

Building Momentum in Writing Instruction Through the Use of Mentor Texts

Gaye Hubble, Ed.D.
Tarleton State University, TX

Holly Lamb, Ph.D.
Tarleton State University, TX

Abstract

Writing instruction has received a lot of attention over the last decade. High stakes testing has raised awareness of process writing at all levels, from Kindergarten through college. We see the use of mentor texts in writing instruction as a way to build momentum, both in improving writing and in students' understanding of author's craft. We present a rationale for using mentor texts, sample lessons using mentor texts, and a list of mentor texts for the traits of writing.

This work was presented at the 2013 TALE Conference as the session, *Writing like a Writer: Mentor Texts to Develop Voice and Other Writing Skills*.

How do we learn to do things? We want to learn, so we watch someone else who knows how, a mentor, and we copy them. Imitation may be the highest form of flattery, but it is also an excellent way to learn; any younger sibling knows this truth. Any brand new teacher knows how valuable a seasoned colleague can be to follow and emulate. It is a kind of short term, informal apprenticeship. We create this kind of apprenticeship in many aspects of the writing process. Students share ideas for writing topics, spring boarding from the ideas of others. During revising conferences, students learn things such as sentence structure and word choice from their peers. In the course of the writing process, we can create this kind of “learning from others” through the use of mentor texts. Lynne Dorfman, in an interview on NWP Radio (National Writing Project on Blog Talk Radio), gave this definition of mentor texts:

Mentor texts are pieces of literature that you—both teacher and student—can return to and reread for many different purposes. They are texts to be studied and imitated...Mentor texts help students to take risks and be different writers tomorrow than they are today. It helps them to try

out new strategies and formats. They should be basically books that students can relate to and can even read independently or with some support. And of course, a mentor text doesn't have to be in the form of a book—a mentor text might be a poem, a newspaper article, song lyrics, comic strips, manuals, essays, almost anything.

The use of mentor texts (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2007, 2009), to be enjoyed, studied, dissected, and used as templates and models, is a way to encourage students to learn from those who know how.

There are numerous sources for suggestions of books to use and how to use them. Blogs are available that are updated frequently by the people using the materials (see References). Gallagher (2014) shared how she has her students imitate model texts before they write, as they write, and as they revise. Scholastic has book lists for the traits of writing. In this article, we have included a list based on the 6 Traits of Writing, as well as some lesson ideas.

Teaching Voice

To illustrate the use of a mentor text, consider the teaching of voice. When students dissect how authors portray voice in their writing, they can then create it. The poems for two voices by Paul Fleischman are a powerful place to start. *I Am Phoenix* (1985) and *Joyful Noise* (1988) are poems meant to be read aloud with another person, each reader portraying a particular character.

A lesson using these poems might follow these steps: 1) Introduce the books, reading aloud a poem with another reader, modeling how the poems are structured. Have the students tell what they know about the characters in the poem by how they “speak.” 2) Display another poem and have students, in pairs, read it with their partner. Discuss how each of the characters might sound, what would be their tone, accent, volume, etc. Why do they think that? What hints does the poet give to the readers about the character? 3) Students read and discuss two or three more poems, finding the voice in each one. 4) Students, with their partners, write a poem for two voices, focusing on what voices their reader will “hear.”

Teaching Story Structure

Aunt Isabel Tells a Good One by Kate Duke (1992) is a delightful tale of the telling of a bedtime story. The storyteller, Aunt Isabel, verbally labels the parts of the story, such as the who, the where, the problem, etc. The story could be read aloud simply for the pleasurable experience, then dissected. Students could contribute to a chart labeling the story parts, and then use a similar blank chart to brainstorm their own stories. If used with older students, the chart could be expanded to include how Duke elaborates the basic structures.

Teaching Word Choice and Elaboration

Two books to use for word choice are *Fancy Nancy* by O'Connor (2006) and *Owl Moon* by Yolen (1987). The *Fancy Nancy* series of books is about a girl who wants to “fancy up” everything. This leads to numerous instances of using out-of-the-ordinary adjectives and synonyms. Bulletin boards or charts of these word and terms would be a great start for students to start looking for others to add to the charts. When holding writing conferences with students, let them find two or three places in their writing where they could “fancy it up.”

Owl Moon is a beautiful story, told in poetic form. The language is evocative and filled with similes and metaphors. All the senses are appealed to in this simple story. After reading the story aloud and discussing how it makes the students feel, the class could list the similes and metaphors used by Yolen. In addition, a graphic organizer could be filled with how the author included the senses of sight, sound, feel, and taste. As a class, choose an event or experience you have shared. Conduct a class writing activity which uses similes, metaphors, and appeals to the senses. Have students apply the same elaboration to their own writing.

Teaching Ideas (Topics)

“I don’t know what to write about” is a common lament in the writing class. Students often do not see the value in a simple event because it does not seem worthy of being the focus of their writing. Mentor texts can demonstrate the wide variety of topics that authors write about.

Trying to talk your parents into something is a common childhood event. Judith Viorst's *Earrings* is the story of one such attempt by a child who wants pierced ears. Cataloging the arguments made in the story gives a structure that students could emulate, and can segue into teaching persuasive writing.

Favorite poems and nursery rhymes are great jumping off points for more elaborated writing. The idea is already there to expand on; teaching students that kernel ideas really are that, a kernel to “pop” into a story. Janet Stevens and Susan Stevens Crummel's *And the Dish Ran Away with the Spoon* can help students see the difference between a simple idea that they can start with and turning that idea into a complete story.

Teaching Sentence Fluency

Sentence fluency is best taught by examples. Students who read frequently for pleasure will pick up sentence fluency, well done or not, by being exposed to it. To highlight the concepts for all students, but especially for those who do not choose to read outside of the classroom, the teacher must showcase effective sentence fluency.

Two examples of “hearing” the action in the story are *Hoops* by Robert Burleigh and *The Thunderherd* by Kathi Appelt. In *Hoops*, if read in just the right way, you can hear the movement of a basketball game. Likewise, you can hear a thunderstorm coming and passing through in *The Thunderherd*. Turn students into CSI agents and have them look for the things that the authors did to make this happen.

Conclusion

We hope you will enjoy sharing one of your favorite books and see students become a better writer. The following list of books can serve as a beginning point from which to choose those texts that will inspire, instruct, and invigorate children's writing. You will find some old favorites and some that are a little off the beaten path. Some books will work in more than one area. Enjoy and experiment. Above all, keep the momentum going.

TEXAS ASSOCIATION FOR LITERACY EDUCATION YEARBOOK

6-TRAIT MENTOR BOOK LIST

Compiled by Dr. Holly Lamb

This list is compiled in part from Ruth Culham's Picture Books: An Annotated Bibliography With Activities For Teaching Writing

IDEAS	
<i>A Year Down Yonder</i> by Richard Peck	<i>One Day in the Life of Bubble Gum</i> by Fourth-Grade Students of Mt. Horeb Intermediate Center in Mr. Horeb, WI
<i>All the Places to Love</i> by Patricia MacLachlan	<i>The Lost Lake</i> by Allen Say
<i>The Always Prayer Shawl</i> by Sheldon Loberman	<i>The Pain and The Great One</i> by Judy Blume
<i>Amelia's Notebook</i> by Marissa Moss	<i>A Pair of Red Sneakers</i> by Lisa Lawston
<i>And the Dish Ran Away with the Spoon</i> by Janet Stevens and Susan Stevens Crummel	<i>The Raft</i> by Jim LaMarche
<i>The Armadillo from Amarillo</i> by Lynne Cherry	<i>Roxaboxen</i> by Alice McLerran
<i>The Bad Beginning</i> by Lemony Snicket	<i>Skinny-Bones</i> by Barbara Park
<i>Daddy Has a Pair of Striped Shorts</i> by Mimi Otey	<i>Snot Stew</i> by Bill Wallace
<i>Earrings</i> by Judith Viorst	<i>Song and Dance Man</i> by Karen Ackerman
<i>Flute's Journey: The Life of a Wood Thrush</i> by Lynne Cherry	<i>Something from Nothing</i> by Phoebe Gilman
<i>Fortunately</i> by Remy Charlip	<i>The Squiggle</i> by Carole Lexa Schaefer
<i>Frindle</i> by Andrew Clements	<i>A Street Called Home</i> by Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson
<i>The Good-Luck Pencil</i> by Diane Stanley	<i>The Summer My Father Was Ten</i> by Pat Brisson
<i>Grandfather's Journey</i> by Allen Say	<i>Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing</i> by Judy Blume
<i>Great Crystal Bear</i> by Carolyn Lesser	<i>Thank You, Mr. Falker</i> by Patricia Polacco
<i>Harry and the Terrible Whatzit</i> by Dick Gackenbach	<i>There's A Boy in the Girls' Bathroom</i> by Louis Sachar
<i>Home Place</i> by Crescent Dragonwagon	<i>Things That Are Most In The World</i> by Judi Barrett
<i>I'm In Charge of Celebrations</i> by Byrd Baylor	<i>The Tub People</i> by Pam Conrad
<i>The Important Book</i> by Margaret Wise Brown	<i>Tree of Cranes</i> by Allen Say
<i>The Landry News</i> by Andrew Clements	<i>Verdi</i> by Janell Cannon
<i>Miss Nelson is Back</i> by Harry Allard	<i>The Wednesday Surprise</i> by Eve Bunting
<i>The Night I Followed the Dog</i> by Nina Laden	<i>Weslandia</i> by Paul Fleischman
<i>Miss Rumphius</i> by Barbara Cooney	<i>When I Am Old With You</i> by Angela Johnson
<i>My Great Aunt Arizona</i> by Gloria Houston	<i>When I Was Young in the Mountains</i> by Cynthia Rylant
<i>My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother</i> by Patricia Polacco	<i>Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge</i> by Mem Fox
ORGANIZATION	

TEXAS ASSOCIATION FOR LITERACY EDUCATION YEARBOOK

<i>Aunt Isabel Tells A Good One</i> by Kate Duke	<i>Maniac Magee</i> by Jerry Pinelli
<i>Belle Prater's Boy</i> by Ruth White	<i>Meanwhile Back at the Ranch</i> by Trinka Hakes Noble
<i>Boundless Grace</i> by Mary Hoffman	<i>Monster Mama</i> by Stephen Gammell
<i>Bud, Not Buddy</i> by Christopher Paul Curtis	<i>Night Tree</i> by Eve Bunting
<i>A Chair for My Mother</i> by Vera B. Williams	<i>Old Yeller</i> by Fred Gipson
<i>Charlotte's Web</i> by E.B. White	<i>Ruby</i> by Maggie Glen
<i>Chattanooga Sludge</i> by Molly Bang	<i>The School Story</i> by Andrew Clements
<i>Clown</i> by Quentin Blake	<i>The Snowman</i> by Raymond Briggs
<i>Do They Scare You?: Creepy Creatures</i> by Sneed B. Collard III	<i>The Tortilla Factory</i> by Gary Paulsen
<i>The Great Brain</i> by John D. Fitzgerald	<i>Touch Boris</i> by Mem Fox
<i>The Grey Lady and the Strawberry Snatcher</i> by Molly Bang	<i>Tuesday</i> by David Wiesner
<i>Holes</i> by Louis Sachar	<i>Twilight Comes Twice</i> by Ralph Fletcher
<i>The Indian Cupboard</i> by Lynne Reid Banks	<i>Two Bad Ants</i> by Chris Van Allsburg
<i>The Knight Who Was Afraid of the Dark</i> by Barbara Shook Hazen	<i>Walk Two Moons</i> by Sharon Creech
<i>Little Penguin's Tail</i> by Audrey Wood	<i>The Wanderer</i> by Sharon Creech
<i>Long Way from Chicago</i> by Richard Peck	
VOICE	
<i>Amber On The Mountain</i> by Tony Johnston	<i>Purr...: Children's Book Illustrators Brag about Their Cats</i> Edited by Michael J. Rosen
<i>Aunt Chip and the Great Triple Creek Dam Affair</i> by Patricia Polacco	<i>Sadako</i> by Eleanor Coerr
<i>Bigfoot Cinderrrrrella</i> by Tony Johnston	<i>The Stinky Cheese Man and other Fairly Stupid Tales</i> by Jon Scieszka
<i>The Big Orange Spot</i> by Daniel Manus Pinkwater	<i>Tar Beach</i> by Faith Ringgold
<i>Brother Eagle, Sister Sky: A Message from Chief Seattle</i>	<i>Voices in the Park</i> by Anthony Browne
<i>December</i> by Eve Bunting	<i>The Wall</i> by Eve Bunting
<i>The Paper Bag Princess</i> by Robert N. Munsch	<i>Yo, Hungry Wolf!: A Nursery Rap</i> by David Voza
<i>Pink and Say</i> by Patricia Polacco	<i>Earthdance</i> by Joanne Ryder
WORD CHOICE	
<i>Abel's Island</i> by William Steig	<i>Our Granny</i> by Margaret Wild

TEXAS ASSOCIATION FOR LITERACY EDUCATION YEARBOOK

<i>Agatha's Feather Bed</i> by Carmen Agra Deedy	<i>Owl Moon</i> by Jane Yolen*
<i>All the Colors of the Earth</i> by Sheila Hamanaka	<i>Possum Magic</i> by Mem Fox
<i>The Amazing Bone</i> by William Steig	<i>ProwlpuSS</i> by Gina Wilson
<i>Appalachia: The Voices of Sleeping Birds</i> by Cynthia Rylant	<i>The Raggly Scraggly No-Soap No-Scrub Girl</i> by David F. Birchman
<i>Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions</i> by Margaret Musgrove	<i>The Relatives Came</i> by Cynthia Rylant
<i>Brave Irene</i> by William Steig	<i>The Remarkable Farkle McBride</i> by John Lithgow
<i>Caleb & Kate</i> by William Steig	<i>The Rough-Face Girl</i> by Rafe Martin
<i>Dogzilla</i> by Dav Pilkey	<i>Ruby Holler</i> by Sharon Creech
<i>Feathers and Fools</i> by Mem Fox	<i>Silver Morning</i> by Susan Pearson
<i>Gorky Rises</i> by William Steig	<i>Slugs</i> by David Greenberg
<i>Harry Potter</i> by J.K. Rowling	<i>Solomon: The Rusty Nail</i> by William Steig
<i>Kat Kong</i> by Dav Pilkey	<i>Spots: Counting Creatures from Sky to Sea</i> by Carolyn Lesser
<i>Like Butter on Pancakes</i> by Jonathan London	<i>Sylvester and the Magic Pebble</i> by William Steig
<i>Miss Alaineus: A Vocabulary Disaster</i> by Debra Frasier	<i>Tough Cookie</i> by David Wisniewski
<i>Nocturne</i> by Jane Yolen	<i>Wilma Unlimited: How Wilma Rudolph Became the World's Fastest Woman</i> by Kathleen Krull
<i>The Old Woman Who Named Things</i> by Cynthia Rylant	<i>Yo! Yes?</i> by Chris Raschka
<i>Once When I Was Scared</i> by Helena Clare Pittman	
SENTENCE FLUENCY	
<i>Because of Winn Dixie</i> by Kate DiCamillo	<i>Puppies, Dogs, and Blue Northers</i> by Gary Paulsen
<i>Dogteam</i> by Gary Paulsen	<i>The Sign of the Seahorse</i> by Graeme Base
<i>The Great Kapok Tree</i> by Lynne Cherry	<i>So You Want to Be President</i> by Judith St. George
<i>Hairs and Pelitos: A Story in English and Spanish from The House on Mango Street</i> by Sandra Cisneros	<i>The Table Where Rich People Sit</i> by Byrd Baylor
<i>Hoops</i> by Robert Burleigh	<i>The Thunderherd</i> by Kathi Appelt
<i>The House on Mango Street</i> by Sandra Cisneros	<i>Welcome to the Greenhouse</i> by Jane Yolen
<i>Island Boy</i> by Barbara Cooney	<i>Wombat Divine</i> by Mem Fox

PROFESSIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

6+1 Books	
<p>Culham, R. (2003). <i>6+1 Traits of writing</i>. New York, NY: Scholastic Professional Books.</p> <p>Culham, R. & Wheeler, A. (2003). <i>40 reproducible forms for the writing traits classroom</i>. New York, NY: Scholastic Professional Books.</p> <p>Spandel, V. (2001). <i>Creating writers</i> (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Addison, Wesley, Longman Inc.</p> <p>Spandel, V. (2001). <i>Books, lessons, ideas for teaching the six traits: Writing in the elementary and middle grades</i>. Great Source Education Group, Inc.</p>	
Writing Process Books	
<p>Cecil, N.L. (2003). <i>Striking a balance: Best practices for early literacy</i>. Scottsdale, AZ: Holcomb Hathaway, Publishers.</p> <p>Calkins, L.M. (1994). <i>The art of teaching writing</i>. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.</p> <p>Calkins, L. M. (2003). <i>Units of study for primary writing: A yearlong curriculum (K-2)</i>. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann (Firsthand Series).</p> <p>Davis, J. & Hill, S (2003). <i>The no-nonsense guide to teaching writing: Strategies, structures, and solutions</i>. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.</p> <p>Fletcher, R (1993). <i>What A writer needs</i>. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.</p> <p>Fletcher, R. (1996). <i>A writer's notebook</i>. New York: Avon Books.</p> <p>Fletcher, R. (1999). <i>Live writing: Breathing life into your words</i>. New York: Avon Books.</p> <p>Fletcher, R. & Portalupi, J. (2001). <i>Writing workshop: The essential guide</i>. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.</p> <p>Graves, D. (1983). <i>Writing: Teachers and children at work</i>. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.</p> <p>Harwayne, S. (2001). <i>Writing through childhood: Rethinking process and product</i>. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.</p> <p>Heard, G. (2002). <i>The revision toolbox</i>. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.</p> <p>Lane, B. (1993). <i>After the end</i>. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.</p> <p>Lane, B. & Bernabei, G. (2001). <i>Why we must run with scissors: Voice lessons in persuasive writings 3-12</i>. Shoreham, VT: Discover Writing Press.</p> <p>McCarrier, A., Pinnell, G.S. & Fountas, I.C. (2000) <i>Interactive writing: How language & literacy come together, K-2</i>. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.</p> <p>Piazza, C.L. (2003). <i>Journeys: The teaching of writing in elementary schools</i>. N.J.: Merrill Prentice Hall.</p> <p>Romano, T. (2000). <i>Blending genre, altering style: Writing multigenre papers</i>. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.</p>	
Web Sites	
<p>http://geocities.com/oberry1790</p> <p>http://teachers.net/mentors/6traits</p> <p>http://nwrel.org</p>	<p>Trait book lists</p> <p>Scheduling and lesson ideas</p> <p>Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory</p>

References

- About 6+1 Trait Writing, *Education Northwest*. Retrieved 10/21/2013 from URL.
- Appelt, K. (1996). *The thunderherd*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.
- Burleigh, R. (1997). *Hoops*. New York, NY: Harcourt.
- Culham, R (2003). *6+1 Traits of writing*. New York, NY: Scholastic Professional Books.
- Dorfman, L (2013). Retrieved from deeperwritingrobinholland.blogspot.com/2013/10/mentor-texts.
- Dorfman, L. R. & Cappelli, R.(2007). *Mentor texts: Teaching writing through children's literature, K-6*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Dorfman, L.R. & Cappelli, R. (2009). *Mentor texts: Teaching informational writing through children's literature, K-8*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Duke, K. (1992). *Aunt Isabel tells a good one*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.
- Fleischman, P. (1985). *I am Phoenix: Poems for two voices*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Fleischman, P. (1988). *Joyful noise: Poems for two voices*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Gallagher, K. (2014). Making the most of mentor texts. *Educational Leadership*. 71 (7), 28-33.
- O'Connor, J. (2006). *Fancy Nancy*. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Stevens, J. & Crummel, S. S. (2001). *And the dish ran away with the spoon*. New York, NY: Harcourt.
- Viorst, J. (1990). *Earrings*. New York, NY: Aladdin Paperbacks.
- Yolen, J. (1987). *Owl moon*. New York, NY: Philomel Books.

Websites:

- Blog – lessons plans and suggestions - <http://www.teachmentortexts.com/p/what-are-mentor-texts.html>
- Pinterest – lesson plans and suggestions - <http://www.pinterest.com/mrsest/mentor-texts/>
- Scholastic – Mentor Texts for the Traits of Writing – book lists - <http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/article/mentor-texts-traits-writing>