

Motivating Writers

When you want to hone a skill or begin a new hobby, you typically turn to an expert to pick up a few pointers or to learn the fundamentals. Whether you are tackling your first marathon, taking up scrapbooking, or learning the rudiments of golf, you seek out someone with the requisite expertise. We do the same thing when we teach students how to write. Armed with our own knowledge, we model a writing skill and then turn to master writers for vivid examples to flesh out our teaching. Gathering a selection of stellar titles penned by accomplished writers is a motivating way to model writing fundamentals or to fire up student writers.

Along with sharing memorable books, we encourage students to read like a writer. As students learn to read from a writer's perspective, they will be scrutinizing their favorite books to see how various authors ply their skills. Teach children to use a handy personal writer's notebook to record found treasure discovered along the way. (Basic spiral-free notebooks are best, since you'll avoid the frustration of untangling wires if they are stored together in a crate.) Students' notes will serve as inspiration for future writing.

We've collected a sampling of appealing titles to use as you build students' writing awareness and try new skills together. For a complete list of the books mentioned here, turn to "Comprehensive Bibliography" on p.62.

Following a Plot Line

When we select picture books that exemplify various plot structures, we choose tales with predictable storylines that young writers can borrow and extend. Cumulative tales and circular stories are two such formats that offer endless writing possibilities. Audrey Wood's *The Napping House*

(Harcourt, 1984) is an ideal book for launching an exploration of cumulative tales. Continue with *Move Over, Rover!* by Karen Beaumont (Harcourt, 2006), where Rover's doghouse becomes a shelter for a group of animals on a rainy day. Certainly, the addition of cumulative folktales, including *The Mitten* by Jan Brett (Putnam, 1989) and *One Fine Day* by Nonny Hogrogian (Simon & Schuster, 1971), will round out this collection. Follow up the reading with an opportunity to write a cumulative story together with

students. Then send them off to write their own.

To introduce circular stories, read Sean Taylor's rollicking adventure *When a Monster Is Born* (Roaring Brook, 2006) about a mon-

ster whose life always has "two possibilities." Pair this book with *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* by Laura Joffe Numeroff (HarperCollins/Laura Geringer, 1985) to discuss how writers design a circular story.

For middle-grade students, use a variety of popular folktales or fairy tales to examine how a basic, well-conceived plot moves the story along. Featuring fast-paced plots and action that peaks and resolves with an anticipated conclusion, these are particularly good teaching choices. In addition, most can be read in a short time. After teaching, invite writers to study additional plot lines in other enticing books. Later, pair students up to pen their own versions of the familiar tales.

Try tales with a variety of cultural flavorings, such as William H. Hooks' *Moss Gown* (Clarion, 1987), set in the deep South, or E. Nesbit and Matt Tavares' *Jack and the Beanstalk* (Candlewick, 2006). For motivating modeling, don't miss the Mexican tale *Borreguita and the Coyote* by Verna Aardema (Knopf, 1991) and the amusing *Wolf! Wolf!*, a retelling with a Chinese twist by John Rocco



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(Hyperion, 2007). Future lessons can include an examination of the different ways plot is used in novels.

Developing Memorable Characters

When a writer creates a memorable character, that character comes to life in the reader's imagination. We often carry characters around in our minds for days after reading a book, they are so real to us. How does a writer do that?

An adept writer develops characters in five ways. He or she:

- describes their appearance
- uses their conversations with other characters
- shows readers how they think
- reveals insights through actions and interactions with others
- offers more information through the role of an omniscient, all-seeing narrator

For primary-grade authors, examples of exceptional character development spring from picture books. Jane O'Connor reveals Fancy Nancy's character through Nancy's own first-person account in *Fancy Nancy* (HarperCollins, 2005) and *Fancy Nancy and the Posh Puppy* (HarperCollins, 2007), whereas in Joan W. Blos' *Old Henry* (HarperCollins, 1987), we learn about the main character through the eyes of the omniscient narrator. Fortunately, the library shelves are brimming with distinctive animal characters to explore, such as the "odd bird" in *Tacky the Penguin* by Helen Lester (Houghton, 1988) and the buttered toast-loving title character in Kate DiCamillo's Mercy Watson series.

To highlight strong female characters with indomitable spirits, reach for *Drum, Chavi, Drum!*; *Toca, Chavi, Toca!* by Mayra L. Dole (Children's Book Press, 2003), a bilingual story about Chavi, who is determined to play the drums in Miami's Calle Ocho festival. In order to further students' understanding of character development, compare Chavi to Ruby, who becomes one of the first female students in a Chinese university in Shirin Yim Bridges' *Ruby's Wish* (Chronicle, 2002).

In the intermediate grades use excerpts from a read-aloud to demonstrate how the author creates a character. During class discussions, ask students to listen for and identify the methods used by authors. Collect examples in writer's notebooks to share in future class discussions and as writing models. Some characters not easily forgotten are Rosa in *Bread and Roses, Too* by Katherine Paterson (Clarion, 2006) and Jamie O'Neill in *The Lighthouse Land* by Adrian McKinty (Abrams/Amulet, 2006). Examine the development of gutsy Charlotte in Avi's *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* (Orchard, 1990) or study Elijah J. Breeze II


in *Safe at Home* by Sharon Robinson (Scholastic, 2006). You will be well on your way to learning from masterful writers.

It's All in the Words

Hearing a book read aloud can make the quiet words on a page sing with joy, tense up with worry, or thunder in rage. Skillful writers seek the most appropriate words to accomplish this. Whether you are book-talking in the library or using the class read-aloud, you can illuminate the power of well-chosen words. Invite your learners to become word collectors, adding succulent tidbits to their writer's notebooks or to a chart of possibilities posted for reference on the classroom or library wall. Periodically share the discoveries so that readers and writers can learn from each other.

Surrounding budding authors with the sounds of well-crafted language is essential to boosting their emergent writing style. When selecting books to read aloud to primary-grade students, look for rhythmic language that invites listeners to join in on the fun. The snappy prose in Carolyn Crimi's *Tessa's Tip-Tapping Toes* (Orchard, 2002) will have students dancing with Tessa and her newfound friend Oscar, the singing cat. Alice Schertle also uses rhyme and alliteration to chronicle a creature's year in *Very Hairy Bear* (Harcourt, 2007). Fans of Kate and Jim McMullan will enjoy an alliterative countdown as a backhoe cleans up an abandoned lot in *Im Dirty!* (HarperCollins/Joanna Cotler, 2006). After sharing a book with distinctive style, discuss what the writer did to make it enjoyable to read. Then demonstrate using rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, and more in your own writing.

Don't ever hesitate to use the perfect picture book in middle and upper grades. To hear how much fun words can be, read over-the-top *The Great Fuzz Frenzy* by Janet Stevens and Susan Stevens Crummel (Harcourt, 2005). Listeners will get the message: you can't skimp on finding the right words to convey your thoughts. Round out the exploration with Sharon G. Flake's *The Broken Bike Boy and the Queen of 33rd Street* (Hyperion/Jump at the Sun, 2007) or Cornelia Funke's *Dragon Rider* (Scholastic/Chicken House, 2004).

It is clear that the more students read, the more they discover about the craft of writing. Your expertise as you point out how writers skillfully create reading magic will inspire students to continue on a quest to hone their own writing skills, with authors by their sides. 

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