

Help Students Learn to Write Well by Teaching with Mentor Texts!
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What is a *mentor text*?

A *mentor text* is a well-crafted text that you show students to help them see how they can craft their writing. Mentor texts can be published texts by well-known authors, texts you've written yourself, or texts written by students.

What is *craft*?

- When we write, we have to decide *what* a piece will be about. And we have to decide *how* we are going to write the piece. When we talk about the craft of writing, we're talking about *how* a piece is written.
- Experienced writers know a great deal about the craft of writing. When they write, they draw upon their knowledge of introductions, transitions, types of details, the ways that punctuation can be used, and much more.
- When writers craft their writing well—that is, use crafting techniques successfully—we say their writing has the *qualities of good writing* (focus, structure, detail, voice and conventions).

Why are Mentor Texts So Important?

1. Creative people study the work of mentors in their field.
2. Students learn that reading and writing are interconnected.
3. Mentor texts help students navigate each stage of the writing process.

The Role of *Envisionment* and *Revision* in the Writing Process:

- Before they begin a draft, writers *envision* the text they want to write. That is, they imagine the shape of the draft, and its features. As they envision the draft, writers draw upon their knowledge of text structures and features that come from previously studying similar texts.
- As they draft, writers continue to envision the unfolding text. They imagine how each section will go, again drawing upon their knowledge of how texts go.
- As they draft, writers sometimes *revise* a part that they've already written, or even all that they've written so far. Revision--making changes to a draft--requires the ability to imagine that a draft could go differently, so it, too depends upon the writer having knowledge of texts and the different ways that writers write them. Writers might revise the *meaning* of a piece, its *structure*, *detail*, or *voice*.
- When writers finish a draft, most will try to improve it by making revisions and edits to it.

4. Mentor texts help us teach writing descriptively.

5. Mentor texts help students teach themselves about writing.

What does it mean to *read like a writer*?

Reading like a writer is a kind of close reading in which we notice the craft moves a writer has made in a text, with the intent of trying those moves in our own writing.

Using Mentor Texts to Teach Writing: Four Steps

1. Gather texts.
2. Get to know your texts well.
3. Immerse students in texts.
4. Teach with mentor texts in mini-lessons, small groups and writing conferences

Step 1: Gather Texts

Criteria for Selecting Texts

- Students can see themselves and their interests reflected in the texts.
- The texts help students imagine new possibilities for expression.
- You need them for your units of study. For genre studies, examples of the genres. For craft and process units, multiple genres.
- Texts should contain the kinds of craft techniques your students need to learn.
- Texts are on your students' writing levels
- You love the texts.

Where can you find good mentor texts?

- Your classroom or school library
- Genre anthologies
- Kids' magazines
- Newspapers
- Online resources (e.g. Moving Writer's Online Mentor Text Dropbox, <https://movingwriters.org/>)
- Guides to finding mentor texts (*Study Driven* by Katie Wood Ray, amandawritenow.com)
- Curriculum resources
- Your colleagues
- Write your own
- Student Writing

- **Step 2: Get to Know Your Texts Well**

GUIDE TO ANALYZING A MENTOR TEXT

Focus:

- Does the author focus the text by developing a single topic?
- Does the author focus the texts by developing part of a topic?
- Or does the author develop an idea about a topic across the text?

Structure:

- What is the structure of this text?
- What kind of lead does this text contain? How does the author use it to establish the focus of the piece?
- Are there any parts of the text that are especially important? What does the author do to help readers know these parts are important?
- How does the writer choose to end the piece?
- How does the author transition us from part to part?

Detail:

- What kinds of details does the writer use in the text? In the illustrations?
- How does the writer weave the different kinds of detail together in sections?
- Where does the writer use specific words?
- Where does the writer use transitions to connect details?

Voice:

- Where does the writer use punctuation to create emphasis or cadence in their writing?
- Where does the writer format words to signal how readers should read the text?
- Where does the writer use sentence structures that cue readers to read in a particular way?
- Where does the writer choose to address the reader?

Conventions:

- What conventions does the writer use in the text?

Step 3: *Immerse your students in texts at the beginning of a unit of study*

- Immersion helps students get an image of what they'll be making and/or doing in the unit;
- 2-4 days at the beginning of the unit;
- It's critical to read texts aloud to students;
- Students should also be able to see the texts;
- Initially, invite the students to respond as readers, not writers;
- Immersion ends by charting student noticing about the texts.

Step 4: Teach with Mentor Texts in Mini Lessons, Small Groups and Writing

Conferences

There are two ways of teaching with mentor texts in mini-lessons, small groups and writing conferences:

In a direct instruction lesson:

1. Name the craft technique you'll be teaching.
2. Make the mentor text visible to the student(s).
3. Name the author of the mentor text.
4. Read the relevant section of the mentor text aloud (if possible, use an annotation tool to highlight the technique).
5. Describe what the writer did in this technique as precisely as possible.

In an inquiry lesson:

1. Name the aspect of craft you'll be teaching.
2. Make the mentor text visible to the students.

3. Name the author of the text.
4. Read the craft technique aloud (if possible, use an annotation tool to highlight the technique).
5. As students, “What do you notice about the way the writer wrote this technique?”
6. Coach the students as they try to describe what the writer did.

Mini-Lessons and Small Group Lessons:

There are several reasons you’ll do mini-lessons/small group lessons about specific craft techniques and conventions:

- As you’ve conferred with students, you’ve noticed many of them need to learn about a technique or convention.
- You’ve noticed that students are excited about a craft technique or convention they’ve noticed during the immersion phase of the unit, or when you’ve done whole-class study of a mentor text.
- The next lesson in your unit of study guide is a craft or convention lesson.

Over the course of the year, you will use mentor texts to teach lessons about every quality of writing. Some of these lessons include:

FOCUS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writers focus on a single topic on every page/in every section of a piece • Writers focus on a part of a topic on every page/in every section of a piece • Writers focus a piece by developing an idea about a topic across the whole piece
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Illustrators focus with a wide angle picture • Illustrators focus by zooming into part of a scene or topic
STRUCTURE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ways writers structure pieces in narrative and non-narrative genres • Leads and endings • Ways of transitioning readers from part to part in a piece • Writers emphasize parts by developing them more than others • Structural options e.g. flashbacks, counterarguments
DETAIL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kinds of genre-specific details • Weaving different kind of details together in sections • Ways writers write details with precision • Word choice • Detail-to-detail transitions • Internal text structures (how details are organized in sections)
VOICE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating voice by choosing perspective • Ways writers use punctuation to create voice • Kinds of sentence structures that give writing voice • Word choice that creates voice
CONVENTIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Punctuation • Grammatical conventions

Mini-lessons/small group lessons have four parts:

1. The *connection*, in which you explain why you're teaching the lesson.
2. The *teaching point*, in which you teach students about one aspect of writing.
3. The *try-it*, where the students "have-a-go" with what you just taught for 2-3 minutes.
4. The *link*, when you set an expectation that many students will try the mini-lesson as they write today.

Conferring with Mentor Texts

Conferences have three parts:

1. *Discover* what students are trying to do as writers.
2. *Assess* what they're doing, and *decide* what to teach them.
3. *Teach* them how to do what they're doing better.

1. Discover what students are trying to do as writers.

- In some conferences, you'll find out students are working on an aspect of process.
- In other conferences, you'll find out students are working on an aspect of craft.

You'll soon be teaching with a mentor text!

2. Assess what they're doing, and decide what to teach

- Read the student's writing and ask yourself, "What does this student know so far about this kind of craft work?"
- Then ask yourself, "Based on what the child knows so far, what is the next logical step?"
- Finally, ask yourself, "Which mentor text can I show the student to show them this?"

3. Teach them to do what they're doing better

- Give the student feedback about what they're doing
- Teach (using the mentor text)
- Coach the student as they try out what you've taught
- Link the conference to the student's work

ABOUT THE PRESENTER

Carl Anderson is an internationally recognized expert in writing instruction. He works as a consultant in schools and districts around the world. Carl is the author of numerous books on teaching writing, including the brand new *How to Become a Better Writing Teacher* (with Matt Glover), *A Teacher's Guide to Mentor Texts, Grades K-5*, and *Teaching Fantasy Writing: Lessons that Inspire Creativity and Engagement K-6* (June, 2024). He is also the author of *A Teacher's Guide to Writing Conferences K-8*, the best-selling *How's It Going? A Practical Guide to Conferring with Student Writers, Assessing Writers* and the *Strategic Writing Conferences* series. Carl is known for his keynote addresses, PD workshops, school-based residencies, and webinars.

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