

Stepping Into Character

Six Steps to Success for Presenting First Person Interpretations!

1. Which characters are you drawn towards and why? Who fits like a glove?

The first and most important step is to find a character that fits. Start with a personality that makes it easy for you to step into their shoes. Look for places where your life overlaps with theirs. The more real it is for you the more real it is for the audience.

2. Start with primary source documents and then read for context.

Look for autobiographies, letters and diaries. The goal is to get a glimpse of their world through their words, their ideas, and their use of language, “from the horse’s mouth.” A children’s picture book or grade school biography is a great starting point, because this author has done some of your homework in both boiling down the important points AND providing a solid bibliography of recommended books at the back. As you read, follow up on threads that intrigue you, look for exemplary stories, pivotal moments in the character’s life that are both ‘a good story’ and give us insight into how they worked. Read what other scholars have written and read contextual history so you can speak intelligently about this person within his or her historical frame. A rule of thumb: the script should be 70% their words, 100% their beliefs.

3. Create a gripping story line: start with a pivotal moment in their career OR create a timeline of their life OR engage the audience in a public debate OR recreate a spiritual crisis...

There are many ways to approach this and when you are well read on the character the outline will suggest itself. Examples include: An old woman looking back on her life; a young man on the verge of some great adventure; a father explaining his life and how he works to a son who is following in his footsteps; a recreated press conference in which you anticipate answers from the press and allow the audience to actually ask questions near the end; or ... whatever frame you create it needs to include a logical beginning, middle, and end, dynamic stories, and a chance for the audience to be engaged with the material. Period music is also a plus.

4. Keep costume and props simple, but pay attention to detail.

Sometimes all you need is a hat, a bonnet, an apron or a pair of wire rim glasses. Let the story convey authenticity, but make sure your shoes fit the bill! Choose props that are more than stage clutter, they should help tell the story. A Tool, A Flag, A Map, A Deer Skin, or A Book of Poetry!

5. See every show as a rehearsal.

Once you have a solid understanding of the character, a clear outline of where you are going and how to get there, the right shoes and props, see every time you perform as a chance to explore the character *and* adapt the program to fit the audience. Be conscious of how you can use each performance as a chance to improve each elements of the program, working one piece at a time. Take risks to keep it fresh.

6. How can you turn inspiration into income?

Marketing is the key to success. Arts Councils, Humanities Councils, Chautauqua, and libraries are just starting points. Look for museum programs, fine arts series, and Google the character. If there are schools that bear his or her name, a mailing is in order. Create a full color brochure and pound the pavement in an effort to create work, don’t just wait for it to come to you.



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STEPPING INTO CHARACTER WORKSHEET: Your Name _____

Name of Your Character: _____

Birth Date: _____ Death Date: _____

2 Books: _____

2 Web Sites: _____

3 - 5 INTERESTING FACTS:

COSTUME IDEAS:

OPENING HOOK or FRAME: (Why are we here? Why should we care?)

ONE to THREE KEY STORIES: (Beginning, Middle, End)

