

Powerful Books, Inspired Writers, Part III

Modeling the Traits of Good Writing— Voice and Conventions

This is the third and final installment in a series presenting books that model the six traits of writing. **By Maria Walther**

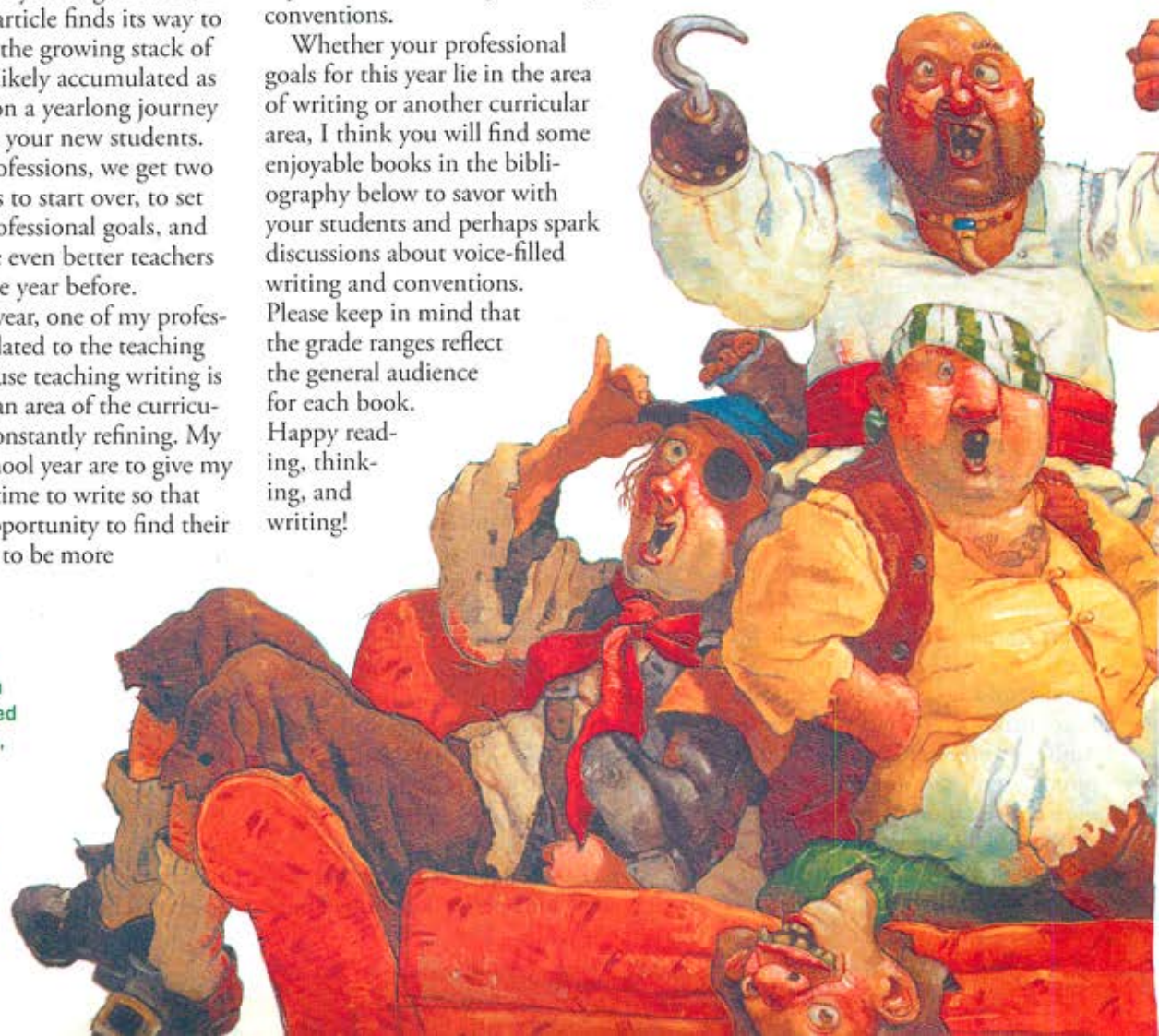
As the school year begins anew, I hope this article finds its way to the top of the growing stack of papers that has likely accumulated as you embark upon a yearlong journey of learning with your new students. Unlike other professions, we get two New Year's Days to start over, to set personal and professional goals, and to attempt to be even better teachers than we were the year before.

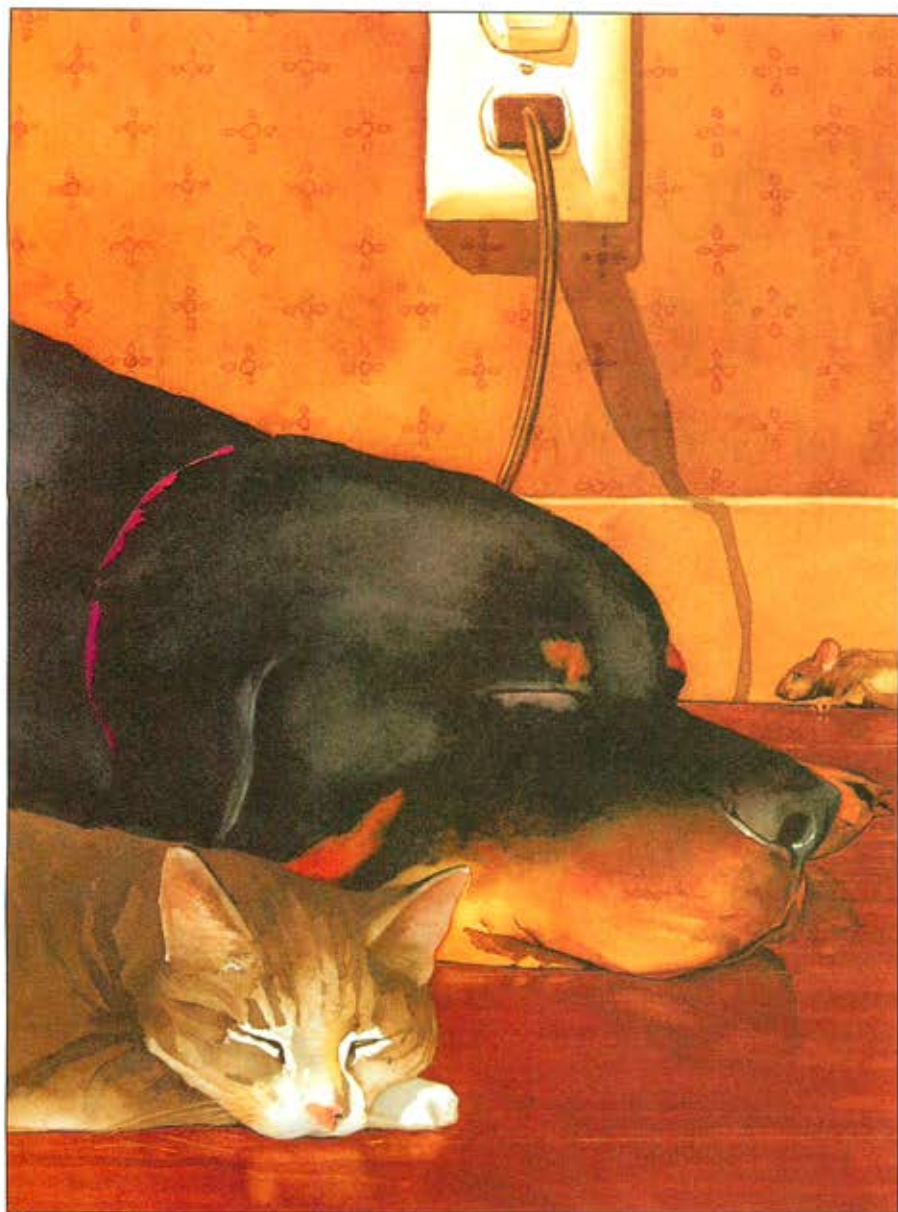
Nearly every year, one of my professional goals is related to the teaching of writing. Because teaching writing is hard work, it is an area of the curriculum that I am constantly refining. My goals for this school year are to give my students ample time to write so that they have the opportunity to find their own voices, and to be more

explicit in the teaching of writing conventions.

Whether your professional goals for this year lie in the area of writing or another curricular area, I think you will find some enjoyable books in the bibliography below to savor with your students and perhaps spark discussions about voice-filled writing and conventions. Please keep in mind that the grade ranges reflect the general audience for each book. Happy reading, thinking, and writing!

Pirates Don't Change Diapers, written by Melinda Long and illustrated by David Shannon, tells the tale of swashbuckling babysitters in pursuit of buried treasure.





Donald Hall's *I Am the Dog, I Am the Cat*, illustrated by Barry Moser, offers readers comically contrasting points of view.

Voice—Look Who's Talking

What characteristics found in a piece of writing give it voice? How do talented authors write so that their words speak directly to the reader? More importantly, how do we, as educators, foster that talent in our young writers? Authors whose voice comes shining through write as though they are having a conversation with the reader.

To bring books with voice into your classroom, begin by looking for tales written in the first person.

You will find many engaging stories in which the character is doing the talking. A simple way to help students refine and strengthen their voice is to encourage them to read their work aloud. Ralph Fletcher, author of *What a Writer Needs* (Heinemann, 1993), suggests prompting students to "Read it back. Listen to how the writing sounds. Which parts sound most like you? Are there places where you can hear yourself chatting to a friend?"

Voice is strongly related to the intended audience and identified pur-

pose for writing. As Reggie Routman states in *Writing Essentials* (Heinemann, 2005), children write with voice when they are interested and invested in the writing.

The following bibliography includes books written in the first person (and many in the first animal!) as well as titles that will help you model, teach, and nurture voice in your budding writers.

Dear Mrs. LaRue: Letters from Obedience School. By Mark Teague. 2002. 32p. Scholastic, \$15.95 (9780439206631).

K–Gr. 2. Ike writes letters to his owner, Mrs. LaRue, trying to persuade her to rescue him from obedience school. Ike's missives have a clear purpose and audience, which leads nicely into a persuasive letter-writing lesson. For a detailed letter-writing lesson plan using this book, visit the *Book Links* Web site at <http://www.ala.org/BookLinks> and click on "Web Connections."



Diary of a Fly. By Doreen Cronin. Illus. by Harry Bliss. 2007. 40p. HarperCollins/Joanna Cotler, \$15.99 (9780060001568).

Gr. 1–3. By now you may well have shared *Diary of a Worm* (HarperCollins/Joanna Cotler, 2003) and *Diary of a Spider* (HarperCollins/Joanna Cotler, 2005) with your students. Cronin's latest first-person account offers many possibilities to young writers. For example, after studying the life cycle of a creature, students could rewrite their observations in a humorous diary format.

How Are You Peeling? Foods with Moods. By Saxon Freymann and Joost Elffers. 1999. 48p. Scholastic/Arthur A. Levine, \$15.95 (9780439104319).

Preschool–Gr. 2. One element of bringing voice into writing is being able to express emotions with words. This book's simple rhyming text and unique food "faces" help children identify different moods and feelings. To extend the book into a writing

minilesson, ask what someone who is happy would look like. How would students describe that mood with words? Encourage children to draw a face depicting a certain mood and label it with words. This exercise will help them as they pen stories with memorable characters.

I Am the Dog, I Am the Cat. By Donald Hall. Illus. by Barry Moser. 1994. 32p. Dial, \$16.99 (9780803715042).

K–Gr. 4. Hall’s poetic text begs to be read by two voices. A Rottweiler and tabby cat reveal the qualities that make each of them unique. Dog says, “I am the dog. / I like bones. / I like to bury bones.” Cat responds, “I am the cat. / I don’t care whether they feed me or not / as long as I get fed.” Students can try their hand at writing from the points of view of two other diverse animals. Provide time for them to read their polished pieces to the class.

Leaving the Nest. By Mordicai Gerstein. 2007. 40p. Farrar/Frances Foster, \$16 (9780374343699).

Preschool–Gr. 2. This lively story is set in a backyard where a baby blue jay, a girl, a kitten, and some squirrels are all trying to “leave the nest.” Each creature’s thoughts and conversations are told entirely through speech bubbles, which young writers enjoy using in their own illustrations. Reach for *Leaving the Nest* when students are ready to experiment with dialogue.

The Night I Followed the Dog. By Nina Laden. 1994. 32p. Chronicle, \$16.95 (9780811806472).

Gr. 1–3. A boy gives a first-person account of his adventures following his dog to the exclusive dog club. The text has a hand-printed appearance and Laden intersperses clever uses of word art, such as turning the *t* in *exotic* into a palm tree. During writing workshop, invite students to try using their imaginations to follow their own pets or stuffed animals and then write about their creatures’ escapades.

On Monday When It Rained. By Cheryl Kachenmeister. Photos by Tom Berthiaume. 1989. 40p. Houghton, \$15 (9780395519400); paper, \$5.95 (9780618111244).

K–Gr. 2. Through expressive black-and-white photographs, a boy communicates the different emotions he experiences throughout the week. Readers watch as each day’s events evoke a different feeling. This book can be used in a similar fashion as *How Are You Peeling?* (see above).

Once upon a Cool Motorcycle Dude. By Kevin O’Malley. Illus. by Kevin O’Malley, Carol Heyer, and Scott Goto. 2005. 32p. Walker, \$16.95 (9780802789471).

Gr. 1–5. O’Malley has captured the essence of voice in this unique picture book. The story opens with a girl and boy who are working together to tell a fairy tale. The girl begins her tale by introducing Princess Tenderheart and her eight beautiful ponies, and when the boy can stand it no longer, he interrupts with his own version of the tale that includes a cool muscle dude. Heyer and Goto’s illustrations add another dimension to the story by reflecting the contradictory tones of the two children’s fairy tale versions.

Pirates Don’t Change Diapers. By Melinda Long. Illus. by David Shannon. 2007. 44p. Harcourt, \$16 (9780152053536).

Preschool–Gr. 2. Certainly we have the popularity of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies to thank for the increase in circulation of pirate books. In this follow-up to *How I Became a Pirate* (Harcourt, 2003), Jeremy tells what happens when he and his pirate friends are roped into babysitting his little sister. This is perfect to share during writing workshop to prompt a discussion about first-person voice.

Wait! No Paint! By Bruce Whatley. 2001. 32p. HarperCollins, \$15.99 (9780060282707); HarperTrophy, paper, \$6.99 (9780064435468).

K–Gr. 2. Add Whatley’s quirky ver-

Related Articles

For more on six-traits writing, see Parts I and II of “Powerful Books, Inspired Writers” in the May and July 2007 issues of *Book Links*. (Part I is also available in the “Archive of



Online Articles” section of the *Book Links* Web site at <http://www.ala.org/BookLinks>.)

sion of the “Three Little Pigs” to your folktale collection. In this retelling, a glass of juice is spilled on the first pig’s straw house by a mysterious voice. After running to safety, the pigs figure out that the mysterious voice belongs to the story’s illustrator. Hilarious antics accompany an ongoing dialogue between the pigs and the illustrator, who has run out of red paint.

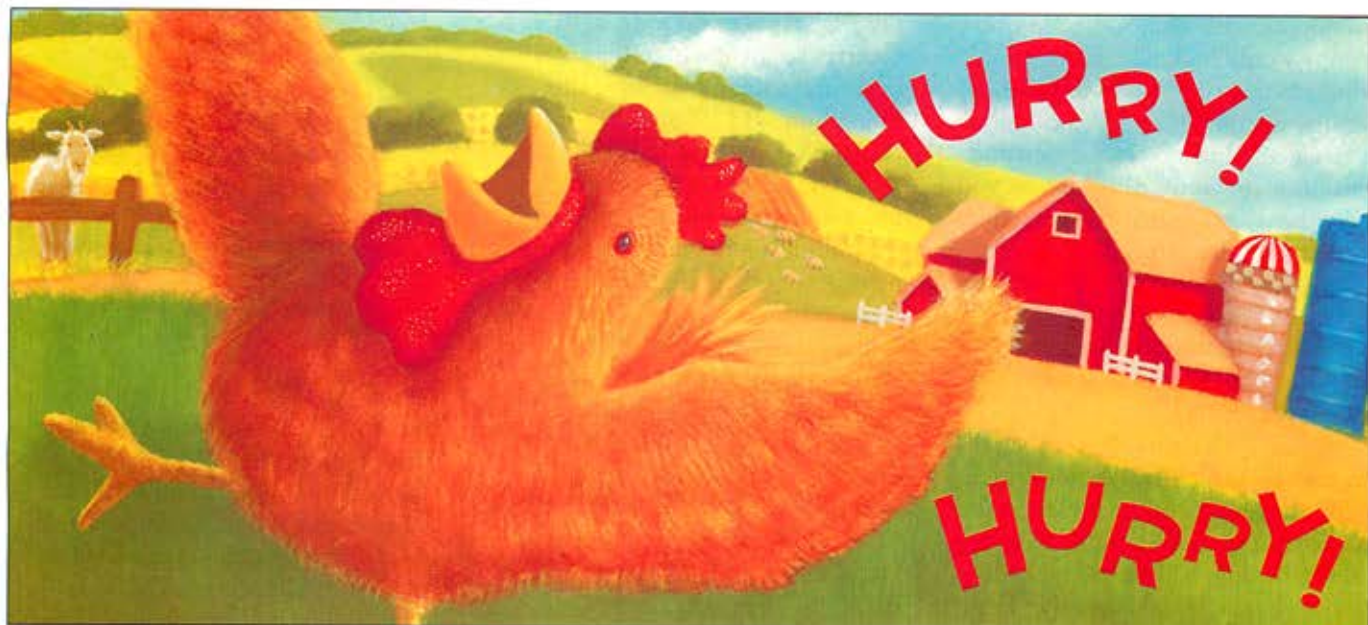
Conventions—A Courtesy to the Reader

Ahhh, conventions! How much should we stress them with beginning writers? Is it more important that students get their ideas on paper or use conventional spelling, grammar, and punctuation? What is reasonable to expect of young writers? Questions such as these challenge every writing teacher.

My belief is simple. We can only expect our students to use conventions that we have explicitly and repeatedly modeled, taught, and practiced. We need to be knowledgeable about our school, district, and state objectives related to conventions. Then, model, teach, practice, and expect that students take the responsibility for their own editing. You might find a book or two below to enhance a conventions minilesson for your students.

Eats, Shoots and Leaves: Why, Commas Really Do Make a Difference! By Lynne Truss. Illus. by Bonnie Timmons. 2006. 32p. Putnam, \$15.99 (9780399244919).

Gr. 1–3. Truss has cleverly adapted her best-selling book for adults into



Eve Bunting's farmyard story *Hurry! Hurry!*, illustrated by Jeff Mack, is told almost entirely in exclamations.

a picture book for young readers and writers. On each two-page spread readers view identically worded sentences with commas placed in different spots. The humorous sentences that result demonstrate the difference in meaning when a comma is added or deleted.

Greedy Apostrophe: A Cautionary Tale. By Jan Carr. Illus. by Ethan Long. 2007. 32p. Holiday, \$16.95 (9780823420063).

Gr. 1–3. In this upbeat, colorful punctuation tale, the greedy apostrophe decides that instead of doing his assigned job, he will place himself into words where he is not wanted. Thus, instead of making possessives, he creates confusion by putting himself into plural words. Consider using this picture book when introducing the proper use of an apostrophe.

Hurry! Hurry! By Eve Bunting. Illus. by Jeff Mack. 2007. 40p. Harcourt, \$16 (9780152054106).

Preschool–Gr. 1. Beginning with “Hurry! Hurry!” as the rooster gathers the farm animals to see the farm’s newest arrival, Bunting’s tale, told almost entirely in exclamations, demonstrates the effective use of

exclamation marks. Mack’s colorful illustrations and energetic type make the exclamations pop off the page.

Nouns and Verbs Have a Field Day. By Robin Pulver. Illus. by Lynn Rowe Reed. 2006. 32p. Holiday, \$16.95 (9780823419821); paper, \$6.95 (9780823420971).

Gr. 1–3. When Mr. Wright and his students go outside for field day, the nouns and verbs are bored, so they decide to have a field day of their own. Verbs team up with verbs and nouns with nouns, but they soon discover that in order to have fun they must work together. The book ends as Mr. Wright’s students come back to discover a Mad Libs–like message on the board encouraging students to play around with nouns and verbs.

The Perfect Pop-up Punctuation Book. By Kate Petty. Illus. by Jennie Maizels. 2006. 12p. Dutton, \$14.99 (9780525477723).

Gr. 2–4. This book lives up to the title. It is brimming with informative tabs, lift-the-flaps, and pop-up elements that combine into an engaging grammar lesson. Readers and listeners alike will learn the proper use of com-

mas, semicolons, colons, exclamation points, dashes, and much more.

Punctuation Takes a Vacation. By Robin Pulver. Illus. by Lynn Rowe Reed. 2003. 32p. Holiday, \$17.95 (9780823416875); paper, \$6.95 (9780823418206).

Gr. 1–3. Consider using this book to introduce the necessity of punctuation. On a hot, sticky day Mr. Wright declares, “Let’s give punctuation a vacation.” As the kids go out for recess, the punctuation marks head for “Take-a-Break Lake.” The postcards they send back are my favorite part of the book. Each is written with an abundance of the particular mark and signed with such clever names as Sentence Stoppers (periods), List Makers (commas), and The Yackity Yaks (quotation marks). Realizing that writing is impossible without the marks, the class writes a letter (incorrectly punctuated, of course) and the marks return to class. 

Maria Walther is a first-grade teacher in Aurora, Illinois, and the coauthor, along with Carol J. Fuhler, of *Literature Is Back! Using the Best Books to Teach Readers and Writers across Genres* (Scholastic, October 2007).