and editors say, "Suzanne Collins, we want your novel!" Just weird enough to make you curious, right?

Celebrate those who shared the best plausibly implausible stories.

Day 1: The So What of Stories: It's All About Survival!Introduction to the topic

- Have you ever written down a song lyric because it was just so, so true?
- Do you have a quote from someone famous on a social media profile because the quote seems very true to your experience, or your life?
- Have you ever heard a character in a movie or TV show say something and you think, *That is so true?*
- Have you ever highlighted something in a book and thought, "Truth?"
- Then you get the definition of **THEME**. You get the **SO WHAT, or THE POINT** of a story.
- [Note to teacher: teachers and people in the field use “concept” and “theme” and “point” interchangeably. A theme might be a full sentence for some, or it might be one word for some. All themes must have a conceptual basis, a root in the abstract concept of something such as “love” or “evil.” In other words, a thematic point of a story won’t mean anything unless it’s grounded in an abstract concept.]

Mini-Lesson

- Give a mini-lesson about story ideas based on some points from author and writing coach Lisa Cron, who teaches in *Story Genius* that stories are about survival and have clear points to be meaningful. They are not mere suspenseful tales full of twists and turns, meant to be pure escape. While escape and entertainment are part of it, they’re actually the biological and evolutionary lure to get us to listen. Use the So What? slides, found [here](#). Depending on your students’ prior knowledge, you may choose to use just a few slides. You might choose to have some mentor texts to reference and suggest in case students can’t think up one.

Think-Pair-Share: Find the Point!

Give students instructions to work in pairs to make sure they can find the point of a story. You can use the slides for guidance and directions for this task.

- Choose a story to discuss that you both know. [Or, you as teacher can provide mentor text suggestions.]
- Identify the point of the story.
- If you can, state it as a PSA (Public Service Announcement).

Independent or Pair Work: Choose Your Truth Bomb

- Explain to students that they will now begin brainstorming for points to a story they will write individually. The story can be fiction, it can be creative nonfiction (memoir), or it can be autofiction (fiction based on an author’s life). It will be an engaging story--an immersive survival guide that readers won’t know is about survival. They will just enjoy the story--but will be socially smarter and savvier and wiser thanks to this story.

- This story will be your truth bomb for the world. It will express ideas important to you. It may be written for just you (and me, the teacher). Or it may be something millions will see. Maybe it's what a college admissions office will see someday. I don't know. You get to ultimately choose your audience. But right now, we don't know. We're experimenting.
- [Note to teachers: if you plan to have students write a full-fledged story/essay/novel by the end of the unit or semester, then share the Duke TIP Creative Writing Story Rubric, found [here](#), sometime during the lesson.]

Note to students that professional authors--whether screenwriters, or songwriters, or rappers, or novelists, or comic book authors--they know that stories begin in many different ways. Three ways that they happen for authors (and there are many more) are reflected in the exercise that students will soon attempt.

- Sometimes a cool idea of "what if this, then this happened?" will start a story for a writer.
- Sometimes it's just one word. "I want to write about justice!" Justice is a one-word concept, but societies spend centuries trying to define it. Justice makes for a great story, because so many people fight for it, in so many ways, and argue about what it means.
- Sometimes it's a point, or a So What. "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." - Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Sometimes it's a lyric or something someone says near or to a writer that sounds like truth and the author is off and running with a story idea...
- Sometimes cool characters and their voices come to mind (authors can literally hear voices in their heads!) but we'll talk about that later. Today we're looking at ideas as the starting point, rather than people, actions, places, or things.

Brainstorming Directions:

- Complete the [What If + So What Brainstorming handout \(you can make a copy of this\)](#) and come up with your three elements for a story. Finish for homework.
- Tomorrow you will either independently or with a partner make a visual PSA of your story idea.

Day 2: The Bingeworthy Show PitchWarmup:

- Ask students to add their one-word Points or concepts to a Google document you make available to them. They don't have to include their name, just copy and paste a word or two into the document.
- Paste the text into a word cloud tool such as [Wordle](#) or [Wordcloud](#). Show the students the word cloud they have generated as a class, and say, "This is what's in your heads and hearts right now--seeds of story ideas. Words that matter to you. Do you see any synonyms--words that mean the same thing? Do you like some of these synonyms better than your word?"
 - By asking the synonym question, you are encouraging students to see the range of possibilities and the need for precision when identifying a concept that matters to them.
- Tell students that authors write for audiences, and therefore, it's not just the personal **So What?** (what matters to the author) but the audience's **So What?** that matters too. In other words, if you want people to buy your book or see your film, you do care what is important to your audience. So, keeping that in mind:
 - Invite someone to choose a word that they did not contribute to the word cloud and explain how a story they like--novel, comic, TV show, film, etc.--deals with that point.
 - Invite someone else to choose a word they did not contribute and say why they think that word is important for people to make art about, especially today.
- Remind students that these are just ideas. We are still experimenting and nothing is set in stone for a story just yet.
- Remind students that the Truth/Lies bulletin board is also a reserve of ideas. In the professional storytelling world, ideas are not copyrighted. If you have a couple words, phrases, or even paragraphs generated toward building a bigger novel, movie, etc., that doesn't mean that it's yours. It's only yours when you've completed a story. Therefore, let's say you see an idea in one of our community spaces posted by a classmate. All ideas are up for grabs, and all ideas will be rendered very differently, depending on the person who brings the idea to fruition. So don't say you don't have any ideas to work with!

Directions for the Bingeworthy Show Pitch

[Note to teacher: Students will use the rubric criteria to evaluate each other's ideas and identify levels. This is a low-stakes activity designed to encourage creative thought and generate several ideas.]

- Tell students: It's important to do exercises--kind of like dress rehearsals, or sports practice--to get the hang of making a good What If? (which is the plot, the what happens of a story) and a good Point, or So What? (which is the purpose of the story, its reason for being). So today we're going to practice by making posters for a new kids' TV show, for kids ages 8-10. You are going to pitch to Netflix or Amazon or Disney an idea for a

series that will be an entertaining story, based on a cool What If? that also has a meaningful Point, or So What?

- So how do you wow the producers at Netflix? Each poster will need a one-sentence pitch that seems both plausible and implausible—in a compelling way. In the business, this is also known as a logline, usually focusing on just the plot, but we’re going to do a So What twist on it. These particular producers need to know that this show is going to be meaningful for kids. They don’t just want humor or drama; they want MEANING. So you are also pitching the Point, or the So What? You will do this through two posters:
 - A What If? Poster that expresses the actions of the plot and characters
 - A So What? Poster that expresses the point of the story.
 - If you want to do both pitches on one poster, and feel you can keep it short—go for it!
- You will have two minutes to make your pitch, and all eyes will be on your posters as you argue to the producers why your story has interesting events/people and why it has a meaningful point.
- Share the Duke TIP Bingeworthy Show Pitch Rubric and see if there are questions. Remind students that the rubric is a way of standing in for the producers. [If time and resources permit, you could create a “board” of producers to hear the pitches, whether using classmates, other classes, adults from the school, or adults from related industries.]
- Share some student models (see the next pages), and ask students to evaluate how well they did per the rubric. What is working? What would you recommend that the student creators change in order to better meet the expectations of the rubric?



A SPLASH OF COLOR

IN A SOCIETY WHERE ONLY ONE YOUNG GIRL WITH A DEEP IMAGINATION CAN SEE COLOR. HER PEERS FAIL TO ACCEPT HER UNTIL A SUPERHERO COMES TO SHOW THAT EVERYONE IS UNIQUE.

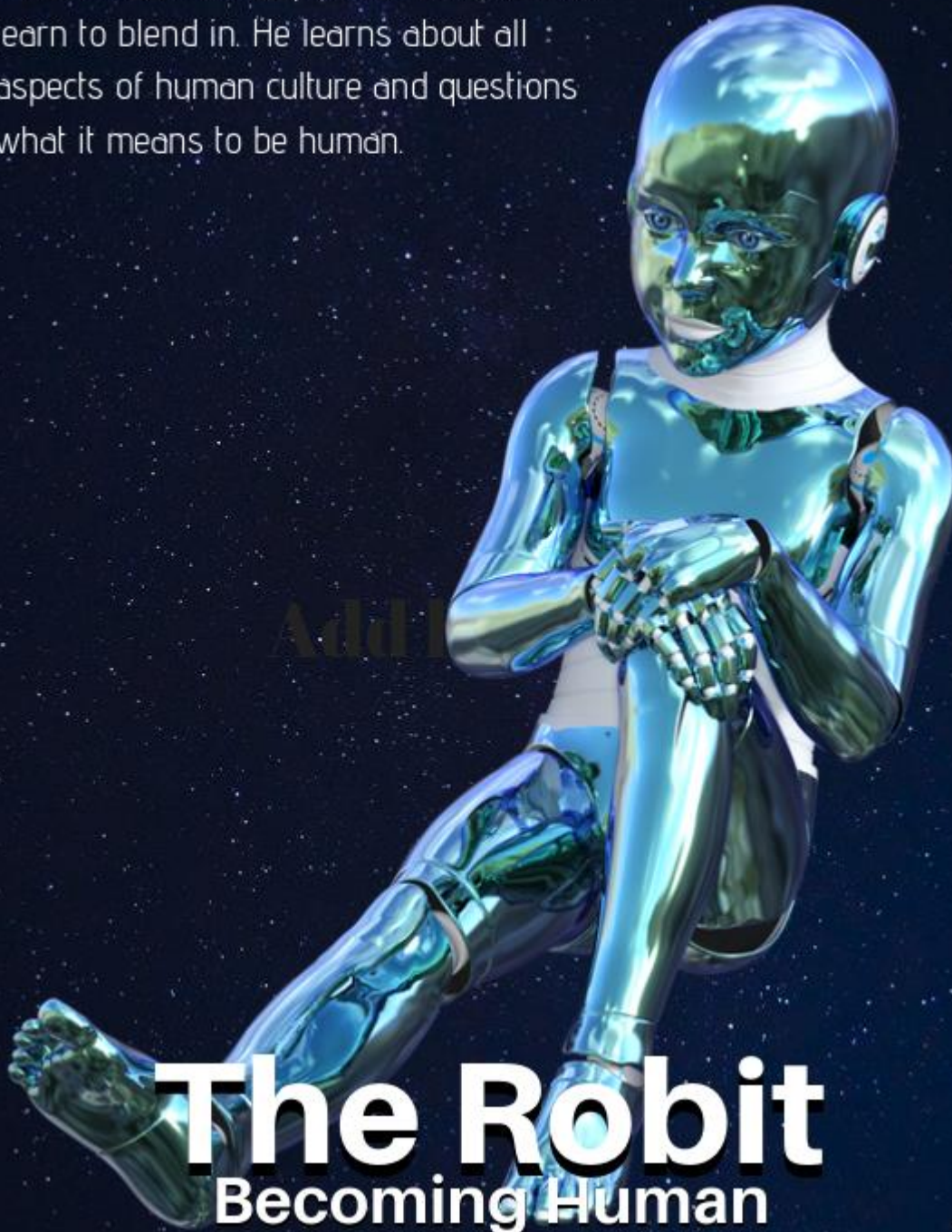


WEDNESDAY | FEB. 14, 2019



Embrace individuality when faced with darkness

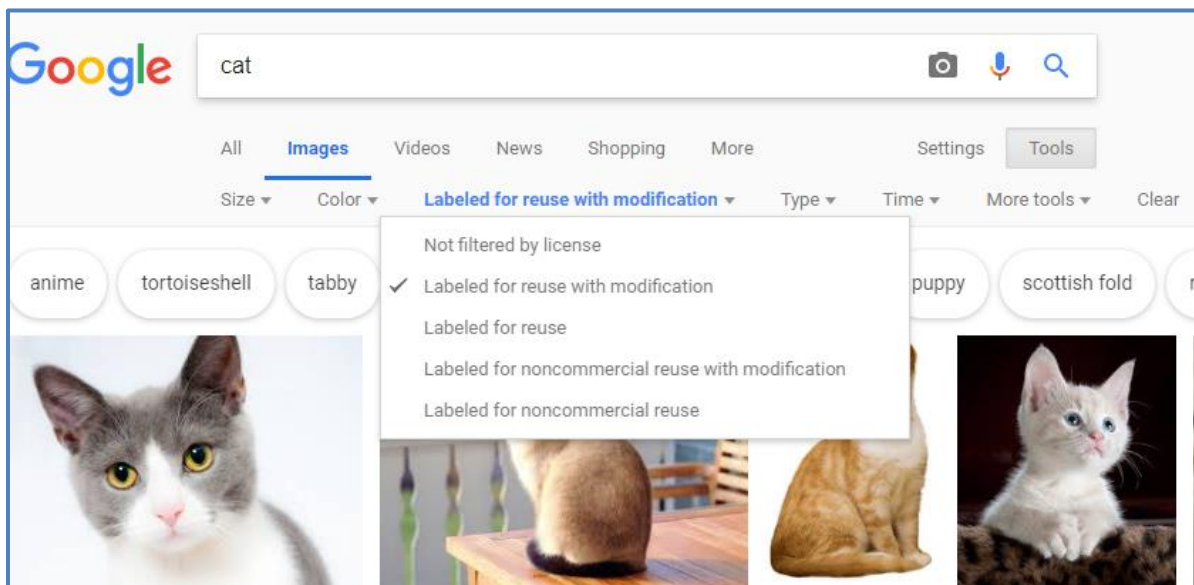
A robot made by scientists to mimic the mind of a child escapes the lab and must learn to blend in. He learns about all aspects of human culture and questions what it means to be human.



The Robit

Becoming Human

- Share the logline and trailer for a small feature film made by the Duke Talent Identification Program (which serves kids ages 9 and up) that was based on this What If? Premise. It’s part of a creative writing curriculum.
 - WHAT IF? *What if the gods of storytelling cursed a group of characters--some fictional, some historical--and made them have to work together and solve conflicts in various centuries in order to get back home?*
 - The So What?, or Point, is twofold:
 - *If you want to be an author, you need to take risks and solve conflicts.*
 - *When people are selfless and work together, problems are solved.*
 - Show the students the trailer [here](#).
 - [Optional] Use other videos as necessary to explain the plot from the Introduction lesson in the *Creative Writing: Adventures Through Time* curriculum available at the TIP Curriculum Vault, or at YouTube [here](#).
 - [Optional] Design and share your two pitch posters, modeling for students.
- Share the What’s a Logline slideshow, found [here](#) (this can be used as homework prior, it can be a resource to consult while working, or it can be a mini-lesson.)
- Remind students as they work to be sure to honor image copyright. They can use copyright-free images from Google Images. Keep in mind that sites like Pixabay may have inappropriate images, as does VisualHunt.com.
 - Use filtered Google search. Type in a search term (example: cat)
 - Go to Tools
 - Make a selection at Usage rights→ consider all reuse options except first one, “not filtered by license.” See image below.



Day 3: Pitching and Sharing

[Note to teacher: you may wish to have students upload their poster files to a gallery space and have a “gallery walk” where students review each submission]

- Post-Gallery Walk Discussion. After students take a minute per partnership to present, ask the class to critique by celebration only. Much like the real world of producing (films and TV) and publishing (novels, short stories, graphic novels), authors and screenwriters don’t hear a reason for the no. They get a yes with reasons the producers or publishers want the story. If your story isn’t as strong, then you get a polite no, with no reason given. So, let’s talk about the why you would give a yes.
- As you critique, say, “I vote yes to produce this TV show idea because...” Here are some compliment stems to start the feedback:
 - **Interest and Appeal:**
 - It’s intriguing because...
 - Kids today want.....
 - **Logline Power:** The conflict, stakes, and irony are apparent.
 - The conflict is good because...
 - The stakes are high because...
 - The emotional intrigue is apparent in...
 - The irony is apparent in...
 - **Relevance and Meaning:** The Point, or the So What?, is a relevant and meaningful message for kids today.
 - The point is relevant and meaningful because...
 - If time, we’ll nominate Best Design...

More Writing Activities

Literary adaptation:

- Have students do the Netflix pitch posters for stories/novels you’ve read, and make them accessible for a modern-day audience. (*Anne of Green Gables* has been adapted for Netflix, for example. How would you adapt *1984* or *Heart of Darkness* for a modern-audience? What’s the What If? and what’s the So What?).
 - Submit a poster for a summative assessment (worth a few points)
 - Then write a brief paragraph that is the thesis statement for a potential essay. It doesn’t need to be elegant or lengthy. It should simply state both the What If and the So What.
 - Example: *1984* is a dystopian novel set in the year 1984 where the world is at war, the government surveils everyone, and propaganda is constant. [**What If?**] Author George Orwell’s main goal was to warn of the serious danger totalitarianism poses to society: the terrifying degree of power and control a totalitarian regime can acquire and maintain. [**So What?**]

More Ideation

On a Padlet or bulletin board you create, shared by the whole class, have students choose to contribute to the What If? column or to the So What? column. They need to populate in a straight column.

- Once each student has contributed, ask students to get into triads or quads and they will have five minutes to make one What If? connect to one So What?
- This exercise helps students practice fluency and flexibility.
- Discuss how important it is (like in sports) to “stay loose” and flexible, to be nonjudgmental of the early ideas. Those professional authors who are too hard on themselves really struggle with perfectionism. Sometimes you can’t force a story premise and you have to try multiple times. I will be sharing some of my experiences with this as an author.

Query Letter

Write a query letter for the story you plan to write. Pay special attention to your opening paragraph, which is the Hook section—sharing the What If? and the So What?

- Find the Duke TIP Query Letter Guidebook [here](#).
- Find more resources for writing a good query, and a rubric, [here](#).

Flash Fiction

Write a scene that’s too plausible (750 words or fewer), then transform the scene to make it implausible, and then a Goldilocks scene—one that blends plausibility and implausibility.

Literary Analysis Writing

- Write a literary analysis essay about plausibility and implausibility of a professional author’s plot (using a mentor text). Explain why the story remains compelling.
- Write an analysis essay about plausibility and implausibility of a favorite story (movie, book, game, etc.). Explain why the story remains compelling.

Common Core Standards Correlation:

- CCSS, 7th Grade
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.3
 - Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.3.A
 - Engage and orient the reader by establishing a context and point of view and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally and logically.
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.4
 - Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.5
- With some guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on how well purpose and audience have been addressed.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.6
- Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and link to and cite sources as well as to interact and collaborate with others, including linking to and citing sources.
- CCSS, 12th Grade
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3
 - Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3.A
 - Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation and its significance, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events.
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3.B
 - Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3.C
 - Use a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole and build toward a particular tone and outcome (e.g., a sense of mystery, suspense, growth, or resolution).