

Mentor Texts

Teaching Writing Through Children's Literature, K-6

By

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C H A P T E R

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Reinventing the Writer with Mentor Texts

With you as a guide, and literature as the landscape, you can open young writers' eyes to the full range of possibilities before them.

—Fletcher and Portalupi, *Writing Workshop: The Essential Guide*

What Are Mentor Texts?

Patricia and Emily MacLachlan’s book, *Painting the Wind*, tells the story of a young boy who loves to paint the water and sky and special places on his island home. But one thing he has never been able to do is paint the wind. The boy eagerly awaits the long days of summer when his friends, the painters, will return. They are his mentors—his teachers who willingly share their craft. The boy sets his easel alongside each one and learns how to paint flowers and faces and still lifes. One day he accompanies the landscape artist to the beach. The artist paints his dog, Meatball, running along the beach with his ears flying in the wind. The boy, feeling the wind on his face, begins to paint the bent trees. Later, the two view their paintings as they hang side by side, and the artist points out to the boy that he has accomplished what he has longed to do—he has painted the wind. The boy responds, “He is right. On my island, surrounded by water and light, I have done what I could not do before. I have painted the wind.”

We all need mentors in our lives—those knowledgeable others who help us learn how to be teachers, mothers, musicians, artists, athletes—who help us do what we could not do before on our own. So, too, do our young writers need mentors. Although it is impossible to have our students open their notebooks and write alongside Cynthia Rylant or Jane Yolen just as the boy was able to paint alongside the island artists, we can bring the literature of these authors and many others into our classroom communities to serve as mentors. Writing mentors are for everyone—teachers as well as students. Katie Wood Ray (2002) describes the importance of feeling the presence of authors in our classrooms as we go about our daily teaching of writing:

I often think that when I watch a really good teacher of writing, it’s almost like there are life-size cardboard cutouts of authors all around the room. Jane Yolen is standing up by the chalkboard and Eloise Greenfield is just by the door to welcome students as they enter . . . With a room full of authors to help us, teaching writing doesn’t have to be so lonely. (150)

Mentor texts are pieces of literature that we can return to again and again as we help our young writers learn how to do what they may

not yet be able to do on their own. Although some teachers use the term *touchstone texts* to describe books that serve as models for students, we take a slightly different view. A touchstone can be a word such as *dog* to help a reader remember the sound of *d*. It can be a phrase such as “furrow followed free” from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* to remember alliteration. It can be a book that uses one word to organize a story such as *Suddenly* by Colin McNaughton. To us, a touchstone text is remembered for a specific purpose.

We believe a mentor text is a book that offers myriad possibilities for our students and for ourselves as writers. Katie Wood Ray (2002) tells us; “As we develop teaching relationships with authors and their work, we will find that certain texts seem to surface as very important to teaching. These are texts that are just full of curriculum potential”(147). Mentor texts are books that are well loved by the teacher and known inside and out, backward and forward. Sometimes they have been used so often that they can be rendered almost without looking at the pages. They have been revisited many times to help students examine an unusual sentence structure, find the poetry in prose, connect with their own memories, think about how a setting creates a mood, or find the places where an author shows instead of tells. In other words, they become our coaches and our partners as we bring the joy of writing to our students. And we, as teachers of writing, will never be alone again if we have mentor texts stored in our classrooms. Mentor texts serve as snapshots into the future. They help students envision the kind of writer they can become; they help teachers move the whole writer, rather than each individual piece of writing, forward. Writers can imitate the mentor text and continue to find new ways to grow. In other words, mentor texts help students and teachers continually reinvent themselves as writers.

The “fingerprints” of the authors’ craft found in mentor texts often become our own. Mentor texts are as comfortable as a worn pair of blue jeans. Their familiarity allows us to concentrate on writing skills and strategies—we know the text that well. They ignite the writer’s imagination and determination to create high-quality text that mirrors the mentor text in many ways. Mentor texts help writers notice things about an author’s work that is not like anything they might have done before, and empower them to try something new.

Often students, and sometimes even teachers, think that it is not okay—that it is almost cheating—to borrow an idea from or imitate the writing style of an author. But this is how we learn to walk, to talk, to

do almost anything: we imitate what we see others doing. The important thing to remember here is to find stellar literature that will inspire students to “copy” the author’s style, focus, or organization. Peter J. Lancia (1997) calls this imitation *literary borrowing*. He goes on to say that literature was a most effective model for writing in his classroom.

The literature-rich environment in combination with an interactive workshop enabled this mentorship to blossom. The children made natural connections between their reading and writing through their daily interactions with books as well as their conversations with fellow authors. (475)

Mentor texts serve to show, not just tell, students how to write well. They, along with the teacher, provide wonderful examples that help students grow into successful writers through supportive partnerships.

Throughout this book you will find many titles that can be used to teach a particular skill or strategy. Some books may be touchstone texts, but you will discover other titles that are used over and over. These books serve as our mentor texts—books that we know well and love deeply. We offer many titles for you to explore in the hopes that you will make your own decisions about which mentor texts will best serve the needs and purposes of you and your students.

Choosing a Mentor Text

How do you go about choosing a mentor text? The first criterion is that you must connect with the book and love it. You might be drawn to the subject matter, the author, the illustrations, or the genre. Then you’ll want to look through the book to find examples of author’s craft such as powerful language, effective repetition, predictable patterns, use of imagery, or rhythm and rhyme. Next, think about how the book serves your students’ needs and connects with your curriculum. Is this a book that your students could relate to and/or read alone or with a partner? Does it provide examples of the kind of writing you want from your students? Can it be revisited often for multiple purposes, providing opportunities for lessons across the traits of writing? In choosing mentor texts it is always good to have a balance of genre such as fiction, nonfiction, memoir, and poetry. In addition, teachers should choose some texts

for cultural diversity and because they demonstrate lessons for living in a social world. Choosing a mentor text is in many ways a personal decision. It is our hope that the titles we offer as mentor texts provide a foundation for you to build upon.

Introducing Mentor Texts

We firmly believe that young writers should be introduced to mentor texts first as readers. They need to hear and appreciate the story and characters as well as the rhythms, words, and message. Only then can they return to a well-loved book and examine it through the eyes of a writer. We teach students to read like writers when we use mentor texts in our classrooms. When teachers bring literature to serve as mentor texts into the writing workshop, they demonstrate the power of the reading-writing connection. Shelley Harwayne (2005) reminds us,

Writers take their reading very seriously. When they read, they discover topics for their own writing. They become interested in new genres and formats. They study authors' techniques to learn how to improve their own writing. They develop mentor relationships with their favorite writers, aspiring to be more like them. (121)

That is what we do with mentor texts. We introduce them as read-alouds, appreciating and responding to them as readers. Then, we revisit them through the eyes of a writer. It is with these writing eyes that we use mentor texts to help us (teachers and students) set goals over the course of the year.

Shelley Harwayne (1992) talks about her visits to reading and writing workshops. On the back of the clipboard she carries is a line she borrowed from a magazine: *I wonder if I can do that*. She tells the young writers she works with that “those words remind me that it’s okay to be jealous of the books I read. It’s okay to fall in love with a writer and try to do what that writer has done.” Sometimes this happens quite unexpectedly, as was the case one afternoon as Rose worked in a first-grade classroom. She had just shared the book *Barn Savers* by Linda Oatman High. This book is about a boy who helps his father dismantle an old barn and save the parts for reuse in building new barns and houses.