

How do we lead students to own the qualities of strong narrative writing?

- **Study forms** that will lead to success for all students (scene, memoir, creative non-fiction, fiction)
- **Students who choose** their passions write better
- **Define the audience** who will read their work
- **“Several laps around the track”** allow students to practice their skills, then repeat what they’ve learned and improve, then begin to move beyond form to larger understandings of the qualities of narrative (repetition = retention.)
During one unit of study in narrative, students might create 3-4 texts that represent different forms, but the similar understandings about the qualities of story: start with one scene, then several that tell a story, then a themed story that moves forward and backward in time & develops characters
- **Frequently study texts** and notice qualities, list, & evaluate during the unit, adding to class understandings & the practice of analytical reading
- **Create anchor charts** of understandings for your classroom that remain in place throughout the unit—anyone should be able to walk into your classroom and know what you’re studying and how today connects to yesterday & tomorrow
- **Name the craft that you see in good stories:** the vivid details, the unusual simile, the dialogue that sounds like people talking, the voice of a narrator that carries a piece and makes readers listen, how writers zoom in and slow down time when it matters, then zoom past months or years that don’t matter to the central idea in the piece, teach and seek the ‘so what?’ moment in mentor texts
- **Frame the year of study** for students, showing how qualities of writing and skills and forms are related to each other & how students will gather skills and larger understandings

Quick Writes:

- Use poetry that shows a moment in time—short texts, big messages—because poetry reinforces the idea that there are many forms of writing that tell stories = a bigger picture of the genre and the way all writing is connected
- Sketch details to help students pay attention—the art of drawing helps us see more deeply
- Use storyboards to help students expand and develop an idea
- Quickly write in imitation of a mentor text form (like “Eleven” by Sandra Cisneros that takes one moment and shows its importance); day two take one element of the quick write and expand it (a character, one setting, one bit of dialogue)
- Quick writing is effective for partners; collaborative writing is a powerful teaching tool (tell the story of our school cafeteria, or the Homecoming dance, etc.)
- Revise quick writing “make it better” as daily practice in rereading & attention to craft

Revision focus:

- Reread your writing and find: your best phrases, lines; the line that is the heart of what you're trying to say; a place where you can make it better writing; a place where you can add information to strengthen the idea; a place where you have more to say; then write just from that place...
- Post best sentences, crafty word choice, celebrate small victories
- Pay attention to the power of voice in story: are you outside the story or caught in the middle?

Sentence Study (can be chosen from mentor texts in unit):

- This work is ideal for partners—collaborative writing is one of 11 best strategies for teaching adolescents writing skills (*Writing Next*)
- Practice skills like words in a series to illuminate description
- Mentor students to samples from texts you study together during this unit: zoom in on one sentence & practice together
 - Example: sentences that group information
 - “**Dash and description**” (zooms in on details that *show* (a narrative skill that is often used in argument); the dash creates emphasis)
 - I stared at my father’s photograph—his thin face stern, lips latched tight, his eyes peering permanently to the right. ~Paul Fleischman, *Seedfolks*.
 - I studied my teacher—the lines around tired eyes, wrinkled pants and pilled sweater, her eyes rapidly searching the room for rule-breakers.
- Strong opening and closing lines—how writers of story often bring the piece full circle through images or ideas that repeat in the piece
- Study frames for essays (images, ideas, questions)
- Transition phrases and sentences: how does a writer move the reader forward and backward in time seamlessly?

Mentor Texts:

- It makes a difference when a student (or the entire class) chooses a text as a *mentor*—makes the deliberate decision to mentor their writing to the model
- Choose anchor texts for whole class to *read closely together* that are good models of the story you want students to write: consider using excellent literature and combine this study with your book talk of the day
- Mix published author texts with grade level strong student texts
- Your process in writing an story including your rough draft (even unfinished) can be an anchor text for the class to study, best if created recently
- Use storyboarding to help students think flexibly about organization of a narrative
- Consider the study one author’s work through several texts = Mentor Author
- Teach students how to annotate what they see in a text by showing them how you annotate the craft you see as you read
- Read, analyze (study), write and share together—your model is critical at every stage of the process

Goals for collaborative writing or independent practice:

- When in the unit will students be ready for independent/collaborative work time? (How much time do you anticipate students need for finding topics?)
- How many days per week/minutes per day for this writing time?
- What are your exit tickets or other expectations for productivity?
- Structure and manage individual & small group conferences so you can teach into the intentions of individual students—your most powerful teaching opportunity
- Define your expectations for peer work, lead students in this work—perhaps all will publish imitation sentences on the white board

Assessment opportunities:

- Quick writes/notebook grades = good faith effort to write & revise
 - Evidence of revision, sentence imitations, write the entire time to build stamina
- Annotations on a mentor text can highlight particular understandings
- Collaborative work on sentence imitation, revision, or annotation of texts
- Exit slips at the end of class to clarify learning: one sentence to show...
- Writing conferences (teacher or peer) are assessment opportunities, keep records
- For YOU: the unit plan; which mentor texts were successful; which quick write invitations produced greatest engagement; the productivity of workshop time

Final product (last draft) evaluation:

- Will you grade content, process, and mechanics separately?
- Will particular focus skills be graded with more weight than others?
- Will you use a rubric or a list of qualities to define expectations?
- *Optional* but important student self-assessment questions:
 - How did you find your topic? How did you sustain interest in it? (Students should name what they've learned about process)
 - What did you learn from a mentor text that helped you write with more purpose and skill? (Students will transfer process of mentoring to writers)
 - How did conferences (teacher, peer) assist in your development as a writer? (Excellent opportunity for teacher feedback & reflection)
 - Discuss your drafting and revision process. (Students highlight revisions)
 - Considering the qualities of strong narrative writing that we discussed in class, how would you evaluate this piece of your writing? (Reflection on skill)
 - If you had weeks more to spend working on this piece, how would you improve it? (Writing is not finished, it's just due.)

*Write for yourself, or yourself plus whoever might find it.
Write it as proof you lived, you saw, you suffered, you passed through fire and laughed mightily.*

~Dave Eggers

You need to make acts of art the very acts of life.

~David Citino