

Study Guide



Using Mentor Texts to Teach the Craft of Writing

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Summary

It's been said that mediocre writers borrow, but great writers steal. Writing thieves read widely, dive deeply into texts, and steal bits and pieces from great texts as models for their own writing. Ruth Culham admits to being a writing thief—and she wants you and your students to become writing thieves, too!

Students learn more about reading and writing when we use mentor texts to explore how writing works. Within *The Writing Thief*, you'll discover more than 90 excellent mentor texts along with straightforward activities that can help you teach the traits of writing across the informational, narrative, and argument modes. Ruth presents exceptional examples of children's literature and everyday texts, organized around the key qualities of the writing traits, that can give your students clear, enjoyable examples of good writing—which they can then pinch and pilfer as models for their own writing.

Chapters also include brief essays from favorite thieves—Lester Laminack, David L. Harrison, Lisa Yee, Nicola Davies, Ralph Fletcher, Toni Buzzeo, and Lola Schaefer—detailing the reading that has influenced their own writing.

Ruth's warm, easy going style and friendly tone make this a book you'll turn to again and again as you guide your students to reach their full potential as deep and thoughtful readers and great writers. There's a writing thief in each of us when we learn how to read with a writer's eye!

The format of the guide is set up for a study group. It could be used with a group of teachers or could be used individually as a reflective structure for those reading the book alone. The suggestions offered in the guide are designed to foster collaboration, spark new thinking, and support the transfer of new ideas into the classroom.

Note: For resources and ideas that specifically celebrate Latino culture, explore Ruth's book *Dream Wakers: Mentor Texts that Celebrate Latino Culture*.

Prologue

Getting Started

Discussion/Sharing (15 Minutes)

- What is your history as a reader?
- What is your history as a writer?
- Do you use mentor texts in your classroom to support reading and writing instruction with your students?

Reading Excerpt (15 Minutes)

- Read pages 1–6 from the Prologue. This is an introduction to Ruth as a reader.
- How are Ruth’s experiences as a young reader and writer similar to yours? how are they different?

Quotes Worth Discussing (15 Minutes)

By stealing ideas and crafting lessons from mentor texts, I grow as a writer and learn firsthand that risk taking is one of the most significant skills that any writer can develop (6).

This is close reading—where reading and writing intersect. I’m reading purposefully and uncovering layers of meaning that lead to deep analysis of the text that informs both my reading and my writing (6).

If it communicates a message clearly, it can be a mentor text (6).

Author Insights (5 Minutes)

- Read “Author Insight: Lester Laminack” on pages 7–8.
- How is Lester’s reading identity similar to or different from yours?
- What is one takeaway from Lester’s story?

Putting Ideas into Practice (5 Minutes)

What is one idea that you will continue to think about after today and might integrate into your writer’s workshop?

Chapter 1

Time to Rethink the Teaching of Writing

Discussion/Sharing (10 Minutes)

- What are your beliefs regarding writing instruction?
- What does writing instruction look and sound like in your classroom?
- Look at Table 1, “Dumb Things Versus Sensible Things in Writing Instruction.” What do you notice? What do you wonder?

Reading Excerpt (15 Minutes)

- Read pages 21–26, “The 4Ws of Writing.”
 - Writing Process
 - Writing Traits
 - Writing Workshop
 - Writing Modes
- How do the 4Ws look within your approach to writing instruction?

Quotes Worth Discussing (10 Minutes)

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 (10).

Krashen notes that when children have access to reading material, they read. And what is of particular interest to note is that reading has been shown to improve ‘all aspects of [children’s] literacy, including vocabulary, grammar, spelling, reading and writing ability’ (11).

Most schools don’t have a scope and sequence or a set of materials and strategies that outlines a core writing curriculum for each grade and across grades. So, although students may have an exemplary writing experience and make great gains one year, they start all over the next year because the new teacher doesn’t know what was taught the previous year or has a different set of objectives in mind. Think of the impact on student writing performance when this happens year after year (12).

Author Insights (5 Minutes)

- Read “Author Insight: Lola Schaefer” on page 27.
- What is one takeaway from Lola’s story of herself as a writer?

Putting Ideas into Practice (5 Minutes)

What is one idea from the chapter that you will continue to think about after today and might try out or rethink in your classroom?

Chapter 2

The Power of Mentor Texts for Writing

Discussion/Sharing (10 Minutes)

- How do you define mentor texts? Ruth defines mentor texts as, “any text, print or digital, that you can read with a writer’s eye (31).” How is this similar to or different from yours?
- What role do mentor texts play within your classroom?
- How do you select mentor text titles?

Reading Excerpt (15 Minutes)

- Read *Traits: The Language of Writers* on pages 39–43.
- Ruth has identified the writing traits as: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation. How are these traits similar to or different from the terminology you use in your instruction of writing?
- What’s the benefit of having a common language for talking about writing?

Quotes Worth Discussing (10 Minutes)

A deep, thoughtful understanding of how text works creates an understanding of what good writers do and, in turn, provides options for them as they write (32).

The consistency of language among and between grades provides the ability to map the writing curriculum so it deepens from year to year (39).

When you discover a mentor text, you should feel excitement and energy, a thrill or rush from the words and the way the author conveys the ideas (47).

Author Insights (5 Minutes)

- Read “Author Insights: Nicola Davies” on page 47.
- What is one takeaway from Nicola?

Putting Ideas into Practice (5 Minutes)

What is one idea from the chapter that you will continue to think about after today and might try out or rethink in your classroom?

Chapter 3

Informational Writing

Discussion/Sharing (15 Minutes)

- How do you select mentor texts for the various modes of writing?
- What traits and modes might you want to look for and add to your mentor text collection?
- How do you know when you have found a good mentor text?

Reading Excerpts (15 Minutes)

- For an overview of informational writing, read pages 50–51.
- Read “The Traits and Informational Writing.”
 - Ideas (57–58)
 - Organization (63)
 - Voice (68)
 - Word Choice (72)
 - Sentence Fluency (76)
 - Conventions (80)
- What do you notice? What do you wonder in regard to the traits in the mode of informational writing?

Toolbox (10 Minutes)

Choose a mentor text that is listed between pages 57–88. Have participants in the group explore the text. Have participants share how they might use this book to support writing instruction with their students.

Quotes Worth Discussing (10 Minutes)

To maximize what mentor texts can bring to teaching and learning, we need to focus on the modes of writing right along with the traits (50).

It’s not enough to seek mentor texts that show strength in each of the traits, as they must be exemplars of the mode as well (50).

This is what I’ve learned: When we write about things that matter to us, it provides us with the courage and momentum to keep going (53).

Author Insights (5 Minutes)

- Read “Author Insights: Toni Buzzeo” on page 56.
- What is one takeaway from Toni of how reading influences her as a writer?

Putting Ideas into Practice (5 Minutes)

- What is one idea from the chapter that you might try out or rethink in your classroom?
- Ask participants to try out a mentor text mentioned in *The Writing Thief* for informational writing or to find a mentor text on their own that they could use to support informational writing in the classroom

Chapter 4

Narrative Writing

Discussion/Sharing (15 Minutes)

- In using mentor texts to support informational writing, what went well? What did you find challenging?
- What traits might you want to look for and add to your mentor text collection for informational writing?
- How do you know when you have found a good mentor text for informational writing?

Reading Excerpts (15 Minutes)

- For an overview of narrative writing, read pages 89–91.
- Read “The Traits and Narrative Writing.”
 - Ideas (99)
 - Organization (103)
 - Voice (108)
 - Word Choice (111–112)
 - Sentence Fluency (115–116)
 - Conventions (120)
- What do you notice? What do you wonder in regard to the traits in the mode of narrative writing?

Toolbox (10 Minutes)

Choose a mentor text that is listed between pages 98–128. Have participants in the group explore the text. Have participants share how they might use this book to support writing instruction with their students.

Quotes Worth Discussing (10 Minutes)

Fiction is the thinker’s laboratory—the place where life is explored and considered (91).

So, how is narrative writing different from the informational writing that we just explored in the last chapter? The answer appears to be obvious: Narrative writing tells a story, whereas informational writing explains and describes. But good writing can do both—tell a story to relate information, or share new information as a story (93).

One of the keys to success in the ideas trait is finding a new way to write about a familiar theme (99).

Author Insights (5 Minutes)

- Read “Author Insights: Ralph Fletcher” on pages 96–97.
- What is one takeaway from Ralph of how reading influences him as a writer?

Putting Ideas into Practice (5 Minutes)

- What is one idea from the chapter that you might try out in your classroom?
- Ask participants to try out a mentor text mentioned in *The Writing Thief* for narrative writing or to find a mentor text on their own that they could use to support narrative writing in the classroom.

Chapter 5

Argument Writing

Discussion/Sharing (15 Minutes)

- In using mentor texts to support narrative writing, what went well? What did you find challenging?
- What traits might you want to look for and add to your mentor text collection for narrative writing?
- How do you know when you have found a good mentor text for narrative writing?

Reading Excerpts (15 Minutes)

- For an overview of argument writing, read pages 129–130.
- Read “The Traits and Argument (Opinion) Writing.”
 - Ideas (142)
 - Organization (146)
 - Voice (150–151)
 - Word Choice (154–155)
 - Sentence Fluency (159–160)
 - Conventions (165)
 - What do you notice? What do you wonder in regard to the traits in the mode of argument (opinion) writing?

Toolbox (10 Minutes)

Choose a mentor text that is listed between pages 141–173. Have participants in the group explore the text. Have participants share how they might use this book to support writing instruction with their students.

Quotes Worth Discussing (10 Minutes)

Argument is a very specific form of persuasive writing that draws on the critical thinking that’s essential to logic, which gets at argument’s core. There’s little room for personal appeal in argument writing; it’s an academic form of discourse (129).

This is the best teaching tip I know: nudge. If you can figure out what a student knows, you can gently point the way to what should be learned next (136).

Student writers I've talked to over the years have told me that when their teachers mark up their papers with all the mistakes they've made (revision and editing), it has the cumulative effect of telling them they're no good at writing and to just throw in their writing towel (136).

Author Insights (5 Minutes)

- Read “Author Insights: David Harrison” on pages 138–139.
- What is one takeaway from David of how reading influences him as a writer?

Putting Ideas into Practice (5 Minutes)

- What is one idea from the chapter that you might try out in your classroom?
- Ask participants to try out a mentor text mentioned in *The Writing Thief* for argument writing or to find a mentor text on their own that they could use to support argument writing in the classroom.

Epilogue

Next Steps

Discussion (15 Minutes)

- Did you have any “a-ha moments” as a result of participating in this group and working with this text? If so what were they?
- How might your use of mentor texts change as a result of participating in this study group using the text *The Writing Thief*?
- What advice might you give to a colleague who is starting to explore the concept of being a writing thief?

Author Insights (5 Minutes)

- Read “Author Insights: Lisa Yee” on page 179.
- What is one takeaway from Lisa on how reading influences her as a writer?

Final Quotes Worth Discussing (15 Minutes)

Finding the books worth hugging is surely a big part of what we’re trying to accomplish with readers and writers at every age (180).

Reading is like breathing in and writing is like breathing out (180).—Pam Allyn

Our rallying cry must be ‘texts not tests’ as we seek to develop richer and more expansive collections of mentor texts (180).

Next Steps (10 Minutes)

What do you see as your next steps in the area of writing instruction?