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Ralph Fletcher
May 2011
In the early 1840s there was a carpenter in Brooklyn, New York, who worked framing two- and three-room houses. He had worked as a journalist and produced some unimpressive fiction. His literary career was not promising. But in 1855 this man shocked the world by publishing a collection of poems that immediately was recognized as a classic.

The book was *Leaves of Grass*. The man: Walt Whitman.

How could a virtually unknown writer come out of nowhere to produce such a work? It may have seemed sudden, but it turns out that in the 1840s Whitman had been undergoing a remarkable transformation, one sparked by reading the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

“I was simmering, simmering, simmering,” Whitman would famously say to John Townsend Trowbridge in 1860. “Emerson brought me to a boil.”

Whitman seemed to be acknowledging that he could only go so far on his own. In order for him to fully tap his potential, Whitman had to apprentice himself to a writer such as Emerson. This story carries important implications for writing teachers.
Our students, too, are simmering, simmering, simmering. How can we connect them to their Emersons? How can we bring them to a boil?

**Reading That Inspires Writing**

Writing is slippery stuff. How does anyone learn to do it well? To enhance the development of their students, many writing teachers turn to high-quality examples crafted by skilled professionals. These texts have been called many things: models, exemplars, anchors, and, more recently, mentor texts. I have made wide use of them in my books on teaching writing, and in my own growth as a writer.

I am certain that reading particular novels, poems, and plays provided a catalyst that helped me grow into the writer I am today. But I am less sure about whether I learned specific lessons from particular texts. Upon reflection, I believe it was more a case of quality by association. Reading wonderful works by other writers (*The Ox-Bow Incident*, *Angle of Repose*, or a poem like “The Bear,” by Galway Kinnell) made me dissatisfied with my writing. My drab sentences just didn't cut it anymore. It was clear I had to shed my old writing skin and grow a better one. I needed a writing makeover. I had to upgrade my prose.

Powerful writing seems to contain a magical essence, one we hope might somehow rub off on us. As a young writer I spent untold hours copying the stories of Ernest Hemingway, sentence by sentence, word by word. With my atrocious handwriting, this was tedious, painful work. It seems pretty silly now, but I was quite earnest. I was hoping that, somehow, the Hemingway magic might rub off on me.
Writing teachers do a similar thing. We share mentor texts by the likes of Cisneros, Rylant, or Christopher Paul Curtis, hoping that their sparkling sentences might lift the writing of our students, or at least provide scaffolding for them to build sturdier texts of their own. But, as any writing teacher knows, it's not always easy. It turns out that this magical essence is not so simple to extract. And once extracted, it doesn't transfer easily to the student who reads it.

When it comes to fostering the reading-writing connection, we might imagine two ends of a continuum—teachers who do very little to connect young writers to exemplary texts, and teachers who do too much. There is a memorable Three Stooges cartoon in which Moe, Larry, and Curly get hired to work as chefs at a fancy restaurant. They each don chef's hats, sharpen their knives, and are eager to get started.

The first order arrives: “A bowl of chicken soup!”

“Coming right up!” Moe promises. He proceeds to pour some hot water through the carcass of a raw chicken, collects the water that comes out the other end in a bowl, and serves it to the unwary customer.

This is hilarious; everyone knows that such a cursory pass-through will not create much of a broth. But I wonder if we don't do something similar as writing teachers. We give students only the briefest encounter with a text, usually one of our own choosing. Then we lament the fact that their writing has not been richly flavored by what they merely skimmed.

At the other end of the continuum, we have teachers who make absolutely certain that their students have a sustained encounter with the specified mentor text. Kids are directed to copy excerpts in their writer's notebooks, answer a series of questions, reflect on what technique the author used, label it, and “write off the text” to produce similar texts of their own.

In this regard, we have drifted a long way from using provocative literature as inspiration. (To me, the phrase anchor text suggests something that weighs down rather than lifts up.) Consider what happens in a classroom when students are having trouble sitting on the rug and a teacher says: “I love the way Eliza is sitting so quietly and ready to listen.” Typically, when one student (or one text) gets identified as a good example, it can create a great deal of resentment.

I once received an email from a middle school boy in Tennessee:

Dear Ralph Fletcher,

This year all we have done is use your books as anchor texts. All we've been doing is try to write like Ralph Fletcher. It hasn't been fun. To tell you the truth it's been wicked boring! Basically, you ruined 6th grade for me and the other kids in my class. Thanks a lot!
I was shocked to receive such a blunt, rude note. (I eventually did receive an apology from this student.) But his email disturbed me for another reason: I realized that it contained a nasty sliver of truth. My texts were being force-fed to him. He had been fletcherized, and he hated it. Who could blame him?

**Open Source Mentor Texts**

Part of the problem may lie in how we have approached mentor texts. Instead of moving from whole to part, we have gone in the other direction, beginning with a specific skill, strategy, or craft element and then looking for a text that illustrates that one thing. This runs the risk of reducing a complex and layered text to one craft element.

In this book I propose a new way we might look at these texts. To explain, I will briefly borrow the concepts of *open source* and *closed source* from the world of computer programming.

*Closed source* refers to software whose source code is kept a secret by its creators. This is done to maintain tight control over their system and to protect trade secrets. Microsoft Windows is closed source: nobody but the employees of Microsoft can read or modify its source code.

Are you with me so far? By contrast, *open source* refers to software whose source code is made available to the public. For example, Linux and Android (which are also operating systems, like Windows) are open source. Anyone can go read the code, see how they’re implemented, and make improvements or copy the code for their own purposes. This creates a more democratic dynamic, allowing easier and more open access to users with programming skills. Talented users become co-creators, shaping the platform they are using. It’s like one chef who keeps a prized recipe secret, as opposed to another who makes her recipe readily available for any would-be chef to use and tinker with.

All this computer talk makes me sound like I’m a computer expert, which I’m not! But I wonder: What would happen if we started thinking of mentor texts as open source? Instead of directing students to pay attention to this strategy or that technique, what if we invite them to *look at these texts and enter into them on their own terms*. This would give students more control, more ownership, and it would respect the transactional dynamic that is present whenever anybody reads anything.

Let’s take a look at the following paragraph excerpted from “The Follower,” a short story by Jack Gantos (*Guys Read*, edited by Jon Scieszka, p. 79).
I dislocated the fingers on my right hand, bruised the side of my face, and sprained my right shoulder. I limped home hunched over like Quasimodo and went straight to my room. A few minutes later I was barking in pain from relocating the joints in my fingers. I was so afraid my mother would see my bruised face that I stole my sister’s makeup and powdered my bruise. At dinner I couldn’t use my right arm. It hung limply at my side like an elephant’s trunk. I must have pinched a nerve on contact with the ground that left my arm paralyzed. Perhaps for life. I ate with my left hand and food kept falling down my chin and shirt and onto my lap. (79)

If you read this aloud to students, or give them time to read it on their own, they will notice various elements in the text. Their connections will naturally range from the specific (the use of barking as a verb) to the general (the black humor of this piece). Here’s one way to envision this range:

In this triangular schema, the most specific noticings (words, phrases, punctuation) can be found at the top; the most general (theme, subject) are represented at the bottom. I suggest that, in the democratic spirit of open source, we put students in charge of what they notice. Instead of directing students to pay attention to a particular strategy or craft element of our choosing, let’s invite students to connect with whatever aspect of the text they find the most intriguing or compelling.

Usually when students look closely at a mentor text, we direct their attention to the how (the craft or the aesthetics of the writing) rather than the what (the subject
or topic). But left to their own devices, students may not choose to connect this way. In fact, they may respond with questions or wonderings that pertain to the content:

- Is the narrator seriously hurt? Or is he just exaggerating?
- How come he doesn't want his mother to know the extent of his injuries?
- Quasimodo sounds like a funny name—who is he (or she) anyway?

Consider the issue of mentor texts in terms of watching a demonstration lesson in a classroom. Most of us have watched a teacher do such a lesson. Let's say that the teacher or staff developer asks observers to pay close attention to her writing conferences during the class. That's a worthy goal, but here's what is actually going on in the heads of the observing teachers:

Lucy is amazed by the high noise level in the classroom. She has never imagined allowing so much talk.

Karen is focused on one little boy who spends most of the period drawing instead of writing.

Dan is intrigued by the amount of writing displayed on the wall—not only finished pieces but lots of rough drafts as well.

Martha can't believe that the teacher is allowing students to write while sprawled on the floor (which isn't very clean).

It has been my experience that, no matter what I say ahead of time, observing teachers will focus on what they find most compelling. When I worked as a coach/staff developer, I found this to be frustrating, but I have come to accept that this is the way most people learn. People focus on what they are ready to see.

The same thing is true when we bring potent texts to young writers. I believe that when we give students a poem, story, or essay to read and respond to, they will zero in on what they are ready to notice. And that's okay. That's what I mean by open source. We can't control how students absorb these texts, nor should we. As writing teachers it is our job to find “stretch pieces,” those rich texts that suggest new possibilities for students' writing. But let's honor whatever they notice, and use that as the building blocks of our teaching.

How to Use This Book

I wrote all twenty-four pieces in this book. You'll find an assortment of genres: stories, memoirs, poems, essays, picture books, and excerpts from novels. I tried to select short, high-interest pieces. Though some are taken from longer works, each one can also stand on its own with a beginning, middle, and ending. I tried to choose pieces that would bring a sense of closure by the end. The various texts have been arranged
so that easier (less challenging) texts can be found at the beginning; more challenging texts can be found toward the end.

Some teachers will be inclined to assign particular texts for the entire class to read. There may be value in doing so on occasion, but as much as possible I’d prefer that you invite students to select those pieces from which they can learn. Realistically, your students probably will not love each and every one of these texts. That’s okay. If they read one of these pieces and have trouble connecting to it, I would suggest they simply skip ahead to the next one.

“We’re doing mentor texts,” a teacher once told me. This comment made me cringe, but it also got me thinking. How do we structure close encounters between students and models from literature in a way that respects student autonomy and individual learning styles? Dick Allington has warned that too often we “do stuff” (activities, assignments, guided reflections, visual charts) with books. I worry that the same is true of mentor texts. Too often we direct students to “do stuff” with these texts, rather than allow them the choice and time to encounter the texts on their own terms.

So instead of assigning tasks for students to do with these texts, I suggest we offer them a range of strategies—we might even call them approaches—and encourage students to find the ones that feel right to them. In my introduction to students (see page 11), I put forth these suggestions:

• **Read at least once for pleasure.** The mentor texts we learn the most from, the ones that have the biggest impact on our own writing, are the pieces we truly enjoy.

• **Reread at least once for craft.** The first time we read for the what: content, ideas, and information. After we know what the piece is about, we can read it a second time for the how: craft. Robert Cohen, a novelist who teaches at Middlebury, once remarked to me: “I read everything twice, once to enjoy it, and once to steal everything I can from the writer.”

  Rob is right—rereading is probably the most important way to delve deeper into the inner workings of a text and begin figuring out how the writer put it together. But it’s a balancing act. As soon as we require students to undergo repeated rereadings of a text, we risk squeezing the life out of it.

• **Reread with pencil (or highlighter) in hand so you can mark up the text.** We want to encourage kids to be active, not stand back in awe or disinterest. Let’s give them as much autonomy as possible in this regard; encourage them to make this process their own. For instance, instead of listing predetermined things for students to look for, you might invite them to come up with their
own labels for craft elements they notice. I visited a fifth-grade class where the students came up with various categories for things to mark when rereading a mentor text:

- **K & Q**: Keepers and quotables—parts you want to save verbatim just because you love the way they’re written.
- **F**: Favorite parts.
- **CAT Scan**: Changes and transitions.
- **Whoa!**: Surprising words and phrases, or familiar words used in an unusual way.
- **Hello?**: Parts that don’t make sense.
- **WE**: Writer’s envy (“I wish I could do this in my writing!”).

It makes sense that students who create their own labels, and their own language, will take a more active part in rereading one of these texts.

- **Save texts (or snippets of texts) you especially like, maybe clipping snippets into your writer’s notebook.**
- **Talk (in small-group or classroom discussions).**

In my introduction to students, in the spirit of anti-stuff, I add this: “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 to let the words soak into you.”

After the kids have grappled with the mentor text in their own particular way, and possibly shared their noticings with each other, invite them to read my “Writer’s Notes” section for that piece. Here I introduce the text, explain my thinking behind various decisions I made, and point out a few things I want kids to notice. With certain pieces, especially the last four, I highlight revisions I made along the way.

I could have gone on and on about each one of the pieces I wrote, but I made a point not to. I didn’t want to squeeze the juice out of them. In his wonderful novel *The Sportswriter*, Richard Ford (1996) suggests that one danger in teaching is that we talk the mystery out of our subjects. Those words haunt me. As teachers, we risk talking the mystery out of good writing, something I tried hard not to do in this book. The writers’ notes are not meant to be comprehensive. They are my way of opening the door and leading the student into the text. I did not attempt to make an exhaustive inventory of every craft element that might be found there.

Note: The writer’s notes should not be played as a trump card or the correct answer given by an expert witness (me). It is my hope that the writer’s notes can be included as another important voice—the author’s insider perspective—in the discussion. Hopefully these notes will extend student thinking, not cut it off.
I suspect a book like this will raise as many questions as answers. As students read these pieces, I hope they will ask themselves:

- Is this mentor piece one I can learn from?
- What do I love? Or not love?
- What is this writer 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 seems most surprising here (in terms of how this is written)?
- What is one part that I admire? Or don't admire?
- Does this mentor text have any takeaways—something I can take/borrow/steal for my own writing? If so, what?

I hope these mentor texts will spark discussion, among both small groups and the whole class. I have long subscribed to the belief that talk is the crucial ingredient in the learning dynamic. My most fervent wish is for these pieces to work as catalysts for some “grand conversations” as you and your students wrestle with the big questions: What is good writing? How can we all become better writers? These are questions writers never stop wrestling with because there are no final answers. But asking those questions will help them grow as writers.

Reading the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson was a pivotal event in Walt Whitman’s life, one that allowed him to make a quantum leap in his own writing. It helped Whitman find his voice, one that has influenced generations of poets thereafter. Our goal should be nothing less when we bring powerful texts to our students—to help each student find him- or herself as a writer. We do that best when we give them the time, space, and choice to enter into the lives of these texts on their own terms. I hope the mentor texts in this book will provide students with new possibilities and ideas for where they might go next—not to fletcherize them, but to help them tap their own individual genius, to help them grow into the writers only they can be.
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!

Ralph Nelson
TEXTS &

Writer’s Notes
Squirming Wizards of Recycling

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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