Dear Reader,

Welcome to my multi-genre research project! I chose to conduct research on the use of mentor texts in writing workshops. Mentor texts are either published works or the works of other students that are used to guide students in their writing process. Educators have found that when students are taught to focus on specific aspects of these texts, they are able to apply these techniques in their own writing. By breaking down the finished products of others, students are able to see the process used to create the writing. Aside from my research paper, I have included several artifacts that showcase the use of mentor texts in the classroom. I hope you enjoy learning more about mentor texts and how to use them to better equip students to become independent readers and writers!

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Yours Truly,

Emily Love
Using Mentor Texts To Aid Student Writing

Many teachers of English language arts in secondary schools have recognized the value of writing workshops, a time set aside for in-class writing. The most effective method of teaching writing is to allow students to write freely and frequently. Proponents of the writing workshop share their strategies with fellow teachers, from arranging the room to writing conferences to assessing final products. Another common theme among these teachers who successfully establish writing workshops is the use of mentor texts. According to Skinner, mentor texts can be defined as “texts that students have engaged with as readers and then chose to study as writers in order to learn something about the process of writing that they can apply and use for their own purposes in their own writing” (Shea, 12). These texts can be published works or the works of former or fellow students in the workshop.

The use of mentor texts is directly linked to the concept of intertextuality, “the idea that texts are ‘compiled from preexistent texts’” (Shea, 11). When one considers the wide spectrum of texts available to modern readers—including literature, poetry, art, film, etc.—there is little room to doubt that students could choose any concept or idea to write about that has not already been discussed by another writer. Rather than allowing this idea to discourage students in their personal writing, this should be used to motivate students to allow their voice and opinions to exist alongside the work of renowned writers from across the centuries.

One of the key aspects in creating influential and helpful writing workshops is establishing a sense of community among student writers. According to O’Sullivan,
"...we as writers and teachers of writing can benefit from a close examination of the methods employed by a community of extremely successful writers" (O'Sullivan). O'Sullivan is referring to a writing group known as the Inklings, whose members included J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. These men and their fellow writers met together on a regular basis to share their work. When they met together, they read their work aloud and provided feedback and suggestions. In *The Company They Keep*, Diana Glyer points out that both Tolkien and Lewis recognized the profound impact these sessions had on their work. Tolkien said of Lewis: “We owed each a great debt to the other” (Glyer, 27). These men realized that “creativity thrives in community,” where they not only inspired each other, but also worked together “offering support in times of discouragement…shaping texts…editing both rough drafts and finished texts; working together to produce joint projects…reviewing books and articles written by one another” (Glyer, 214). When students see the benefits of writing groups espoused by famous and successful writers, they will begin to understand the potential of the writer’s community in the classroom.

The word “influence” can have an ugly connotation when used in reference to writing. Many people assume that when author’s claim that they were influenced by other writers, they have simply copied the work of another or even worse—committed an act of plagiarism. However, allowing the works of other writers to influence personal writing is “far from being a sign of intellectual deficit” (O'Sullivan). In fact, most writers are “under the influence” and may not even recognize it. When beloved authors are interviewed, some of the typical questions they can expect to hear are: “Who is your favorite author? What books are you reading right now?” Professional writers can
understand “the influence of other writers upon their own work” (Leograndis, 23). In fact, many writers “read the works of people who write like [they] hope to write; studying them carefully for style, organization, beautiful wording, ideas” (O’Sullivan). Who better to turn to in the art of writing than the experts? Jeff House, a secondary teacher who uses mentor texts in the classroom, believes that without showing his students these expert models, they "are unclear about both the specifics and standards of the assignment...a model makes clearer to students what they must aim for" (Shea, 12). Students need to be introduced to well-done products in order to understand what they are working towards; and these products must be broken down for the students in order to aid in the process.

Oftentimes, students do not even know that they are writing under the influence of others. Fletcher and Portalupi recognize this to be true for many students in their classrooms: "Many of us have students who arrive in our classrooms and, from the very beginning of the year, write with power and passion...Their language sings. Not surprisingly, these students are usually avid readers. Their heads are filled with stories, poems, pictures books, and essays that they have read and reread, and have been read to them" (Fletcher and Portalupi, 74). These students have learned quality-writing techniques simply through their exposure to good writing. For the students who have not been so fortunate in their personal reading, teachers are obligated to teach them to make “the reading-writing connection that certain students have seemingly made on their own” (Fletcher and Portalupi, 74). The process of teaching mentor texts in the classroom enables teachers to this, while helping all of their students to learn new approaches to reading.
The process of introducing mentor texts into the writing workshop is a gradual process. Certain students will embrace the concept from the start and may even choose their independent reading as a mentor text; other students may need to be given a specific text to work from; while another group may resist until they see their peers improving through the use of mentor texts (Leongrandis, 29). In order to show all of the students how to use mentor texts, it would be advisable to work through some specific writing assignments as an entire class. For example, many students dislike reading classic literature because they find it boring, removed, and difficult. Educators that work for the Northern Nevada Writing Project recommend several lessons that encourage students to read the classics and to apply what they learn to their writing. One such lesson that teacher could use as an introduction to mentor texts requires the use of *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. Students are encouraged to pay attention to the voices and points of view in a particular scene in the novel, where the mob of citizens want to lynch Tom Robinson and Atticus Finch stands up to the crowd. After reading this scene, students would write a scene of their own creating two or more characters with opposing viewpoints. Another introductory method would be to encourage students to create a found poem out of a passage from a novel. They block out words and phrases, using the remaining words from the original text to create a new poem.

Students need to make connections with their mentor texts, therefore teachers should choose books "that students can relate to and can read independently or with some support" (Dorfman and Cappelli). Many teachers like to use picture books, as they stimulate creativity through illustrations, demonstrate the importance of word choice, and offer culturally diverse themes (Wilson). Corbett Harrison breaks mentor texts down into
three categories. Idea texts contain unique ideas that stimulate students in their own work; structure texts contain patterns or organization methods that students can mimic; and craft texts showcase “stylistic techniques.” Harrison recommends introducing craft texts after students have completed a draft of their writing but before they begin the revision process; this will allow students to notice the beautiful language and sentence structures as they begin to edit their own work (Harrison). Leograndis recommends that teachers use books they love, because, “If you love them, they're written well” (Leograndis, 72).

Mentor texts can also be used to teach students the mechanical aspects of writing. Students “make the most sense out of grammar rules, traditional and nontraditional, when taught in the context of real-world writing” (Leograndis, 57). When teachers show their students the relevance of grammar, they will become more receptive towards learning new terms and skills. When focusing on grammatical aspects of a text, educators should choose pieces that are “interesting or challenging syntactically” (Wilson). Simmons provides several helpful questions to ask students when teaching them grammar from mentor texts, including: What’s the effect of using long series of –ing words? Why does the author write a series of long sentences, followed abruptly by a short sentence? Why write long sentences? Why does this piece have rhythm? (Simmons, 51).

An important element of educating students to use mentor texts independently is to refer back to mentor texts during writing conferences. According to Penny Kittle, when teachers refer back to the mentor texts repeatedly, they give the students independence to solve their own problems. She refers to mentor texts as the roadmap for students (Kittle, DVD). One of the main goals of the writing workshop is to create independent readers and writers. Teachers should also use the work of former students as
mentor texts. This allows students to recognize their potential to create wonderful pieces of writing. It is also a highly effective method of providing students with genuine praise for their work, by showcasing it to others.

Films are also being used as mentor texts. In the 1970s, Joseph Comprone wrote that accepting film as a valid mentor text would be especially helpful for struggling readers. He asserted that watching film "could help students generate ideas for writing as well as enable them to move from concrete description toward more abstract rhetorical modes" (Shea, 20). There is still much resistance to using films as mentor texts, but Shea found that documentaries were particularly applicable mentor texts in secondary schools. He used the documentary The Cutting Edge: the Magic of Movie Editing to show students the similarities between editing movies and editing their personal writing pieces. He also mentions the grammar lessons that can be taught through film. Etzkowitz did a study on the “cinematic punctuation” in film, where she links "the dissolve to a comma, the fade to a period, and a cut in a film to chapter divisions" in a novel (Shea, 25). Shea also believes that films can showcase "character development, plot devices, setting, theme, tone, voice, and perspective" (Shea, 25). In a society where students are especially loyal towards popular culture, introducing films as mentor texts can encourage many students in their writing.

The use of mentor texts in the classroom encourages students to become readers as well as writers. These texts can develop a sense of community, as the students are encouraged to learn from the “greats.” By showcasing a wide variety of mentor texts, teachers can engage readers in various genres of literature that they may never have approached on their own. Students learn the importance of following the rules of
grammar in their own writing by actively participating as the audience in the books that they read. Furthermore, students will become more secure in their personal writing as they are able to recognize the themes and techniques present in published works. They will be able to write outside of the classroom because they will know where to go for support.
Bibliography


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Conversation Between Teachers Using Mentor Texts in the Classroom

On the site English Companion, English teacher Mark Childs starts a discussion asking fellow teachers to share the mentor texts that they use in their classrooms and how these texts demonstrate specific aspects of writing. One teacher recommends using Jamaica Kincaid’s short story “Girl,” as a method to engage students who are struggling writers, along with presenting an interesting format for students to copy in their own work. Another teacher recommends using very short texts, while encouraging students to identify and “steal” the techniques the writers use. The students are supposed to write comments on their text, discussing the results of their text experiment. A middle school teacher presents a long list of picture books that she uses in classrooms with great success, including Dr. Seuss and Schotter. She includes the topics to consider when teaching each picture book as a mentor text, including aspects such as symbolism, patterns, point of view, tone, mood, etc. The final comment is from Penny Kittle, a teacher whose use of mentor text I studied during my research. She emphasizes the importance of maintaining a balance between using published work and student work as mentor texts. She also mentions the use of Sherman Alexie’s work as a mentor text, combined with her use of student examples of narrative texts. There are three things that she wants them to focus on when writing the first piece: voice, details, and dialogue.

These conversation threads were especially interesting, as I had the opportunity to observe teachers sharing their methods and successes with each other. I appreciate the sense of community that they create; encouraging other teachers in their pursuit of finding the right mentor texts to aid students in their writing. The teachers emphasize the importance of finding specific aspects of the text to hone in on when introducing it to the
students, and their thoughtful lists of mentor texts not only offer teachers lists of texts to use but provide them with inspiration to find their own mentor texts.
The Guidelines

Write, write, write—
Get up every day ready to write.

Read, read, read—
Make the time each day to read.

The more you read, the better you write.

Read what you love:
Poems, stories, picture books, biographies.

Read who you love:
Dickens, Austen, Milne,
Cushman, White, Smith.

If you love them, they are worthy.

Let them inspire you;

Do what they do,

Steal from the greats.

Copy the grammar;

Explode the moment;

Notice the dialogue.

Write about what matters,
Share your story and your thoughts.

Read the work of classmates;
Allow them to surprise you.

Write, write, write;

Read, read, read—
“While all this was happening, Piglet had gone back to his own house to get Eeyore’s balloon. He held it very tightly against himself, so that it shouldn’t blow away, and he ran as fast as he could so as to get to Eeyore before Pooh did; for he thought that he would like to be the first one to give a present, just as if he had thought of it without being told by anybody. And running along, and thinking how pleased Eeyore would be, he didn’t look where he was going…and suddenly he put his foot in a rabbit hole, and fell down flat on his face.

BANG!!??***!!!

Piglet lay there, wondering what had happened. At first he thought that the whole world had blown up; and then he thought that perhaps only the Forest part of it had; and then he thought that perhaps only he had, and he was now alone in the moon or somewhere and would never see Christopher Robin or Pooh or Eeyore again” (Milne, 83-84).
Think about how quickly a balloon pops—then read this passage again. Notice how Milne slows time after the balloon pops, allowing the reader to recognize the significance of this moment when Piglet ruins his present.

RECIPE TO EXPLODE THE MOMENT:

¼ cup buildup

2 cups turning point

¼ cup control

3 tbs. time compression

1 cup relevant information

½ cup sensory detail

2 tsp. inner thoughts

Start with the ¼ cup of buildup, and mix it thoroughly with the 2 cups of turning point. Immediately add the ¼ cup of control. Add exactly 3 tbs. of time compression, allowing the mixture to rest for several seconds. In a smaller bowl, combine the 1 cup of relevant information, ½ cup of sensory detail, and the 2 tsp. of inner thought. Add this mixture to the large bowl and mix together until smooth. Allow the mixture to rest for ten minutes before serving.
"If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."
~Sir Isaac Newton~

"Be obscure clearly! Be wild of tongue in a way we can understand."
~E.B. White~
ARTIFACT 4

Found Poem

Mentor Text: *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens

**Guilty**

A rimy morning, and damp. outside of my window, some goblin had been there all night.

The damp like a sort of spiders’ webs; hanging itself clammy, thick, people invisible to me.

Invisible to me my oppressed conscience like a phantom.

Heavier so that everything, everything seemed to run at me. This was a guilty mind.
ARTIFACT 5

Classroom Bulletin Board

"The best things come, as a general thing, from the talents that are members of a group; every man works better when he has companions working in the same line, and yielding the stimulus of suggestion, comparison, emulation."
--Henry James

"Creativity thrives in community!"

"When a tree grows by itself it spreads out, but does not grow tall. When trees grow together in the forest, they help push each other up towards the sun."
--Buddhist Monastic Saying

"Support each other!!"
ARTIFACT 6

A Brief List of Recommended Mentor Texts:

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee
A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens
The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck
Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury
The Time Machine by H.G. Wells
The Adventures of Ulysses by Bernard Evslin
Sarah, Plain and Tall by Patricia MacLachlan
Skylark by Patricia MacLachlan
Crab Moon by Ruth Horowitz
An Angel for Solomon Singer by Cynthia Rylant
Fly Away Home by Eve Bunting
Langston’s Train Ride by Robert Burleigh
Homer Price by Robert McCloskey
The Important Book by Margaret Wise Brown
Because of Winn-Dixie by Kate DiCamillo
Wringer by Jerry Spinelli
Marshfield Dreams: When I Was a Kid by Ralph Fletcher
Owl Moon by Jane Yolen
Love That Dog by Sharon Creech
“Girl” by Jamaica Kincaid
In Short: a Collection of Brief Creative Nonfiction by Jones and Kitchen
Faithful Elephants: a True Story of Animals, People and War by Yukio Tsuchiya
The Sneetches by Dr. Seuss
The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian by Sherman Alexie
The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven by Sherman Alexie
Poem: The poem, entitled “The Guidelines,” is designed to introduce students to the use of mentor texts in the classroom. It is of the utmost importance for students to learn to make connections between their reading and their writing. I emphasized the importance of reading and writing every day; of reading authors that you love; of borrowing their ideas; and of sharing your work with others.

Explode the Moment: This artifact is designed for students. One specific lesson that could be taught from a mentor text would be about pacing, specifically how to “explode the moment” of action in the story. This requires students to speed up time right before a critical turning point and then to slow it down to allow the moment to make an impact on the reader. I have included an excerpt from Winnie-the-Pooh that focuses on a moment where a balloon pops. After the excerpt, I have a recipe for students to follow to help explode moments in their own writing. The recipe includes the terminology that would be involved in a lesson on pacing.

Glog: This artifact is designed for students. Ideally, it would be used to introduce students to the ideas that accompany the use of mentor texts. I have included several tips to look for in the mentor text and to apply in student writing. It also contains several meaningful quotes for students to read. The final element is several pictures of well-known authors that students could use as mentors in their writing. This artifact is meant to encourage students and to remind them that writing is a collaborative effort.

Found Poem: This artifact is meant to be an example for students who are working on creating their own found poems. One of the lessons that educators who use mentor texts
suggest is allowing students to write found poems from one of their mentor texts. I used a passage from *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. I chose to make my poem about a central theme from the novel, that of guilt. This could be an activity that the whole class works on together, showcasing the process of writing.

**Classroom Bulletin Board:** This artifact is meant for students, as it encourages them to establish a sense of community in the writing workshop. It contains a collection of quotes, encouragement, pictures, and comic strips. It was created online, and the website allows students to log in to view any notices. Student papers could also be uploaded to the bulletin in document form, so their fellow writers could see their finished work.

**List:** This artifact is designed for teachers. It is a brief list of several recommended mentor texts that I came across in my research. For teachers who are introducing mentor texts in the classroom, this list can act as a starting place for them until they become comfortable enough to make their own selections. Teachers who already use mentor texts may discover new suggestions as well. It includes a wide variety—from picture books to short stories to popular novels to classic literature.
Bibliography


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