

Children's books as models to teach writing skills

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A walk through elementary classrooms today often reveals students immersed in literature. Books in baskets, books on shelves, books in centers, and books in the hands of teachers and children reflect a model literacy environment. We believe that in these classrooms lies a great tool for teaching writing in the elementary grades: children's literature.

Writers' workshop has proven to be a powerful method for the delivery of writing instruction. Authors such as Lucy Calkins have written extensively about their research using direct instruction, writing and conferences, and sharing for teaching young writers. Our school district provided us with excellent training opportunities and resource materials for teaching writing as a process through the daily workshop format.

As kindergarten and fourth-grade teachers, we were excited about the possibilities of daily writing. However, we found ourselves looking for models other than our own writing to use in the direct instruction portion of writers' workshop. The daily minilesson often requires demonstration of a target writing skill. Precise examples, in the form of good writing models, are necessary for students to learn the target skills. To support the materials we already had, we began to search for a tool that would provide a model for all writing levels.

We stumbled on the answer while conducting our joint kindergarten/fourth-grade peer writing workshop. Susan had just read aloud *The Important Book* by Margaret Wise Brown (1949) to the students. Both classes were discussing the author's technique of focusing on an object through the use of specific details. Our two groups of students were at different ends of the writing continuum. However, the kindergarten students were enthralled with the riddle-like language of Brown's book. The fourth-grade students were eagerly counting the many citations of specific details.

The resulting cross-age quiet writing, conference, and sharing time proved that 50 heterogeneous students were willing to give details a try in their own writing. We discovered that literature was the bridge that linked the target skill with the reason for thinking, speaking, and writing like a writer. It was then that we envisioned creating a list of target skills necessary for developing effective writing and then matching children's literature books to those skills. (See Sidebar for books we use to teach specific skills.)

Skills and seeds

The qualities of effective writing may be defined as target skills for instructional purposes. When presented in daily writers' workshop, these skills emerge, develop, and mature in our students' writing. Target skills include brainstorming, focus, elaboration, organization, and conventions. Target skill instruction may begin with brainstorming personal topics to write about and learning how to focus on a particular topic. As focus becomes evident in our students' writing, many elaboration skills emerge and develop. These include the crafting of supporting ideas; specific details; and rich language such as simile, alliteration, metaphor, onomatopoeia, and personification.

As students realize they have a lot to say about a topic, the need for organizing the writing becomes apparent. Organization skills include an attention-catching lead, an interesting and complete middle, and an ending that either brings the piece to a definitive close or leaves the reader wondering about multiple possibilities. Conventions allow the writer's piece to clearly express a message. Knowledge of sentence structure and variety, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and grammar are necessary to write clearly. A master teacher tries to provide learning opportunities for all students at their individual levels. Although we may be competent in writing, published authors of children's books are often the real masters of these skills.

Our plan involved using children's literature, specifically fiction and non-fiction picture books, as a teaching tool to support our writing instruction. Prior to using picture books in our mini-

lessons, the examples we used to model writing skills were primarily our own. Realizing that we can't describe a setting as eloquently as Jane Yolen, we read *Owl Moon* (1988) and let her model for students what a difference a word or phrase makes. Early writers who are just beginning to include settings in their writing will listen to the words *white snow* and know that it must be winter. Older students will listen to "Then the owl pumped its great wings and lifted off the branch like a shadow without sound," and discover the difference a simile can make in a piece of writing. Therefore, the picture books would serve as models from which students would view published examples of the target skills. During the minilesson, we would examine the model and study how the author used a particular target skill. Then teacher and students attempt to use this skill in their own writing.

The use of picture books led us to another discovery. We cannot simply model a writing skill for students and expect them to easily create a similar example. We need a bridge to link the model to students' ability to write independently and confidently. Hence, we added demonstration to the minilesson. This involves the teacher and students together attempting to create their own example of the target skill. Once students study the author's model and participate in a group demonstration of the target skill, they are better able to try the skill in their own pieces.

We have found two other benefits to using children's literature in writers' workshop. One is that literature allows students endless opportunities to generate personal topics for writing. The other is that students are exposed to models that facilitate the development and enhancement of "writerly" thinking and language, which they then apply in their own writing.

Harwayne (1992) believed that literature helps students discover their own "seeds" or thoughts to write about. She suggested that "We've not only come to appreciate that responding to literature can help students find their own topics for writing, we've come to value literature as a major resource for generating topics" (p. 61).

We agree that students write best about what they know from their personal experiences. Topics of interest to them are found in many children's literature books. Through literature, students meet characters that remind them of themselves or of people in their daily lives. Grandparents or other special relatives are brought to mind in Karen Magnuson Beil's *Grandma According to Me* (1992). Books that model attention to setting, such as Jane Yolen's *Welcome to the Sea of Sand* (1996), may remind students of their visits to special places. As the events of a narrative unfold, children may find the character facing a similar problem or using actions they have personally experienced. Every child can relate to Judith Viorst's character Alexander as he endures his "terrible, horrible, no-good, very bad day" (1972). Such reminders become seeds for thoughts to write about. Suddenly, children realize that their own experiences are worthy of print.

Books that we have used to facilitate the discovery of seeds include *When I Was Young in the Mountains* by Cynthia Rylant (1982), *Tell Me A Story, Mama* by Angela Johnson (1989), and *When I Was Little* by Jamie Lee Curtis (1993). As students listened to the words of Cynthia Rylant, they recalled personal experiences and began to generate a list of topics or seeds to write about. When Rylant described her grandmother beating a snake in the yard, a kindergarten student remembered a time when a bird entered her house through the chimney. The description of Rylant's visit to the general store helped a fourth grader recall her visit to one. After taking a bath in cold spring water, Rylant and her brother enjoyed hot cocoa. One of our students remembered the winter day she couldn't wait to drink hot cocoa and ended up burning her tongue.

Endless story topics are jotted down on paper, like seeds sprinkled in the earth. The number of ideas generated quickly becomes impressive. During future writing workshops developing stories are shared with others. The sharing of personal experiences in turn may spread even more seeds for stories.

Finally, when students are immersed in a literature-rich environment and par-

Examples of children's literature for teaching writing skills

- Baylor, Byrd. (1986). *I'm in charge of celebrations*. New York: Scribner's.
Using strong verbs for description.
- Beil, Karen Magnuson. (1992). *Grandma according to me*. New York: Dell.
Describing a person.
- Blume, Judy. (1974). *The pain and the great one*. New York: Dell.
Comparing and contrasting two people.
- Brett, Jan. (1996). *Comet's nine lives*. New York: Putnam.
Using cause and effect and strong transitions to sequence a story.
- Brown, Margaret Wise. (1949). *The important book*. New York: HarperCollins.
Focusing on a topic using specific details.
- Cooney, Barbara. (1982). *Miss Rumphius*. New York: Dial.
Developing a strong character.
- Crews, Donald. (1991). *Bigmama's*. New York: Mulberry.
Organizing with an obvious beginning, middle, and end.
- Curtis, Jamie Lee. (1993). *When I was little*. New York: HarperCollins.
Brainstorming personal topics to write about.
- Fox, Mem. (1985). *Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge*. New York: Dial.
Using effective lead sentences.
- Heller, Ruth. (1989). *Many luscious lollipops*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap.
Using a variety of verbs.
- Himmelman, John. (1997). *A slug's life*. Danbury, CT: Children's Press.
Describing an animal.
- Johnson, Angela. (1989). *Tell me a story, mama*. New York: Orchard.
Brainstorming personal topics.
- Krauss, Ruth. (1945). *The carrot seed*. New York: Harper & Row.
Story in the voice of first person.
- Lindbergh, Reeve. (1996). *What is the sun?* Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.
Using questions as leads.
- Numeroff, Laura. (1994). *If you give a mouse a cookie*. New York: Scholastic.
Examples of cause and effect.
- Numeroff, Laura. (1996). *If you give a moose a muffin*. New York: Scholastic.
Focusing on a topic.
- Numeroff, Laura. (1998). *If you give a pig a pancake*. New York: Scholastic.
Using a full circle: the story beginning and ending in the same place.
- Paulsen, Gary. (1995). *The tortilla factory*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
Explaining how to make something.
- Pratt, Kristin Joy. (1992). *A walk in the rainforest*. Nevada City, CA: Dawn.
Using alliteration in the format of an ABC book.
- Redhead, Janet Slater. (1985). *The big block of chocolate*. New York: Scholastic.
Focus on a topic.
- Rylant, Cynthia. (1982). *When I was young in the mountains*. New York: Dial.
Brainstorming topics to write about.
- Showers, Paul. (1961). *The listening walk*. New York: HarperCollins.
Integrating onomatopoeia throughout a text.
- Van Allsburg, Chris. (1979). *The garden of Abdul Gazasi*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
Narrative with open endings.
- Van Allsburg, Chris. (1981). *Jumanji*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
Narrative with open endings.
- Van Allsburg, Chris. (1985). *Polar express*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
Narrative with open endings.
- Viorst, Judith. (1972). *Alexander and the terrible, horrible, no-good, very bad day*. New York: Scholastic.
Brainstorming topics to write about.
- Yolen, Jane. (1988). *Owl moon*. New York: Scholastic.
Describing a setting using similes.
- Yolen, Jane. (1996). *Welcome to the sea of sand*. New York: Scholastic.
Elaborating through the use of strong verbs.

ticipate in daily writing, they can develop “writerly” thinking and language. Teachers who consistently share and discuss effective writing techniques found in children’s literature facilitate opportunities for their students to think, speak, and write like writers. Through the study of published authors’ books students can view examples of each target skill. Appropriate vocabulary terms, such as *focus* or *elaboration*, are introduced in the minilesson and referred to throughout conferences and sharing time.

It becomes commonplace to overhear kindergarten students discussing details or fourth graders discussing types of transition words. Writing vocabulary emerges in layers as we continue to use previously introduced terms while adding new ones. As we confer with students and they confer with one another, the application of writing skills takes on a deeper meaning.

Sharing and rehearsing

While students learn the language and how it reflects the thought processes necessary to written expression, they also begin to analyze their own thinking. They begin to share ideas for leads, opinions on word choice, and thoughts about organization as they come to value the time spent thinking before writing. When our students demonstrate this we tell them they are rehearsing for writing, just as an actor rehearses for a play. Calkins (1994) believed that when children view themselves as writers they write often and rehearse often what they plan to write about next.

We observe the growth of writers in our classrooms every day. As our students develop a love for language and confidence as writers, they notice specific words or spellings in literature and collect new words for their pieces. The collection grows as they listen to one another. They begin to understand an author’s style and bring in other books by the same author to share.

One such example is our collection of Chris Van Allsburg picture books. In our fourth-grade class we studied the open endings in *Polar Express* (1985), *The Garden of Abdul Gazasi* (1979), and *Jumanji* (1981). Students began looking for more titles, and soon our collection grew to 15 books. By the fourth book,

the students knew the elements of Chris Van Allsburg’s style. They became experts at comparing and contrasting one book or one character to another.

Laura Numeroff provides explicit examples of circular stories in her books *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* (1994), *If You Give a Moose a Muffin* (1996), and *If You Give a Pig a Pancake* (1998). In each book the reader is introduced to a character who receives something. The character moves through a series of events that concludes with the character receiving the same object again. Through such a study of literature, students will attempt to mimic an author in their pieces as they search for their own voice and style.

As we continue to explore children’s literature as a tool for writing instruction we keep notes of which books model particular target writing skills. An easy way to do this is by using index cards and storing them in a box. Favorite pieces of literature may be used over and over by simply changing the focus of the target skill. For example, *Bigmama’s* by Donald Crews (1991) is an explicit model for organization and also demonstrates the effective use of transitions and prepositions.

A natural connection

The use of literature has proven to be an effective way to support writing instruction in the primary and intermediate grades. The masters of children’s literature have given us their books not only to read and enjoy as readers, but to dissect and learn from as writers. They have provided us with authentic, language-rich examples to model the target skills we hope our students will master. Models of quality literature motivate students to explore personal topics of interest in their own writing. Students are able to observe good writing, which enhances their ability to recognize clear, focused, elaborated text in other literature as well as in their own writing.

We need to take advantage of the books filling our library shelves. The connection between these texts and what students can write is a natural one. We have successfully implemented this resource to develop this natural connection.

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