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How Can Mentor Texts Be Used to Accelerate Writing Skills?



When we read great writing with young writers, the goal is respect, not awe. While fandom is OK, we don't want our students to worship the Shakespeares, Morrisons, Wrights, and Acevedos as if their writing talents were given at birth and are therefore unattainable. After reading something spectacular, we want students to think, "How did they do that?" Then, after learning how, we want them to say, "Let me try." Then finally, after the first few successes, "Look! I did that!"

The secret to going from "How did they do that?" to "Look! I did that" is the regular use of mentor texts, or texts chosen to offer examples, guidance, and possibilities. In our classes, we use mentor texts constantly, but most tend to fall into one of three categories.

STAND-ALONE ACTIVITIES THAT PRACTICE THE SKILLS FOUND IN MENTOR TEXTS

- 🍌 **Juicy Sentences.** Inspired by ELA teacher Emma Tsai (2019), Matt Kay asks students to first collect "juicy" sentences in the texts that they read together and then use versions of two or three of them in the unit's final creative project. To make this work, first point out different types of sentences in a piece of writing, such as an article or passage from a class novel, that stand out to you as particularly effective. For instance, call attention to a "short, punchy sentence" ("All he wanted was that view") and one with "a strong verb" ("All cancers have the power to ravage a body, but each assails in distinctive ways"). Then, ask students to read and pick sentences that they—for whatever reason—deem well written. Students then must replicate *their own versions* of the sentences in their own creative writing. They can do this by "adding an impactful introductory sentence, incorporating introductory clauses, varying sentence length, diversifying verb choice or anything else" (Tsai, 2019, p. x). The final product looks like this:
 - 🍌 **Example:** "But not long afterward, I began to hate her, due not to the foolishness of her idea but because of her absurd and unyielding confidence in it."
 - 🍌 **Student:** But not long afterward, I was filled with regret, not because I fully understood her words, but because I knew in my gut they were right.
- 🍌 **Craft Lessons.** Matt Johnson found that a large part of what made so many of his students dislike writing was that they simply didn't know how it worked. They had no idea what gave a sentence "flow" or how to add emphasis to a moment that really mattered because nobody had ever told them. Now, as a way of building both skills and confidence, Matt does weekly craft lessons aimed at expanding the students' writing toolboxes and making clearer to them how writing can work. (The online companion, resources.corwin.com/answersELA, hosts some downloadable examples of craft lessons.)

