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Spotlight On...Mentor Texts: Tools for Strengthening Writing

Chances are that by this point in your life, you have built a relationship with someone you would consider to be a mentor—someone who teaches or gives helpful advice, such as an educator, counselor, parent or coach. If asked to think about who has mentored your writing development, you might be quick to identify specific people, but would particular texts also cross your mind? While we can often point to texts as sources of entertainment, information and enlightenment, we might not recognize how texts can also shape our writing abilities. The practice of incorporating mentor texts into ongoing writing instruction has grown steadily over the past twenty years and strongly supports helping students build proficiency with writing standards.

What are mentor texts? Ruth Culham (2014) defines mentor texts as any text, print or digital, that can be read with a writer's eye. Dorfman and Cappelli (2007) elaborate by sharing that, "Mentor texts are pieces of literature that we can return to again and again as we help writers." Dorfman and Cappelli (2007) go on to explain, "We all need mentors in our lives—those knowledgeable others who help us learn how to be teachers, parents, musicians, artists, athletes—who help us do what we could not do before on our own. So, too, do our young writers need mentors." Writing mentors frequently take the form of teachers and parents who demonstrate models of writing for students. Additionally, authors can be powerful mentors. While it might not be feasible to have authors regularly mentor students in person, the texts they compose can serve as mentors when read and studied by students. These mentor texts "become coaches and partners in providing high quality writing instruction" (Dorfman and Cappelli, 2007).

Why use mentor texts? Research in the area of writing instruction has demonstrated the positive impact of including mentor texts as an essential component. As Graham and Perin (2007) note in *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools* (a synthesis of the elements of writing instruction which research demonstrates have positive impact) a critical element of writing instruction is the study of models. Writing achievement is improved when, "Students are

With you as a guide, and literature as the landscape, you can open young writers' eyes to the full range of possibilities before them.

~Ralph Fletcher and
Joanne Portalupi



When students are taught to see how writing is done, this way of seeing opens up to them huge warehouses of possibilities.

~Katie Wood Ray

encouraged to analyze examples and to emulate the critical elements, patterns and forms embodied in the models in their own writing” (Graham and Perin, 2007). Further, use of mentor texts can support achievement of Maine’s English language arts/literacy standards. Both the reading and writing standards make strong reference to studying the craft of writing to bolster reading comprehension and written composition. The reading standards focus on building comprehension by studying how authors have conveyed ideas through analysis of aspects like word choice, text structure, and point of view. The writing standards emphasize attention to task, purpose and audience as well as application of revision and editing to improve writing. All of these standards can be addressed through the use of mentor texts. The close reading inherent in the use of mentor texts enables readers to critically analyze the author’s intended meaning which provides opportunity to study the “writing moves” the author has made to communicate his/her message (i.e. word choice, sentence structures, use of literary devices, description that shows rather than tells, etc.). The use of mentor texts should also be coupled with other high quality instructional practices, such as teachers modeling application of the techniques discovered in the mentor texts to other pieces of writing and providing students with guided practice in applying the strategies to their own writing.

What makes a good mentor text? Katie Wood Ray (2002) says, “As we develop teaching relationships with authors and their work, we find that certain texts seem to surface as very important to teaching. These are the texts that are just full of curriculum potential.” Mentor texts can take many forms—picture books, passages from longer pieces of literature, speeches, letters, poems, etc.—but they share several key characteristics. Mentor texts should:

- be rich and engaging enough to support rereading them multiple times;
- offer examples of the aspect of author’s craft being studied to illuminate what is possible;
- ignite writers’ imaginations and invite opportunity to try mirroring the same; and
- be representative of the content students are studying (i.e. demonstrate models of well-crafted writing across content areas).

In the sections that follow, a number of resources are noted that can support use of mentor texts as tools for improving students’ writing achievement.



Upcoming Professional Development from the Maine DOE

To explore potential training sessions that may be of interest, be sure to check our extensive list of professional development offerings at

www.maine.gov/doe/calendar/



Online Resources

The following online resources provide tools for finding and using mentor texts.

[Writing Fix](#)

Produced and maintained by the Nevada Writing Project, the Writing Fix has built a large collection of mentor text lessons classified by grade span across PK-12. Once at the site, choose the “mentor text” lesson link on the left-hand navigation bar.

[Reading, Writing and Mentor Texts: Imagining the Possibilities](#)

The National Writing Project produces a radio program that focuses on a variety of aspects of writing instruction. This episode discusses the many ways mentor texts support writers. Direct connections to learning across the disciplines and resources for finding mentor texts are also explored.

[Kelly Gallagher: Building Deeper Readers and Writers](#)

Gallagher maintains a website which includes links to his blog and to the much acclaimed “Article of the Week” which provides brief articles about timely topics with some direction for analysis and response. To help build his students’ prior knowledge, Gallagher assigns them an “Article of the Week” every Monday morning. Besides a meaningful reading exercise, each article provides a model of writing for a particular purpose and audience.

Professional Texts

A number of professional texts are available to support educators in utilizing mentor texts as tools for writing instruction, including:

**Mentor Texts: Teaching Writing
Through Children’s Literature, K-6**
(Lynne Dorfman and Rose Cappelli, 2007)

**Nonfiction Mentor Texts: Teaching Informational
Writing Through Children’s Literature, K-8**
(Lynne Dorfman and Rose Cappelli, 2009)

**The Writing Thief: Using Mentor Texts to Teach the
Craft of Writing**
(Ruth Culham, 2014)



Writing well is not just an option for young people – it is a necessity. Along with reading comprehension, writing skill is a predictor of academic success and a basic requirement for participation in civic life and in the global economy.

~Graham and Perin, 2007

Writers take their reading very seriously.

~Shelly Harwayne



**Writing Is Magic, or Is It? Using Mentor Text to Develop the
Writer's Craft**

(Jennifer Bogard and Mary McMackin, 2015)

**Write Like This: Teaching Real-World Writing Through
Modeling and Mentor Texts**

(Kelly Gallagher, 2011)

Literature for Children and Adolescents

Here are a couple of our favorite authors and some of their books that we have found to be valuable mentor texts.

Eve Bunting

[Fly Away Home](#)

[Night Tree](#)

[Someday a Tree](#)

[Wednesday Surprise](#)

Chris Crutcher

[Period 8](#)

[Angry Management](#)

[Athletic Shorts: Six Short Stories](#)

For additional information about this edition, email:

leeann.larsen@maine.gov or morgan.dunton@maine.gov

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The Maine Department
of Education
Phone: 207-624-6600
Web: www.maine.gov/doe



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