Approaching Texts as Writers

Holly H. Robbins

Approaching Texts as Writers

Abstract

Students can benefit from approaching texts as both readers and writers. As readers, students approach texts primarily for enjoyment and information. Approaching text as writers, students take a more metacognitive stance toward thinking about text creation (McKeough, 2013). In this article I focus on how teachers in the elementary grades can support their students in reading like writers, recognizing the qualities of effective writing and developing these qualities in the texts they create for the mutual benefit of subsequent reading and writing.

Introduction

Although they are not identical cognitive processes, both reading and writing rely on a common fund of knowledge, skills, and processes (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000). Teachers can support their students' reading and writing development through focused re-readings of text followed by opportunities for students to apply literary elements and techniques in their own writing. Through the use of read-alouds and shared reading experiences, teachers can help their students build more sophisticated understandings of text features and provide opportunities for students to apply these features in the texts they create.

This process described above goes by different names. Smith (1983) used the term *reading like a writer* to describe how teachers can initiate students into the "club of writers" (p. 567) through re-reading passages that are particularly well-worded and through discussing the craft of the author. *Reading with a writer's eye* is another term that has been used to describe this process (McKeough, 2013; Tiedt, 1988). McKeough (2013) defines reading with a writer's eye as "noticing how expert writers write as one reads a selection so that one's own writing can be improved. It's paying attention to literary elements and techniques so that they can be used in

one's own writing" (p. 87). Regardless of what we call it, the process has important benefits for students' literacy development.

How Reading Supports Writing

With a finite capacity for working memory, young writers must balance the demands of creating content while deliberately attending to the physical demands of writing such as spelling and handwriting or typing. The opportunity to examine an author's craft while reading like writers, listening to or participating in reading activities, serves as a bridge between the two literary activities. Englert and Mariage (1991) found that explicitly teaching text structure during repeated read-aloud experiences provides young writers with greater resources to use in organizing the texts they create, evidenced in the increase use of text structure elements in students' written products. Bradley and Donovan (2011) found that second graders' use of genre elements and organizational structures in their informational text writing increased following the simple inclusion of discussion of genre elements, features, and organizational structures in informational book read-alouds.

How Writing Supports Reading

While it may seem logical that writing about the material students are learning enhances content knowledge, there is also a growing body of research to support how writing enhances reading comprehension and strengthens students' reading skills. After conducting a large-scale meta-analysis to determine the writing interventions that have the greatest impact on students' reading development, Graham and Hebert (2010) posit that teaching students the writing skills and processes that go into creating text was linked to significant growth in students' reading comprehension, reading fluency, and word reading skills. A type of metacognitive transfer occurs between reading and writing, as the process of creating texts appears to enhance writers' awareness of the genres, text structures, and literary features in their reading.

Selecting a Focus for Reading Like Writers

The complexity of the writing task and the array of different techniques and skills writers use would be too great to try to teach to young writers. Teachers can highlight text features that are developmentally appropriate for their students and

features with which young writers often struggle, those of focus and elaboration. Teachers can also situate reading like writing within the genres with which students are most familiar - narrative and informational text.

In Virginia, the rubric domains for student writing used in the "Grade 5 Instruction Writing Checklist" aligns with the language of the *6 Trait® Writing Model of Assessment and Instruction* (Education Northwest, n.d.; Spandel, 2005). The 6 Trait® Writing Model was developed by teachers to describe the qualities of effective writing. Teachers and students can use the trait language to examine text construction and the qualities that make the writing interesting to read. Using the traits as a focus, teachers can guide students in thinking about the topic choices an author makes and the details that give substance to the writing (ideas); the overall structure of the text, where it begins and how it concludes (organization); the personality of the text or that which makes the writing honest and convincing (voice); the precise and accurate use of language (word choice); the readability of the text (sentence fluency); and the grammar and orthography that hold the piece together (conventions). The overlap of language in both the 6 Trait® approach and the rubric domains in the Virginia "Grade 5 Instruction Writing Checklist"provides a lens and a language for guiding our students in reading like writers.

The Standards of Learning - English: Written Composition (Virginia Department of Education, 2010a) require students to write for a variety of purposes and audiences. A review of the published writing prompts for fifth grade suggest a primary emphasis on personal narrative, essay, and short fiction/imaginary narrative (Virginia Department of Education, 2010b).

> Personal Narrative example: There is a saying that time goes by quickly when you are having fun. Write about an exciting event in which the time seemed to go by faster than usual.
>
> Expository example: Imagine a local newspaper reporter wants to know about your favorite school event. Write to describe the event and explain why it is your favorite.

> Short Fiction (Imaginary Narrative) example: Imagine you received a package in the mail from a special person. Using details, write about what happened when you opened the package.

Within a gradual release of responsibility model, teachers can first introduce students to a mentor text, approaching the text first as readers for aesthetic or efferent reading. Mentor texts illustrating the 6 Trait® qualities are shared during multiple readings. Teachers can then plan a re-reading of the text in which they draw students' attention on a particular trait or traits that make the writing effective. Students discuss how the author creates this effect and teachers model and collaborate with students to emulate this technique in their own writing. Finally, the trait becomes part of students' reading and writing repertoire. Teachers encourage students to find examples of the trait in other texts they read independently or collectively, occasionally returning to exemplary models for further inquiry and application.

Teaching Examples

Once teachers become comfortable with recognizing the traits in published texts, almost any text can become a mentor text for reading like writers. Suddenly the world is rich with examples in commercials, bumper stickers, books, and media of all types. However, as teachers and students are beginning this process, it is helpful to have a few texts that address typical challenges are highly illustrative of the traits we want students to recognize and apply. I describe below a few of these challenges and corresponding mentor texts (see also Table 1).

Reading and Writing IDEAS

Personal narrative writing ensures that students have the requisite background knowledge to develop the content of the text. Yet, students often have trouble selecting an idea on which to focus their writing. The story that reads like an interminable list is our first sign that the writer is struggling with identifying one event or one idea as being whole topic worthy. Sometimes our prompts are to blame. Prompts such as the yearly "write a story about what you did this summer," can easily turn into a list of "I did this, we did that," without focus or elaboration on any key event.

The first trait, Ideas, corresponds with the "Grade 5 Instruction Writing Checklist" domains *Central Ideas* and *Elaboration and Details.* When selecting mentor texts for reading to explore Ideas, it is important to select children's books in which the entire story, from character introductions to resolution of conflict, occurs within a brief time period. These texts provide models that students can emulate in their own writing. *Bunny Cakes* by Rosemary Wells provides a great example of a story that occurs over one afternoon. It has a clear beginning, middle, and end. There are four characters in the book, but the majority of the action takes place between just two main characters – a manageable number of characters for young writers to juggle in their own compositions. Max, the main character, even uses a combination of drawing and writing to express his ideas on paper – a process young writers can be helped to use themselves.

Crab Moon by Ruth Horowitz features only two characters, a boy and his mother. There is one setting, and the entire story takes place from midnight when the horseshoe crabs come on shore to lay their eggs through sunrise the next morning when the boy helps a stranded horseshoe return to sea. By first grade, most writers can include a simple conflict and character feelings in their narrative writing (McKeough, 2013). Through repeated readings, young writers can use *Crab Moon* as a model for including in their written stories one simple problem the main character must solve.

Writers in grades three and up are ready to create two-step problems or additional obstacles that impede the main character in resolving the initial conflict (McKeough, 2013). *Shortcut* by Donald Crews provides a model for intermediate writers to learn pacing and the creation of tension in writing. The book also takes place within a very short time frame, a walk home one afternoon, and uses a combination of pictures and simples sentences to create suspense for the reader.

Reading and Writing ORGANIZATION

Once they select a strong idea to serve as the focus for their writing, students often struggle with organizing their thoughts on paper. One common challenge for young writers is deciding how to begin and end their texts. Students often include so

much backstory in the beginning of the piece that they appear to run out of stamina for the writing by the time they actually arrive at the "hot spots" of their story.

The trait of organization corresponds with the "Grade 5 Instruction Writing Checklist" domain "organization and unity." Reading as writers, students can learn how organizational choices affect where and how a writer begins and ends a piece. Readers can notice in the texts they read how authors use transitions to link ideas together. When reading narrative and short-fiction, readers can note how the writing is frequently organized chronologically, with stories involving a beginning, middle, and end, as opposed to reading expository writing which is often driven by a question or organized around an idea (thesis statement) that an author is seeking to advance.

Many stories, books, movies, and television shows begin with what Fletcher (1999) termed a "waterfall beginning" (p. 55-56). A good waterfall beginning starts just before the moment that conflict is introduced. The reader does not have to wait long to find out what the conflict will be as the author provides just enough backstory for the reader to understand why the change they are about to witness is significant for the main character. *Enemy Pie* by Derek Munson is an example of a book that employs a waterfall-type beginning. The reader learns within the first two pages how an otherwise perfect summer is potentially ruined when a new kid moves into the neighborhood, right beside the protagonist's best friend. *Paperbag Princess* by Robert Munsch also employs the waterfall-type introduction of conflict. Within the first four sentences the reader learns how the beautiful princess Elizabeth is confronted with a fire-breathing dragon who reduces her belongings to cinders and absconds with her fiancé. Through repeated readings of stories commencing with "waterfall beginnings," young writers can experiment with different points in time to begin their stories while collecting new examples from additional texts they read and share.

Meanwhile by Jules Feiffer is a children's book that cleverly teaches how to use transitional words to segue between ideas and scenes. The book's protagonist uses the transition "meanwhile" to journey to new landscapes where he must avoid hungry sharks, a wild-west posse, and finally, a frustrated mother.

Reading and Writing Voice

Writing that has voice gives us a sense of the personality of the character or the position of the author. The use of voice in expository writing may not be quite as personable as the voice present in narrative and short fiction, but that is not to say expository writing cannot possess voice. A review of the expository prompts in the "Grade Five Writing Prompts" (Virginia Department of Education, 2010b) suggests that most of these are constructed to allow students to write in first person, making it easier for students to use voice in this genre and avoid writing that reads like an encyclopedia. Teachers can point out examples of voice in the texts they read with their students.

The book *Alexander and The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* by Viorst (1987) provides a strong example for young writers to emulate in the expository genre. Viorst uses narrative anecdotes to support Alexander's claim that it had been a terrible day. Told from Alexander's point of view, each page offers students opportunities to find examples of Voice.

Reading and Writing WORD CHOICE:

Have you ever read a poem or listened to a song lyric and thought, "I wish I had come up with that?" If so, you have experienced the power of word choice. As a lover of words, this happens to me quite frequently. While reading or listening to song lyrics I come across a particular arrangement of words that describes something I have felt before but never articulated. Teachers can point out examples of powerful words and sentences, ideas expressed through the precise use of words. Students can then begin searching for power sentences and clever word arrangements in the texts they read. The trait of word choice corresponds with the domain of the same name on the "Grade 5 Instruction Writing Checklist".

The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane by Kate DiCamillo is a great read-aloud choice for drawing students' attention to word choice. DiCamillo uses precise word choice to build character traits and showcase character change as the main character, Edward, transitions from a despicable, vain creature to a loving, caring rabbit. Through guided discussions, students can listen for examples where DiCamillo "shows" the reader Edward's character traits instead of telling the reader

that Edward is vain and arrogant. Students can be assisted in emulating this technique as they identify places in their own writing to trying showing instead of telling.

Reading and Writing SENTENCE FLUENCY

Try reading your students' writing out loud. Do you sound like a robot? If so, your young writers are likely struggling with sentence fluency. This trait aligns with two rows on the "Grade 5 Instruction Writing Checklist"domains "sentence formation and structure" and "flow." Just as reading fluency in reading deals with prosody and expression, sentence fluency is present in writing that has sentences of varying lengths with varying beginnings and that has a pleasant rhythm or cadence when read aloud. Margie Palatini's *Sweet Tooth* is a great read-aloud choice for illustrating sentence fluency as well as voice. Throughout the book Palatini's sentences purposefully vary in length. Teachers and students will have no difficulty detecting the rhythmic cadence that supports reading aloud. Palatini also offers alternatives to the traditional subject-verb-object pattern that typifies the sentences of young writers and contributes to the uniformity of young writers' sentences which often results in the robot effect when reading aloud.

Reading and Writing CONVENTIONS

Reading like writers, students can use an inquiry approach to examine how authors use conventions. When young writers begin using direct quotations in their writing, teachers can help their students use published texts as resources for determining which punctuation marks to use and how. Reading like writers for conventions can also be extended to the reading of signs and advertisements that surround us. Students enjoy finding misuses of punctuation marks in the real world. Examples of misused apostrophes can be found using Google Images and the search term 'apostrophe.' Using both correct and incorrect examples, students can start reading the world like writers, using ubiquitous cell phones with camera features to collect examples of convention use (and misuse) in the world around us.

There are several good examples of mentor texts that can be used to introduce punctuation to students. *Punctuation Takes a Vacation* (2004) can be used with young writers to illustrate how difficult it is for readers to make sense of

writing without correct punctuation. Truss has created three books for children on different conventions. In *Eats, Shoots, & Leaves*, Truss (2006) shows readers how commas can change the entire meaning of a sentence. Truss's (2007) *The Girl's Like Spaghetti* provides similar examples based on apostrophe use. *Twenty-odd Ducks* (Truss, 2008) provides examples of how meaning is affected by different uses of punctuation marks. Carr's (2007) *Greedy Apostrophe* shows readers the differences between contractions, possessives, and plural possessives.

Conclusion

Teaching children to write is a valuable endeavor regardless of the influence of writing on reading. However, research supports the complementary nature of reading and writing and highlighting the benefits for explicitly teaching children to approach texts as both readers and writers. Teachers select mentor texts and help students comprehend and enjoy the text during the first reading. During subsequent readings, teachers provide a focus for reading like writers and discussing the author's craft. This step allows a student to focus on the author's craft without the additional cognitive challenge of creating text. Students are then given both collaborative and individual opportunities to apply these skills and strategies in their own writing, building greater understandings of text from the inside out.

Table 1. Mentor texts for reading like writers.

Virginia *Grade 5 Instruction Writing Checklist* domains	**Trait/s**	**Mentor Text Examples (see reference list for author/publisher)**	**Common Student Writing Challenges**
Central Idea Elaboration & Details	Ideas	*Bunny Cakes* *Crab Moon* *Shortcut*	Lack of focused idea
Organization and Unity	Organization	*Enemy Pie* *Paperbag Princess* *Meanwhile*	Too much backstory; writing that just ends; ideas are unrelated.
Sentence Formation and Structure Flow	Sentence Fluency	*Scarecrow* *Sweet Tooth*	Many sentences begin the same; Too many sentences of the same length/construction
Word Choice	Word Choice Voice	*The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*	Details that tell but do not show Writing that is impersonal, flat
*Conventions	Conventions	*Eats, Shoots, & Leaves* *The Girl's Like Spaghetti* *Twenty-odd Ducks* *Punctuation Takes a Vacation* *Greedy Apostrophe*	Lack or misuse of the conventions of formal English; errors that interfere with readability

* Conventions is not on the Virginia *Grade 5 Instruction Writing Checklist* but included in a separate rubric for scoring the usage/mechanics domain.

References

Bradley, L.G., & Donovan, C.A. (2011). Book read-alouds as models for second-grade authors. *The Reading Teacher, 64,* 246-260.

Education Northwest. (n.d.). *About 6+1 Trait® Writing.* Retrieved from http://educationnorthwest.org/resource/949.

Englert, C.S., & Mariage, T.V. (1991). Shared understandings: Structuring the writing experience through dialogue. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 24,* 330-343.

Fitzgerald, J., & Shanahan, T. (2000). Reading and writing relations and their development. *Educational Psychologists, 35,* 39-50.

Fletcher, R. (1999). *Live writing: Breathing life into your words.* New York: Avon Books, Inc.

Graham, S. & Hebert, M. (2010). Writing to read: Evidence for how writing can improve reading. Retrieved from http://carnegie.org/fileadmin/Media/Publications/WritingToRead_01.pdf.

McKeogh, A. (2013). Teaching narrative composition. In S. Graham, C.A. MacArthur, & J. Fitzgerald (Eds.), *Best practices in writing instruction, 2nd edition.* New York: The Guilford Press.

Rylant, C. (1998). *Scarecrow.* Orlando, FL: Harcourt Books.

Spandel, V. (2005). *Creating writers through 6-Trait writing assessment and instruction (4th ed.).* New York: Allyn & Bacon.

Smith, F. (1983). Reading like a writer. *Language Arts, 60,* 558-567.

Tiedt, I.M. (1988). Reading with a writer's eye. *Learning, 16,* 7, 66-68. Virginia Department of Education. (2010). *Grade five instructional writing checklist.* Retrieved from http://www.doe.virginia.gov/testing/sol/standards_docs/english/.

Virginia Department of Education. (2010). *Grade five writing prompts.* Retrieved from http://www.doe.virginia.gov/testing/sol/standards_docs/english/.

Children's Literature Cited

Carr. J. (2007). *Greedy Apostrophe: A cautionary tale.* New York: Holiday House.

Crews, D. (1992). *Shortcut.* New York: Greenwillow Books.

DiCamillo, K. (2006). *The miraculous journey of Edward Tulane.* Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.

Feiffer, J. (1997). *Meanwhile.* New York: Harper Collins Children's Books.

Horowitz, R. (2000). *Crab moon.* Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press.

Munsch, R. (1980). New York: Annick Press Ltd.

Munson, D. (2000). *Enemy pie.* San Francisco: Chronicle Books.

Palatini, M. (2004). *Sweet tooth.* New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.

Pulver, R. (2004). *Punctuation takes a vacation.* New York: Holiday House.

Truss, L. (2006). *Eats, shoots, & leaves: Why, commas really DO make a difference!* New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.

Truss, L. (2007). *The girl's like spaghetti: Why, you can't manage without apostrophes.* New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.

Truss, L. (2008). *Twenty-odd ducks: Why, every punctuation mark counts!* New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.

Wells, R. (1997). *Bunny cakes.* New York: Puffin Books.

Author's Note:

Holly Robbins is an Associate Professor in the School of Teacher Education & Leadership at Radford University. Her research interests pertain to helping elementary students learn to write and write to learn.