

# **Study Guide**

## **for *What a Writer Needs, Second Edition***

### **by Ralph Fletcher**

Cyrene Wells describes *What a Writer Needs, Second Edition* as a “crash course on writing and the teaching of writing.” You may decide to read it by yourself or with others. Ralph Fletcher’s book is full of big ideas, which makes it an ideal choice for a professional book study with a colleague or with a group of peers. Here are a few suggestions to get the most out of a professional book study.

- Start by reading a chapter by yourself. Mark what strikes you:  
**connections**  
**questions**  
**“take-aways”** you want to bring forward into the upcoming school year.
- Schedule time to get together with your book study group. It might make sense to meet after reading a chapter. The book study works best if everyone has shared the common experience of reading the book. (In some schools, teachers read aloud the chapter during the book study itself.)
- Share your insights with your peers.

The following discussion points have been divided by the chapters in the book. These questions/suggestions are not intended to be followed rigidly. They are included as a guide to keep your group focused and, hopefully, to enrich the experience of reading this group. Of course, you should feel free to follow any vein of discussion that seems promising.

Much of *What a Writer Needs, Second Edition*, is a deep immersion into the writer’s craft. Do whatever you can to make this book practical and applicable to your teaching situation. Teachers might bring student writing samples pertinent to the subject matter in the chapter being discussed.

## **PART ONE: ESSENTIALS**

### **Chapter One: Mentors**

1. Make a list of people who impacted your identity as a writer. Which of their words or messages do you remember? How do you think those messages impact your writing and teaching today?
2. How do your expectations as a mentor “inspire a young writer not to lower his or her own standards” (13)?
3. What are your own strengths as a writer? As a mentor? Are there areas that you find more difficult to value as a reader?
4. How do you encourage writing that differs from your own preferences and style as a reader and writer?
5. How do you encourage students to take risks and experiment in your classroom? How is that risk rewarded or valued?
6. Perhaps with a few colleagues, select 1–2 pieces of student writing that would be considered either weak or experimental. As a group, discuss the strengths of that writing. Then, brainstorm how you would discuss the work with the writer. Finally, take this collective knowledge back to the classroom and conference with the student.
7. Stephen King wrote, “You can’t write until you have been flattened by a book” (18). Which books have flattened you? With your colleagues, discuss the texts (books, poems, essays) which have most effectively shaped your learning environments, both as a teacher and a learner.

### **Chapter Two: Freezing to the Face**

1. When you write, how much value do you place on discovery? How does this belief impact both the process and product of the writing?
2. How do you balance clear writing instruction with the notion of “remystifying” writing that Ralph discusses?
3. As Ralph asks on page 25, how can we encourage students to internalize their own high standards for writing? How do we find a compromise when those standards differ from our own?
4. Brainstorm a list of “safe” and “risky” topics to share with students as they develop their own meaningful topics.
5. What strategies do you have to encourage students to select topics which are “on the thinner, though possibly richer, ice of a subject that feels more unresolved” (28)?
6. It’s difficult to encourage students to take risks as writers if we don’t take risks as teachers. What risks or “stretches” (teaching a unit on fantasy writing, for instance) might you take as a writing teacher?

### **Chapter Three: A Love of Words**

1. Make a notebook of your favorite words, phrases and sentences and share some of these regularly with students. Ask students to keep a list of their own favorites from their reading.
2. How do you help yourself and your students keep writing playful? Share some strategies with a colleague.
3. Think about the language around your strongest memories. Perhaps you can find a particular word that stands out among one memory. Share your thinking about the language and the anecdote with students, as Ralph does on page 41. Then, have student's free write and see what they uncover.
4. Look at the section of the appendix sub-titled "Books with Unforgettable Language" (205–207). Choose a work or excerpt and read aloud to students. Then, discuss which words or phrases were most unforgettable and what qualities those words, collectively, may share.

## **PART TWO: THE CRAFT**

### **Chapter Four: The Art of Specificity**

1. How do you tease out the specific details in your own writing? How do you help students do the same?
2. Find a few examples, either from students or published work, which reflect Don Murray's reminder that effective writing is "honest, specific, accurate" and share with students each day.
3. Mull over the idea emphasized in this chapter: *the bigger the issue, the smaller you write*. Write a draft of a piece (or find one) which models this concept and share with students. Ask students to discuss the details that help illuminate the big issue.
4. As a reader and a writer, how do you react to the "raw materials" of a story, cited on page 51? How can we create a classroom environment where students can access this raw material without fear?
5. Draft or select a piece of writing that has a recurring detail (or choose from the examples within the chapter) and ask students how that repetition works to make the story, essay or poem more meaningful.

### **Chapter Five: Creating a Character**

1. Ralph says that "young writers need help in breathing life into their characters" (57). Do you think this is true? Discuss. What are your students' strengths and weaknesses when it comes to developing characters?
2. As a reader, think about the characters that have resonated most with you. What do you specifically recall about them?
3. As suggested on page 57, brainstorm a list of a character's public persona as well as his/her private one. Think about specific traits in the latter category that would help students access the "inner being" more easily.
4. See page 57 for an example, or look at the section of the appendix sub-titled "Books with Strong Characters" (191–193) and share an excerpt with

- students. Then, generate a list of small physical details of a character, either from imagination or memory, which would help a character come to life.
5. In writing conferences, how do you encourage students to teach you everything they know about their characters?
  6. Using examples from your own writing or from authors you love, give students some examples of “revelatory” and telling details. Discuss the qualities of these details. Finally, ask students to brainstorm and then share one telling detail about their character.
  7. Ask students to eavesdrop over the course of a week, recording snippets of dialogue. After they collect them, students might share their favorite snippet with the class or group. As students share, have them think about what effective dialogue reveals about a character.
  8. Have students create a “flash-draft” for a character they have created or as a tool for nonfiction, as suggested on page 64. Make sure when they draft, they put all notes away and just write.

### **Chapter Six: Voice**

1. In what ways can you encourage students to play with “inner voice writing” (68) in your classroom?
2. Think about ways to “stalk the inner voice” (69), both in your writing and for your students. Keep a notebook and take time each day to listen and record that voice in its various forms. Notice how your inner voice flows. In words? Sentences? Fragments? Images?
3. Thinking about the exercise above, ask students to do the same. Think and discuss with colleagues how much time is needed—both inside and outside of the classroom—for students to capture their authentic voice.
4. What kinds of real audiences do you create for your students’ writing? Brainstorm with colleagues about ways to stretch and enhance these audiences.
5. How can teachers help students create an intimacy with subject and audience that often gets lost as students get older?
6. Has the issue of “dump-truck writing” in nonfiction been a challenge for your students? Have you tried comparing voices, as mentioned on page 77, between encyclopedia and nonfiction texts on the same subject? What do your students notice?
7. As suggested on page 78, have students select an author (nonfiction or fiction depending on your focus) whose voice they admire and try to write something in that voice.

### **Chapter Seven: Beginnings**

1. Within the sub-title, “Some Notable Beginnings” (186–188) read through the exemplars and select a few to share with your students that reflect Ralph’s concept of the “dual-pronged spiral of intention” (82).
2. How do we cultivate “intense honesty” in students so they will feel comfortable sharing in a dramatic lead?
3. Which of the strategies in this chapter do you tend to suggest the most? The least? Discuss this question with colleagues and see if you can increase risk-taking in your classroom. Then, try each strategy with students; perhaps use mentor texts suggested in appendix, or use your own writing or selections from students. Also, consider any new strategies you gained from your discussion with colleagues.
4. Invite students to revise the lead in a piece of their own writing. Later, give those students a chance to share their revisions with the class.

### **Chapter Eight: Endings**

1. Do you agree with Ralph’s assertion that “the ending may well be the most important part of a piece of writing”? How can you make that case to students?
2. How do you conference with students to help make their endings both “surprising and inevitable” (via Jane Yolen) (95)?
3. Within the sub-title of the appendix “Endings” (188–191), choose a few endings that reflect the different kinds of endings highlighted in this chapter: circular, ambiguous, poignant, ironic. Read the stories to students over the course of a week and ask students to notice how the ending enhances the story. Feel free to focus on fewer approaches, as is appropriate for your students.
4. Share your own story, essay or poem, experimenting with at least two different endings. Ask students to choose an ending they prefer and articulate reasons for their choice.
5. Invite students to revise the ending in a piece of their own writing. Give students the opportunity to share their revisions with another person or the class.

## **Chapter Nine: Tension**

1. How can we nudge students towards “the psychological nature of human conflicts” (105), especially in person vs. person conflicts?
2. In person vs. nature conflicts, brainstorm mentor texts and strategies that would help students explore nature as a catalyst to reveal character. Also, think about how to illustrate the possibility of this conflict as a “character’s first encounter with something new” (111).
3. Brainstorm more subtle possibilities of internal conflict that occur when a character “gets torn between conflicting impulses” (112). Start a class discussion where students can put this idea into their own words, and use their own examples. Consider using one of the mentor texts cited on pages 204–205 as a way to begin this conversation.
4. How do you distinguish between tension and conflict? As you teach, how might the differentiation of the two ideas help students’ writing?
5. Read “Watermelons” by Charles Simic (115) and ask students to note what is most striking in terms of language and tension. Then, ask students to think about two images that do not seem to fit together, and try to create a relationship of tension between the two. Consider drafting your own poem or use Ralph’s poem as another model before students begin.

## **Chapter Ten: A Sense of Place**

1. Either using a mentor text or your own writing, share a story with students where the writer has created a believable world. Ask students to identify the details or facts that help convince readers of that place.
2. Do you have a place or world, like Ralph’s clam digging scene, that is alive in your imagination? Free write about this place, focusing on sensory details, odd facts, and snippets of conversation that would help bring that world to life. Share with students, then facilitate this exercise with them as a way to deepen the sense of place in their writing or as a beginning activity for a story or essay.
3. As a reader, can you think of good examples of “integral” settings, where place serves as a way to exert influence on the character? See the sub-title in the appendix “Books with a Distinct Sense of Place” (198–200) for ideas, and select a few excerpts to share with students.
4. How can you help students uncover the “subtle links between a character and a setting”? Consider the exercise Ralph suggests by John Gardner from *The Art of Fiction* on page 124 as a possible exercise or adapt it to suit your students.
5. Invite students to reread one their drafts, focusing on the setting, reflecting on how they might do a better job of bringing it alive for the reader.

## **Chapter Eleven: A Playfulness with Time**

1. How much time do you dedicate to your own writing? Has this amount shifted over the years? Does it shift throughout the school year?
2. How do you interpret Ralph's thoughts on writing, both for yourself and your students: "This is the perfect excuse for not writing: no time. But the real writer refuses to fall for it. Writers write. In notebooks, on napkins, at the kitchen table surrounded by dirty plates." How do you address this idea, both in your practice as a writer and a teacher of writing?
3. What strategies do you have to help students distinguish between real time and story time? Consider Fletcher's suggestions of examples from published literature found in the sub-title of the appendix, "Time" (200–201), student writing and direct instruction. Talk with your colleagues for ideas about effective approaches for your grade level.
4. Consider inviting students to write a series of non-linear snapshots that may be connected through subtle details and then connect them in a way which makes sense to them. Then, either in conferences or a larger group, ask students to discuss these choices.
5. If your students could benefit from focusing their stories, consider addressing the concept of omission or focus. Consider a conference or direct instruction on timeline construction, focusing on the small details, as shown on page 139.

## **Chapter Twelve: Unforgettable Language**

1. Look through some of your favorite works of literature and write down 5–10 favorite sentences or phrases. Share these with students and explain what makes them special. Then, encourage your students to make their own lists, either on the spot or as they read throughout the year.
2. Which writers inspire you most? Share your favorite writer with students and invite students to do the same.
3. Keep a class journal or blog of "magnificent language" throughout the year, inviting students to add sentences and phrases, both from published work as well as their peers. You might want to have a separate section for invented words with a definition written by the author.
4. How do we help young writers attune their ears to magical language? How do we help older writers rediscover this magic?
5. Invite students to reread one of their own drafts, looking for strong language. They might circle a word or phrase that stands out in this regard.
6. With your colleagues, brainstorm strategies and ideas that could help writers to follow Ralph's mantra: *write what you see, not what you are supposed to see.*

### **Chapter Thirteen: Writing Nonfiction**

1. How do you differentiate between *important* and *significant* ideas in nonfiction writing? How can we help young writers understand the difference?
2. In what ways do you cultivate curiosity in your classroom? How can we steer writers towards a subject that resonates, but also has “a healthy dose of ignorance”?
3. As students are drafting nonfiction, how can we help them balance the facts so it won’t sink the writing?
4. Find 2–3 examples which interpret facts and offer insight. Share with students and ask them to observe the techniques the writer used to make the piece effective. You may consider using several pieces by the same author to highlight certain techniques.
5. Many educators interpret the Common Core State Standards as encouraging more nonfiction writing. Where do you see nonfiction writing in your writing classroom? Discuss.

### **Chapter Fourteen: Revision**

1. In your own classroom, how do you address the resistance to revision many students have? Discuss this issue with colleagues and see if there are any new ideas you can add to your approach. What are realistic goals in this arena of revision?
2. Ralph writes, “Too many students conceive of revision as a way to fix a broken piece. In fact, it’s just the opposite—it’s a way to honor a strong piece that has real potential.” Discuss. How can we help shift the paradigm for revision in our classroom?
3. How do you cultivate yourself as a reader for your students? How can we establish that identify first before we engage with student work as a teacher?
4. As you conference, what strategies do you use to convey your enthusiasm and sympathy to young writers’ vision?
5. When it comes to revision, how do you support student voice and autonomy? How do you balance this sense of agency with assessment expectations in your school?
6. What does the relationship between Ralph and Don Murray reflect about the tenets of effective feedback and revision highlighted in this chapter? How can we bring those conditions to our own relationship with young writers?



### **Un-Final Thoughts**

1. Ralph states on page 177: "Writers explore." In what ways could you "explore" as a way to enrich your writing life?
2. What are a few "tiny things" you could write about? People you could observe or to whom you could listen? Ideas you feel are important? Jot down a list of potential writing topics.
3. How has the digital age impacted your writing? Teaching of writing? Ask your students about the different digital forms in which they read and write.
4. Do you find, as Ralph does, that "strong writing is still strong writing" (180), even with an expanded digital literacy? Discuss this issue with your colleagues.
5. On page 181, Ralph made a list of his thoughts about writing. Generate your own thoughts, discuss with colleagues, and then place them somewhere you can see them each day.
6. What new ideas or inspirations do you have for your own writing? Your teaching?