



Using Mentor Texts to Teach the Craft of Writing

RUTH CULHAM

INTERNATIONAL



Reading Association

800 BARSDALE ROAD, PO BOX 8139

NEWARK, DE 19714-8139, USA

www.reading.org

IRA BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Maureen McLaughlin, East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania, East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, *President* • Jill D. Lewis-Spector, New Jersey City University, Jersey City, New Jersey, *President-elect* • Carrice C. Cummins, Louisiana Tech University, Ruston, Louisiana, *Interim Vice President* • Heather I. Bell, Rosebank School, Auckland, New Zealand • Steven L. Layne, Judson University, Elgin, Illinois • William H. Teale, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois • Douglas Fisher, San Diego State University, San Diego, California • Rona F. Flippo, University of Massachusetts Boston, Boston, Massachusetts • Shelley Stagg Peterson, OISE/University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada • Bernadette Dwyer, St. Patrick's College, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland • Laurie A. Elish-Piper, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois • Julianne Scullen, Anoka-Hennepin School District, Andover, Minnesota • Marcie Craig Post, *Executive Director*

The International Reading Association attempts, through its publications, to provide a forum for a wide spectrum of opinions on reading. This policy permits divergent viewpoints without implying the endorsement of the Association.

Executive Editor, Publications Shannon Fortner
Acquisitions Manager Tori Mello Bachman
Managing Editors Susanne Viscarra and Christina M. Lambert
Editorial Associate Wendy Logan
Creative Services/Production Manager Anette Schuetz
Design and Composition Associate Lisa Kochel
Cover Beth C. Ford, Glib Communications and Design

Copyright 2014 by Ruth Culham

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission from the publisher.

The publisher would appreciate notification where errors occur so that they may be corrected in subsequent printings and/or editions.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Culham, Ruth.

The writing thief : using mentor texts to teach the craft of writing / Ruth Culham.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-87207-099-8 (alk. paper)

1. Language arts.
 2. Children's literature—Study and teaching—Activity programs.
 3. English language—Composition and exercises—Study and teaching. I. Title.
- LB1576.C8469 2014
372.62'3—dc23

2014009325

Suggested APA Reference

Culham, R. (2014). *The writing thief: Using mentor texts to teach the craft of writing*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

For Sam, always



CONTENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR vii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS viii

FOREWORD ix

Kate Messner

PROLOGUE 1

What Lies Ahead for Prospective Writing Thieves 6

AUTHOR INSIGHTS: Lester Laminack 7

CHAPTER 1 10

Time to Rethink the Teaching of Writing

Start Here: Stop Doing Dumb Things 14

The Elephant in the Room: The Common Core State Standards 17

Don't Forget the Importance of Excellent Teachers! 19

The 4Ws of Writing 21

AUTHOR INSIGHTS: Lola Schaefer 27

Educational Shift 28

CHAPTER 2 30

The Power of Mentor Texts for Writing

The Case for Mentor Texts 31

Students Develop Bigger Understandings From Authors, Not Assignments 32

Deep Reading: Linking Reading and Writing Processes 34

My Summer Ritual 37

Traits: The Language of Writers 39

How Getting Granular Yields Better Mentor Text Mining—and More Focused Teaching 43

How Do You Spot a Mentor Text? 44

AUTHOR INSIGHTS: Nicola Davies 47

CHAPTER 3 50

Informational Writing

What Makes Informational Writing Tick? 51

Informational Writing Reveals Big Thinking 54

| | |
|--------------------------------------|----|
| AUTHOR INSIGHTS: Toni Buzzeo | 56 |
| The Traits and Informational Writing | 57 |
| Wrapping Up Informational Writing | 88 |

CHAPTER 4 89

Narrative Writing

| | |
|------------------------------------|-----|
| Fiction and Nonfiction Matters | 91 |
| The Power of Narrative | 92 |
| Good Writing Tells a Story, Period | 93 |
| The Story About Stories | 94 |
| AUTHOR INSIGHTS: Ralph Fletcher | 96 |
| The Traits and Narrative Writing | 97 |
| Wrapping Up Narrative Writing | 128 |

CHAPTER 5 129

Argument Writing

| | |
|---|-----|
| A Developmental Stand for Arguments (Opinions) | 130 |
| Getting Started With Argument (Opinion) Writing | 132 |
| The Secret Is in the Nudge | 136 |
| AUTHOR INSIGHTS: David L. Harrison | 138 |
| The Traits and Argument (Opinion) Writing | 140 |
| Wrapping Up Argument (Opinion) Writing | 174 |

EPILOGUE 175

| | |
|---------------------------|-----|
| AUTHOR INSIGHTS: Lisa Yee | 179 |
| Final Thought | 180 |

APPENDIX 181

Reproducibles

REFERENCES 193

| | |
|-----------------------------|-----|
| Children's Literature Cited | 195 |
| Everyday Texts | 197 |

INDEX 199

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ruth Culham, EdD, is the president of The Culham Writing Company and the former unit manager of the assessment program at Education Northwest in Portland, Oregon, USA. She was the English Teacher of the Year in Montana, the highlight of her 19-year teaching career. She holds specialty degrees in library science and elementary, middle, and secondary English education.

As a pioneering researcher in writing assessment and instruction, Ruth creates and conducts teacher workshops to provide professional development at the local, district, and state levels. At state and national conferences, she's a featured speaker on using the traits of writing, designing effective writing instruction, using reading to teach writing, and other related topics.

Ruth is the recognized expert in the traits of writing field and the author of more than 40 teaching resources published by Scholastic, including *6 + 1 Traits of Writing: The Complete Guide, Grades 3 and Up* (2003); *6 + 1 Traits of Writing: The Complete Guide for the Primary Grades* (2005); and *Traits of Writing: The Complete Guide for Middle School* (2010), the winner of a 2011 Teachers' Choice Award. (This isn't surprising since middle school is her true love.) As the author of *Traits Writing: The Complete K–8 Writing Program* (2012), she has launched a writing revolution. The program is the culmination of 40 years of educational experience, research, practice, and passion. She also wrote a new book for principals, *What Principals Need to Know About Teaching and Learning Writing* (Solution Tree, 2014).

Ruth lives in Portland, Oregon, USA, and can be reached at ruth@culhamwriting.com.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Acknowledgments remind me of the speeches that actors give at the Oscars: I don't actually know them or their people, but I'm glad to hear that they have strong support in their professional and personal lives. I hope these acknowledgments give you a similar glimpse into my writing life and the people who made a difference in getting this book into your hands.

Let's begin with Tori Bachman, the acquisitions and development editor for the International Reading Association. Tori is smart, funny, wise, perceptive, and a great motivator. Writers need all that and more to go from an idea to a book. She found the title, *The Writing Thief*, in the Prologue and urged me to use it as a theme. As a result, I found myself morphing from the traits lady to a writing thief as the pages and chapters evolved. Thank you, Tori, for your vision and friendship that will certainly extend past the publication of this book. And thank you to the other talented, patient, and open-minded IRA staff who coaxed and encouraged at every turn.

Thank you to the children's book authors and friends who so graciously contributed their thoughts about how reading influences their writing: Ralph Fletcher, Lester Laminack, Toni Buzzeo, Lola Schaefer, David Harrison, Nicola Davies, and Lisa Yee. Your reflections add so much to the ideas in this book. Your books add so much to the reading and writing lives of children everywhere.

To Kate Messner who graciously wrote the Foreword—blowing me away with her thoughts about reading and writing. Kate, thank you for adding to this book in such a significant way. Your words are inspirational and deeply appreciated.

To Beth Ford for the most beautiful and perfect cover any author could dare to imagine. Your incredible design talent always makes me look good. And to Eva Hamaker, my wonderful assistant, who tracked down all the permissions for the everyday texts and takes such good care of me and The Culham Writing Company every day.

And finally, to a dear friend, Wendy Murray, who rode in during the cloudy days and turned them sunny.

FOREWORD

Whenever I visit schools to talk about writing books, kids inevitably ask what inspires me to write. It's a question with a thousand answers.

I write because there are mountains and snowflakes and snakes with gorgeous patterns on their skin, because children are honest and funny and true, because the world is stunningly beautiful and painful, all at once. But beyond all of that, I write because of the books I read growing up.

Being a reader made me want to be a writer. I wanted to be part of that magic, spinning characters out of thin air, building escapes for myself, portals to worlds that were infinitely more interesting than the small town where I grew up.

You'd think that finding writing mentors in that sleepy town might have been a challenge, but it wasn't. I learned from the very best: Beverly Cleary and Judy Blume. Neither was aware that she was mentoring a strong-willed, "too full of energy" fourth grader, but that didn't matter. With Beezus and Ramona, Peter, and Fudge as their proxies, they taught me how to make characters funny and real and imperfect, how to write books that can make a reader laugh and cry. Their books taught me how to read like a writer and how to find mentors on my own bookshelf.

J.K. Rowling's Dumbledore may be every writer's dream mentor, but in the real world, mentoring usually happens in more casual ways. After all, a mentorship can be as simple as finding someone who's good at what you want to do—whether that's writing or mountain biking or knitting—and asking that person to talk with you about it a little and show you the ropes.

Kids are especially good at this. My middle school daughter has no qualms about recruiting mentors for herself. She likes to hula-hoop and once saw a college girl performing seemingly impossible tricks at a local festival. My daughter walked up, waited until the girl saw her, and then asked, "How are you doing that?" The young woman smiled, loaned my daughter a hula-hoop, taught her a handful of cool tricks, and told her where she could find more lessons online.

"How are you doing that?" Those are five powerful words that we shouldn't be afraid to ask. We can ask the question of people—and we

can ask it of the books we read and love. When we read like writers, we learn to experiment with new genres, forms, structures, and styles. We learn to follow rules, but also to break them, to branch out and be brave with our words.

As lifelong readers and writers, we know this to be true. And as teachers, we must recognize that our very best resources for writing instruction aren't found in test prep programs or worksheets; they're in the books that we love as readers—the beloved stories we read growing up and the brand new titles that we can't wait to share with young readers today. Voice and word choice are traits learned through the reading of masters, and sentence structure is a skill better taught by J.K. Rowling or Katherine Paterson than some workbook writer at a testing company. Children and adults alike learn to write through reading.

Ruth's new book, *The Writing Thief*, embraces that idea. Through specific examples, it coaches educators in how to work with the very best in children's literature and beyond to teach our students how to steal—how to borrow structures and styles, how to craft beautiful phrases, and how to move readers of their own.

At the end of the day, a mentor is more than an instructor. Dumbledore doesn't just teach spells and share lemon drops; he leads by example, challenges, and lights a fire. Reading great mentor texts can provide that same inspiration for students, long after they leave the classroom. They will not only read but also write throughout their lives. They'll write because they see beauty in the world, because they are fighting for change, because they are angry or sad or joyful.

But mostly, they will write because they are readers.



Kate Messner
www.katemessner.com