



# Personification: A Word Walks In

<b>TIME:</b> about 45 minutes		<b>GRADE LEVEL:</b> 4 and up																		
<p><b>MATERIALS:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slides 1–3*</li> <li>• Personification GO Sheet*</li> <li>• Notebooks, computers, or tablets</li> </ul> <p>*Available online at <a href="http://scholastic.com/ThrivingWriterResources">scholastic.com/ThrivingWriterResources</a></p>																				
<p><b>WHY TEACH THIS?</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To help students see that personification is central to understanding and using figurative language.</li> <li>2. To show students how to personify a feeling or abstract noun, dressing it up and examining how it looks, moves, and sounds.</li> </ol>																				
<p><b>CONTENT AREA CONNECTIONS:</b> ELA initially, but you may see other connections as you personify content area terms.</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Persuasive</th> <th>Descriptive</th> <th>Narrative</th> <th>Procedural</th> <th>Research</th> <th>Vocabulary</th> <th>Figurative Language</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td></td> <td>X</td> <td>X</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td>X</td> <td>X</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>							Persuasive	Descriptive	Narrative	Procedural	Research	Vocabulary	Figurative Language		X	X			X	X
Persuasive	Descriptive	Narrative	Procedural	Research	Vocabulary	Figurative Language														
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### STEPH REFLECTS ON FRAMEWORK 5

As they say, time can fly—it can drag its feet, tap its fingers, or it might even run away. Don't let it run away before you steal a few minutes to teach personification, a very important aspect of writing. In general, helping children learn to use figurative language in their writing also enhances their comprehension of reading as it brings language to life, adding depth, vitality, and meaning to both reading and writing.

If it walks like frustration or sings like joy, then it's personification.

This lesson is designed to encourage students to attach physical characteristics to otherwise intangible emotional states by collecting and citing evidence rather than subjective synonyms. We demonstrate *show, don't tell* by asking students to use objective evidence to tell us *how* (*show* minus the *s*) a particular emotion acts within a well-structured sequence. This way we avoid lines like "I knew he was angry because he had a mad face," or "She was the bravest and stood up fearlessly."

Personification is possibly the most ubiquitous form of figurative language. Words and phrases that animate our descriptions of objects and feelings with human traits help our readers and listeners manufacture a picture of what we are trying to communicate. Time can fly, it can drag its feet, tap its fingers, or it might even run away. That neon sign might be screaming for attention while a bucolic log cabin hides among the pines. Personifying a word requires that the writers cozy up to that word, familiarizing themselves with the nuances of its meaning.

By employing well-grounded personification in their own writing, students will be better able to identify and understand its use in the text they read.

**Sara:** Personification makes words cartwheel and skip.

**Michael:** Hopefully in language that doesn't trip over itself.

## 1. Introduce the Framework

Project Slide 1, read it aloud, and quickly review the concept of personification: giving human characteristics to something that is not human.

**Personification:  
A Word Walks In**

**What are we going to learn today?**

1. We are going to learn about the personification of a word.
2. We will discuss how to show and not tell.
3. We will write using personification.

Slide 1

## 2. Discuss Mentor Text

- Project Slide 2, read it aloud, and clarify any unknown words. Ask students to join you in a second read-aloud, and have fun!
- Ask: *Can Sorry really sit next to you at dinner? Can it trail after you?* This is personification in action, and it is a tool of writers of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and other types of text.
- Explain that the author could have personified the word *sorry* by simply writing, *Sorry was really annoying* or *Sorry was bugging me*, but instead she explained how *Sorry* was a pest by describing the annoying actions *Sorry* took. This is what is meant by *Show, don't tell*.

**Sorry**  
follows like my shadow,  
fastened at the heels.  
It trails me to my room  
and sits with me at meals.  
It nags me in my dreams  
when I have gone to bed,  
That sorry pest hangs on  
until it's finally said.

Sara Holbrook

Slide 2

**Shy**  
*Jennifer*  
Shy shuffles her feet,  
stares at ground,  
nibbling at her bottom lip.  
A moth  
of washed out grey  
among a crowd of brightly colored butterflies.  
She was not  
standing on stage  
applauded  
by millions of spectators.  
Instead  
Shy cowers,  
makes herself  
as small as possible,  
and slips  
unnoticed  
through the crowd  
without a word.

Version 2 of sixth grader Jennifer's personification of the word *shy*. For Version 3, we would help her identify some tense issues and encourage her to experiment by rearranging lines and seeing where she could take this creatively.

## A WORD ABOUT GENDER SENSITIVITY

In the Version 1 co-construct, we refer to the word we are personifying as *he* or *she*. This is just for simplicity's sake, and in the Version 2 co-construct, you and/or students may wish to edit those pronouns out.

We want to work with a singular pronoun for clarity, so *them* doesn't work, and neither does using *it* to describe human qualities. So, in Version 1, we might describe *Flamboyant* as a *she*, as in *She walked in wearing a tutu and a neon pink boa*. By Version 2, we might drop the pronoun altogether: *Flamboyant bounced in wearing a tutu and a neon pink boa*, or change it altogether, giving *Flamboyant* a bright red beard and a top hat. This is the beauty of Version 1; it is infinitely changeable.

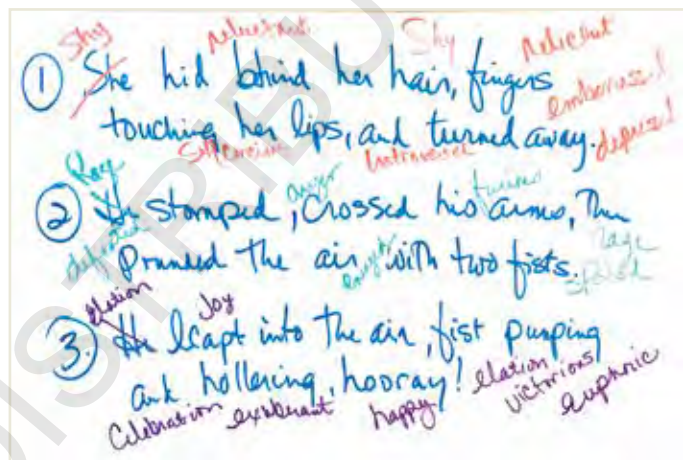
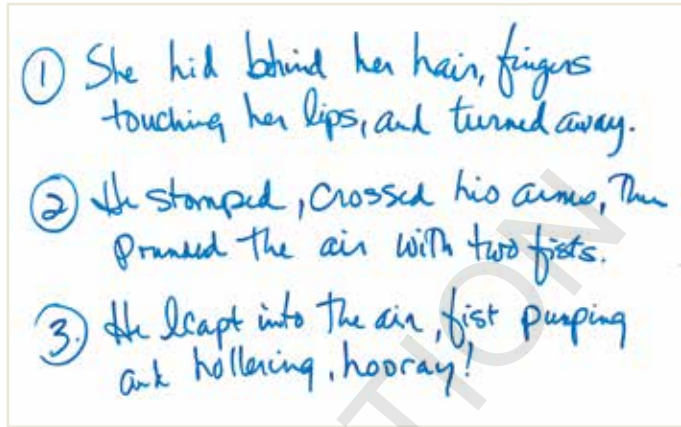
All emotions and states of being are, of course, gender neutral. In our co-constructing, we like to challenge gender stereotypes. *Flirty* is not always female and *Powerful* is not always male. We urge you to embrace this thinking as you co-construct your Version 1 with the class, but choose either *he* or *she* to start. At Version 2 and beyond, let writers know that gender is not essential to personification and gender-specific pronouns may be dropped entirely.

### 3. Build Background Knowledge

How personification works: Before we ask students to describe an abstract noun or a feeling using actions, we want to familiarize them with how actions lead us as readers to infer meaning. The following warm-up exercise helps them differentiate between identifying physical evidence and interpretation or inference. We don't care why *Shocked* is grabbing his hair with his mouth agape, we simply want to describe what we see and leave it to our reader to infer.

- Write three basic emotions or states of being on slips of paper, such as *happy, sad, angry, sleepy, excited, scared*.
- Invite three enthusiastic volunteers to the front of the class, hand each one a slip of paper, and ask him or her, one at a time, to act out the emotion or state of being physically, using no words or cliché movements, such as drawing hearts in the air for "in love."
- As each student performs, ask the class members what they are seeing. Most likely they will initially guess the emotion being acted out: *sad, depressed, or unhappy*. If that's the case, push them to articulate the actions that led them to identify that emotion. In other words, have them describe motions, not emotions, evidence rather than interpretation. Volunteers may have to perform their emotion multiple times.
- Allow volunteers to return to their seats after their action has been described and you have recorded class members' responses on the board. Tip: Overacting pays off. Applaud the performers!

- Explain that these are images—not visual images like photos, but word images a reader might encounter in a story.
- Consider your three images and read the first one aloud. Ask: *If you saw this as a character description in a story, what would you infer the character was feeling?* Jot down four or five suggestions from students. If you’re working on a projection system, write the images in one color and the emotions in another. (See right.)
- Push beyond everyday vocabulary words, such as *happy*, *angry*, and *sad*. Go for those “five-dollar” words, such as *exuberant*, *reticent*, and *infuriated*.
- To create personification, replace pronouns with emotions and states of being. (*Shy* hid behind her hair. *Rage* stomped. *Elation* leapt.)



#### 4. Co-construct Version 1

- Pick an emotion or state-of-being word to write about as a group. We like to take three suggestions from the class and then vote on the final word. Assure students whose nomination did not get chosen that they can work with that word when they write on their own.
- Write the word at the top of your co-construct space.
- Remind students to describe *how* the emotion manifests itself. In other words, they should describe the actions of the emotion, and not rename the emotion. *Embarrassed* is not acting *shamed*, for instance.
- Title your text “Version 1” and build the text one line at a time.
- Ask students to come up with a line describing an action the emotion might take. Prompt them by asking a question such as, *How might it enter the room?* Solicit several suggestions and meld them into a line of text.

*Embarrassed: He walked in slowly, head down.*

- From there, consider following this line-by-line procedure:



**Line 1: Action:** Ask students to describe external actions a word such as *embarrassed* might take, or actions we might see (we are not mind readers). For example, *Embarrassed hides his face, sweats profusely.* (*Embarrassed was thinking about what he'd done* is mind reading. *Embarrassed was hiding in his hoodie* is an action.)



This co-constructed text is from Libbie Royko's seventh-grade class in Eastlake, Ohio.

**Line 2: Action:** Ask: *What happens next? What's another action that this word may take?* (His hands were fidgeting.)

**Line 3: Animal:** Ask: *If you were to compare this word to an animal, which would it be?* Have students turn and talk and then take a few suggestions, picking one and adding it to the list of descriptors. (He looked like a raccoon hiding in the sewer.) Ask: *Under what circumstance is the animal behaving this way?* Note: Is that bear you are referencing shuffling out of a cave after hibernating or is it standing on its hind legs clawing the air? Be specific and offer some context to the animal comparison.

**Line 4: Color:** Bring a little color into the fourth line—color to describe clothing, mood, or an outside force. *His face was as red as a chili pepper.* From gray skies to yellow flowers, color adds tone to any text.

**Line 5: Opposite Action:** What is your word definitely *not* doing? (He was not talking or laughing with friends.) Using contrast this way helps to clarify your message.

**Line 6: Action:** Add one more action, starting with a transition word such as *rather* or *instead*. (Instead, he disappeared into his own bubble.)

Read aloud your Version 1 with the class and stand tall. Applause! Great Version 1.

## 5. Hand Out the GO Sheet

## 6. Have Students Write Their Version 1

- Ask students to pair up with a writing partner or work solo. Have each pair or individual student select one of the remaining emotions or states of being on the board, or come up with their own, as long as it fits the criteria. Have them write that word at the top of their GO Sheets.

Personification: A Word Walks In	
Emotion or State of Being:	_____
Action:	_____
	_____
Action:	_____
	_____
Animal:	_____
Color:	_____
Not do:	_____
	_____
Action:	_____
	_____

Personification GO Sheet

- Ask students to stand up and act out their word. Encourage them to go over the top and exaggerate movements. Urge them to be conscious of what they are doing with their hands, feet, shoulders, and faces. Doing so will inform their writing.
- Tell students to sit and base their first line on the GO Sheet on one of the actions they just performed. Walk them through the five remaining prompts, one at a time.

**Action:** Add at least one more action. Think about eyes, shoulders, feet.

**Animal:** Encourage students to think beyond clichés. *Brave* doesn't have to be a lion; it can be a chihuahua. Remind them of birds and insects—mean like a scorpion perhaps, or annoying like a mosquito.

**Color:** Dress the word up in a pink tutu or a black cape. Ask if the word might be wearing mismatched red and blue socks, or is the word standing out in the room like an orange traffic cone?

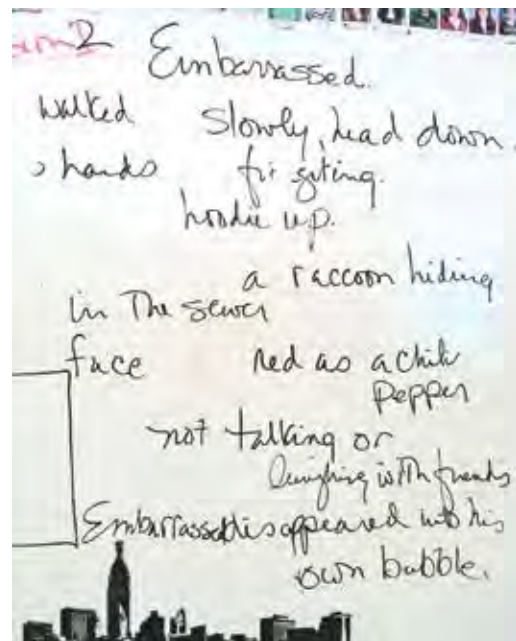
**Not do:** *Shy* wouldn't be standing on a chair belting out a song, and *Evil* is not passing out hugs. Ask: *What would your word definitely not do?*

**Action:** Begin this line with *Instead* or *Rather*, building a comparison with the previous prompt. *Shy* was not standing on a chair belting out a song; instead she hid under her desk. Again, students are looking to identify actions, not motivations.

- Remind students to focus on actions, not motivations, thoughts, or feelings—what their words did, not what they were thinking. No mind reading.
- If they get stuck on a particular prompt (animal and color can be tricky at times), encourage peer discussion and/or throw the challenge out to the whole class for ideas, so students see writing as a cooperative effort.
- Once students have completed their six-sentence texts, invite them to read aloud all at once, and then read aloud to a partner.

### 7. Co-construct Version 2

- Return to your co-constructed Version 1 and look for words that can be eliminated or phrases that can be tightened, beginning with the first line.
- Strengthen verbs.
- For the animal line, consider turning a simile into a metaphor, or a metaphor into a simile. Which works better?
- Don't finish your Version 2 before students begin their own. We usually continue working as students are writing, to model the process.



This is Version 2, in which students have eliminated all but, in their opinion, power words.

## 8. Have Students Write Their Version 2

- Suggest students start their Version 2 by rearranging the lines and picking their strongest line to be used for the lead. Give them a “word elimination” goal, such as removing at least six words from their Version 1.
- Confer with and offer assistance to writers who can use it.
- Encourage subsequent versions. You might ask students to evolve their work into a character description or the opening paragraph to a story. See Slide 3 in which we have turned “Embarrassed” into a short piece of descriptive prose.



Slide 3

## 9. Share!

- Ask students to share their work with a student other than their writing partner.
- Ask a few volunteers to share their work with the whole class. Urge them to read with expression! Their body language and the tone of their voices should reflect the personified word. *Evil* should not sound the same as, say, *Jubilant*.

### Lesson Extension Ideas

- Consider having students continue to revise their pieces onward, to Versions 3, 4, 5, and so on, clarifying images and honing their visual language. They may add more sensory perceptions or even a line or two of dialogue. In this way they will experience what it means to grow a simple piece of text into a more complex work.
- After substituting the emotion with someone or something concrete, have them use Version 2 text as an opening paragraph or character description, and, from there, continue writing a longer piece.

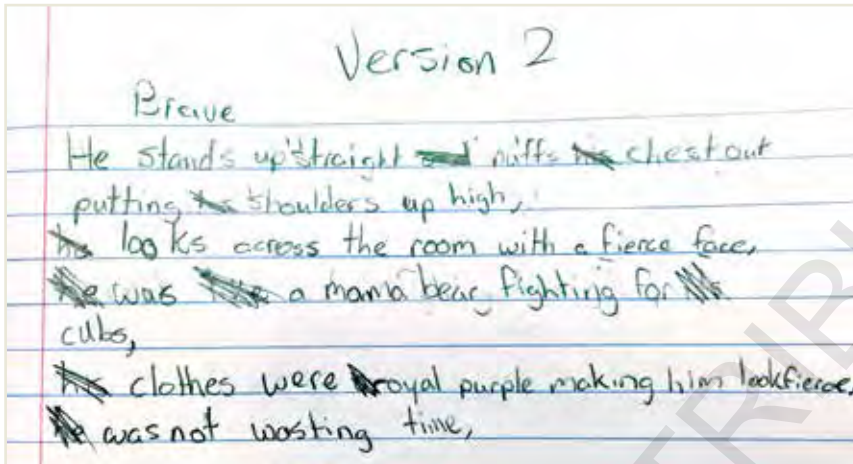
### Content Area Extension Idea

Use this framework to personify important terms in any discipline (e.g., How would *evolution* behave? What would *democracy* do in a lunchroom? What about an *electron*?)

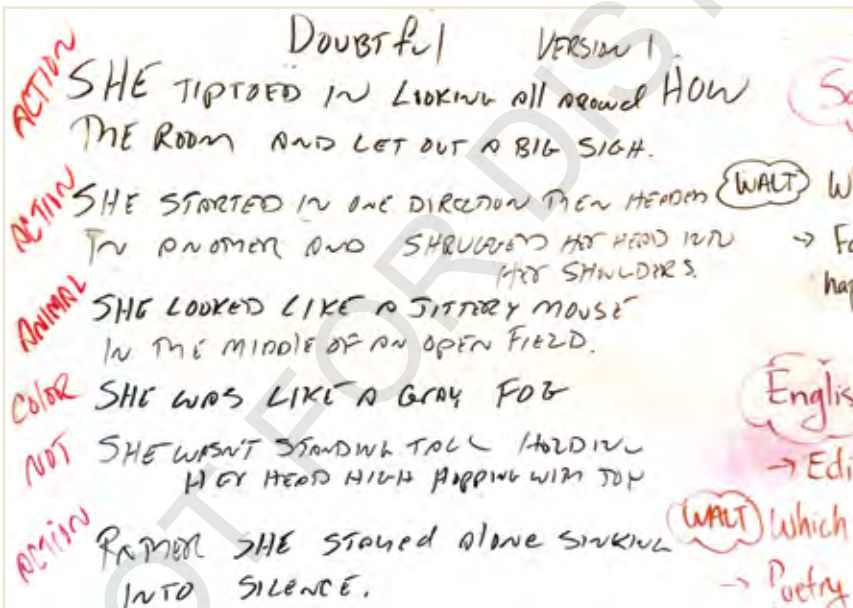


### Sample Stages

These personification texts move out and move on, compressing into poetry or morphing into character descriptions or story starters. The framework can even be used to personify content area words, such as *chemical elements*, or social studies words, such as *revolution*. In these samples, students were working with abstract nouns.



In this sample Version 2, a fifth grader is doing a great job eliminating unnecessary words to tighten his text. For Version 3, we would coach him to keep his gender references consistent (he can't be a mama bear, for instance), or eliminate the pronouns altogether by crafting a metaphor. Work in progress!



This is a sample co-construct written with a fourth-grade class in Frederick, Maryland. *Doubtful* was a word taken from their vocabulary list for that week. The students went on to write definitions of other words on the list.

## Personification: Assessment Checkpoint

SKILL	3	2	1
<b>Careful Reading</b>	Demonstrates an understanding of how to use actions to define an emotion in visual language.	Partially demonstrates an understanding of how to use actions to define an emotion in visual language. May confuse more nuanced references.	Does not yet demonstrate an understanding of how to use actions to define an emotion in visual language. Cannot see past literal meaning of text.
<b>Structure and Organization</b>	Demonstrates the ability to recognize and re-create a writing structure and to revise for concision and order.	Partially demonstrates the ability to recognize and re-create a writing structure. May not be able to complete one or two of the sequential steps or instructions.	Does not yet demonstrate the ability to recognize and re-create a writing structure. Is unable to follow most of the sequence and instructions.
<b>Grammar Conventions</b>	Demonstrates an understanding of how to maintain third person throughout the piece. Maintains subject-verb agreement throughout.	Partially demonstrates an understanding of how to maintain third person throughout the piece. Maintains subject-verb agreement most of the time.	Does not yet demonstrate the ability to maintain third person throughout the piece. Confuses subject-verb agreement throughout.
<b>Connotative Word Meaning</b>	Demonstrates an understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings when using personification.	Occasionally demonstrates an understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings when using personification. May have trouble articulating responses to one or two of the writing prompts.	Does not yet demonstrate an understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings when using personification. Cannot articulate responses to any of the writing prompts.
<b>Speaking Skills</b>	Is willing to share aloud and consistently demonstrates effective presentation skills using good voice projection, inflection, pacing, eye contact, and stance.	Is often willing to share and partially demonstrates effective presentation skills using good voice projection, inflection, pacing, eye contact, and stance.	Is not yet willing to share and/or does not demonstrate effective presentation skills using good voice projection, inflection, pacing, eye contact, and stance.
<b>Listening Skills</b>	Actively participates in discussions about other students' work and is tuned in to student presentations.	Occasionally participates in discussions about other students' work and is tuned in to student presentations.	Does not participate in discussions about other students' work and is not yet tuned in to student presentations.