

# Lisa Bullard ... Writing Road Trip

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## Mystery Ingredients

### A “Quick Write” Warm-up Activity

You can get students “jump-started” on drafting a story by having them mix together three key ingredients:

- Character: a person or creature in a story
- Setting: the place/time of a story
- Conflict: the problem(s) the character(s) face

In advance, I create three sets of color-coded cards: one color for different character possibilities, one color for setting, one color for conflict. For example, each character card will have one possible character written on it—something like “pirate” or “dog.”

Then I have one student choose a random character card, one choose a random setting card, and another choose a random conflict card (younger kids especially enjoy pulling them out of grab bags, but even older kids like the surprise of learning the mystery ingredients). Then the students announce the selections to the class, and everyone uses those three choices as the starting point for their individual stories.

The first time we’re going to do this quick write, I make sure that students understand the definitions for the basic story ingredients. Then I explain to them that the point of a quick write is to get their imaginations—and their pencils—moving freely. It’s like stretching your muscles before running a race. The story they produce doesn’t have to be a great story. They likely won’t have time to write all the way to an ending. They don’t have to worry about spelling everything correctly. The goal is to use all three ingredients, and to mix them together and start a story as quickly as they can. Sometimes the mix of ingredients will be odd—but that’s part of the fun!

I give them a few minutes to write (it varies by age and ability, but generally my goal is that most students fill about half a sheet of paper). When necessary, I reinforce the idea that the goal is to keep writing without “over-thinking.”

I ask for volunteers to share at the end—it’s always fun for everyone to see how different the stories can be, despite the fact that everyone started with the same three basic ingredients. I point out things that I admire about these shared student stories, but I don’t critique them in any way (other than to correct for occasional inappropriateness)—a critique defeats one of the purpose of the exercise, which is to get students to write a first draft without perfectionism hindering their creativity.

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## Mystery Ingredients (cont'd)

Even though ingredients are sometimes repeated when we do the activity again on another day, usually the combination of ingredients is new. If you want to continue the exercise all year long and need fresh ingredients, you can ask three different kids each day to be the “story starters” and think up story ingredients for the whole class to use. But for now, here are some ideas to help you create a set of cards for yourself:

### Characters

Pirate  
Dolphin  
Ghost  
Alien  
Twins  
Dog  
Superhero  
Eagle  
Famous Person  
The student is the character in the story

### Settings

Ancient Egypt  
The Bottom of the Ocean  
Australia  
Disney World  
Hawaii  
Outer Space  
The Old, Wild West  
The North Pole  
The Amazon Rainforest  
The school cafeteria

### Conflicts

An alien spaceship has crashed nearby.  
Something/someone has been shrunk in the incredible shrinking machine.  
Your character wants to be on “American Idol”  
Your character doesn’t have any friends.  
Your character is being picked on by a bully.  
Your character has run away from home.  
Your character has had a big fight with somebody.  
Your character has been sent somewhere in a time machine.  
Your character has been kidnapped.  
Your character has turned invisible.