



Using Mentor Texts to Teach the Craft of Writing

RUTH CULHAM

INTERNATIONAL



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*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).

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## 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.



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