Short Texts, Craft Notes, and Practical Classroom Uses

Mentor Author, Mentor Texts

Ralph Fletcher

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Hi. I’m Ralph Fletcher, and I want to tell you a little about myself before we get rolling. I’m the oldest of nine kids. On the street where I grew up we had our nine, plus there was another family of Fletchers (no relation) down the street and they had ten kids. Nineteen Fletcher kids! On that street either you were a Fletcher, or you pretended you were one.

Let’s see, what else should I tell you about myself? Well, I like baseball, hiking, campfires, mustard, funny movies, novels by Cormac McCarthy, Jackson Browne songs, basketball, babies when they’re just learning how to walk, Hawaii, grilled fish, blueberry pie with vanilla ice cream, dark chocolate . . .

I like writing, too. In fact I love to write. A day without writing just doesn’t feel complete. I have written forty books, half of them for teachers, the other half for kids. I have a special interest in helping young writers. That’s why I wrote this book. I gathered the short texts for this collection in the hopes that they would fuel you on your journey to becoming a better writer.
Too often in school, books and poems get dissected like so many frog legs. That isn’t necessarily bad—it can shine a spotlight on an important craft element (writing technique or strategy)—but it has its downside, too. It’s sort of like taking apart an antique pocket watch to see how it works. When you’re finished, instead of having a beautiful pocket watch that can accurately tell time, you end up with dozens of glittering little pieces spread out on a table. Worst of all, the watch’s heart, its ticking pulse, has stopped beating.

I didn’t want kids to dissect these stories and poems, to smash them to smithereens. I knew there had to be a better way! In college I had one professor who would begin the class by saying: “Let’s *unpack* this poem . . . .” I like that word. That’s what I want to do in this book—not to *dissect* these pieces with you but to gently *unpack* them. It’s my hope that the discussions we’ll have will take you deeper into these pieces and, in the process, inspire you to try things in your writing you’ve never tried before.

These twenty-four pieces of writing were all created by me. A half dozen of them are what I call “slices of memoir.” You’ll find an assortment of other genres: poems, stories, excerpts from novels, nonfiction, picture books, and essays. The first few pieces are easiest to read and delve into; the mentor texts become a bit more challenging as you move through the book.

When choosing these pieces, I put a premium on brevity. I wanted “microtexts” short enough to be read in one sitting. I tried to select high-interest pieces. Realistically, however, you may not love each and every one of them. That’s okay. If you read one of these pieces and have trouble connecting to it, feel free to skip ahead to the next one.

I strongly suggest that you read each one at least twice. Read it once to enjoy it, paying attention to what it’s about. Then read it again, and try to read it as a writer. During this second reading, pay attention to *how* the piece is written: word choice, surprising imagery, transitions, details, the varying length of sentences, or whatever happens to strike your eye.

When you read one of these selections the second time around, make sure you have a pen in hand so you can underline or circle any parts you find noteworthy. Go for it—mark up my texts! Feel free to make notes in the margins, too. Mark up any parts you want, for instance:

- surprises (unexpected things in the piece)
- what puzzled you
- great words or phrases you’d like to use in your writing
• favorite sentences (quotables and keepers)
• connections (to other books, other pieces in this book, or your own life)

After you have read a particular piece a few times and marked it up, turn to the Writer’s Notes section. In this section I unpack the piece you just read and try to give the inside scoop. How did I come to write that piece? What was I aiming for? What issues did I wrestle with? What questions are still unresolved in my mind? Writing involves making a hundred decisions, and I was there when I made those decisions so I can talk about each piece from the inside out. In the writer’s notes I point out a few writerly moves I want you to be aware of. Maybe you’ll like something I do and want to try in your own writing.

The Writer’s Notes sections are not meant to be encyclopedic—in other words, I don’t try to point out everything. Rather, I focus on what I consider the most important things. In some of the pieces, especially the last four, I share the revision process I went through in order to reach the final version.

I suspect that these pieces will raise more questions than answers. As you’re reading and rereading, you might ask yourself:

• Is this mentor piece one I can learn from?
• What do I love? Or not love?
• What is this author doing that I have never done in my writing?
• Why did the writer do this or that? What was his thinking in the decisions he made along the way?
• What is one part that I admire? Or don’t admire?
• What seems most surprising here (in terms of how this is written)?
• Does this mentor text have any takeaways—something I can take/borrow/steal for my own writing? If so, what?

Okay, so you have read and reread the piece, marked it up, and read the writer’s notes. Now what? Here are a few things you might do next:

• Make a copy of the writing and put it in your writer’s notebook.
• Copy a sentence or short section of the piece into your writer’s notebook, maybe mentioning why you chose it.
• Share it with a friend, zooming in on one part or craft element you really liked.
• “Write off the text”—that is, create a piece of your own that is similar to the one I wrote.
You’re in charge of your own learning. This applies to these texts. I would never direct anyone to do all the items on the previous list of suggestions. And I would only suggest you try one of these things if it makes sense to you as a writer.

It’s okay to do nothing, too. Sometimes it’s enough simply to read the writing in a quiet place, to think deeply about it, and let the words soak into you.

Becoming a strong writer isn’t like winning American Idol; you don’t make it overnight. Learning to write well is a lifelong journey. Everything you read will have an impact on making you into the writer you’ll become. I will be happy if these stories, poems, and other pieces become part of your journey. The word inspire means “breathe in.” I hope you will breathe in these pieces—their spirit as well as their craft—and allow them to lift your writing. Okay, now let’s have some fun together!
TEXTS &
Writer’s Notes
Can you guess what kind of pet I have? Here are two hints. I have hundreds if not thousands of them. Plus, they make a valuable contribution to the world.

If you guessed honeybees, you would have been wrong. In fact, I have a colony of composting red worms. Because of them, I almost never have to throw away any spoiled or leftover food scraps from the table.

I have always been interested in transformation: how one thing can morph into something else. Once upon a time there were people known as alchemists who believed you could turn lead into gold. (An intriguing idea, even if it’s not true.) I have a rock tumbler that can turn common stones into polished gems. So when I first heard about worm composting, I loved the idea that common food scraps could be magically transformed into a useful thing.

Here’s how it works: Instead of throwing away that half-eaten piece of pizza or scraps from the salad bowl, you feed it to a colony of red worms. The worms eat that stuff and turn it into rich soil you can use in your garden or for houseplants.

To get started I purchased a batch of red worms for $30.00 from a company in California. They look like common earthworms, only smaller. I also bought a composter that had four stacking trays. There are holes in the bottom of each tray so the worms can migrate up or down depending on where the food is. Mine is called an Upwardly Mobile Composter, a name that still makes me smile. I mean, are these worms hoping to move into a richer neighborhood or something?

I followed the instructions and got the composter started by mixing a “coir” (fibers from the husk of a coconut) with some dirt plus shredded cardboard. Then I added the worms and gave them a moderate amount of food. The instructions cautioned against over-feeding.

It worked! Red worms are not picky eaters. They will devour almost everything you give them, but they especially love coffee grinds, cereal, French fries, greasy pizza cardboard, moldy bread, and slightly spoiled vegetables. You know the glossy ad fliers you find in Sunday newspapers? It turns out that this paper is covered with clay during the printing process, and worms go wild for it. Recently I shredded a pile of this paper and fed it to the worms as a treat, which prompted my youngest son to complain: “You treat those worms better than your kids!” That is entirely untrue, though I do bring the composter into the garage during the winter so they don’t freeze in the icy New Hampshire air.
The red worms produce the “soil” by eating the food and passing it out the other end of their bodies. This probably sounds pretty gross, but the resulting stuff is fresh and rich. Trust me: there is no unpleasant smell at all. You end up with grade-A loam for all your plants and shrubs.

These composting red worms are awesome pets. Maybe you can’t cuddle up with them in front of the TV like you can with a cat or dog, but these little critters require very little care. Best of all, they’ll happily turn your leftover food into valuable soil. In this way, the worm-wizards of recycling make this world a better place.
Bringing Readers into an Unfamiliar World

This is an example of nonfiction writing—I’m teaching the reader about worm composting. But you could also classify it as how-to writing. Here I take the reader by the hand and lead him or her through the steps necessary to buy and sustain a colony of composting red worms. My purpose was to explain worm composting in a way that would be clear, and make it seem like anybody can do it—which they can!

I actually have come to learn a great deal about composting worms, but I kept reminding myself that readers would probably know very little. They would be wondering about many things. What are red worms? Where do you get them? How much do they cost? How do they eat? I wanted to make sure to answer these basic questions.

Notice that I used questions several times in this piece. I have found that questions are a great way to engage the reader. As much as possible, I tried to make the tone conversational in this piece of writing. Also, if possible, I always try to interject a little humor in my nonfiction writing. I did that here.
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