

Making the Most

We must teach students to imitate model texts before they write, as they write, and as they revise.

Kelly Gallagher

When George Lucas was making *Star Wars*, his special effects team was at a loss as to how to film realistic-looking dogfight scenes. They began by storyboarding them, but they found that simply drawing the scenes on paper didn't help them understand the pacing and rhythm of the fights. They solved their dilemma by splicing together footage of real dogfights from World War II documentaries into one film sequence and copying this sequence frame by frame.



... We are left to blame in this
much provid that with devotion's visage
an action we do sugar o'er
himself. O 'tis too true!
[Aside.] O 'tis too true!
start a lash that speech doth give n
elot's cheek, beautied with plasterin
more ugly to the thing that helps it
my deed to my most painted word.
y burthen!
I hear him coming; let's withdraw,
Exeunt [King an
Enter Hamlet.
To be, or not to be, that is the question:
er 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
ngs and arrows of outrageous fortune,
56
59 take . . . troubles; cf. n.
67 shuffled off: sloughed off
68 give us pause: cause us to he
69 Cf. n.
72 dispriz'd: held in contempt
73 office: people holding official
70
release from life

of Mentor Texts

This story reminds me of the first time I was asked to write a grant proposal. Never having written one before, I was feeling very unsure of myself. My bosses were counting on me to write something I didn't know how to write. Can you guess what I did next? I found a previously successful grant proposal and studied it, paying close attention to its structure and language. Like the *Star Wars* team, I found a strong model and emulated it.

Isn't this how people learn to do something unfamiliar? We stand next to someone who knows how to do it. We watch him or her carefully, analyzing what the person does and then copying those actions as closely as we can.

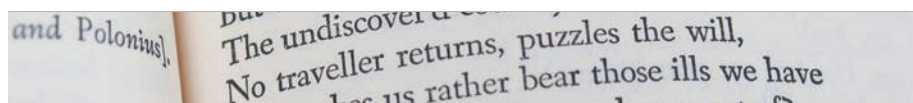
There's a lesson for writing teachers here. If we want our students to write persuasive arguments, interesting explanatory pieces, or captivating narratives, we need to have them read, analyze, and emulate persuasive arguments, interesting explanatory pieces, and captivating narratives. Before you can film a dogfight, you have to know what one looks like. Before our students can write well in a given discourse, they need to see good writing in that discourse.

But effective modeling entails much more than handing students a mentor text and asking them to imitate it. It's not that simple. Rather, students benefit from paying close attention to models before they begin drafting a piece of writing, as they compose

their first draft, and as they move that draft into revision. Mentor texts are most powerful when students frequently revisit them *throughout* the writing process—and when teachers help them take lessons from writing exemplars.

- Standard 4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

- Standard 5: Analyze the structure



Having **students recognize good writers' techniques** positions them to infuse them into their own compositions.

Prewriting: Discerning What to Imitate

If we want beginning writers to learn lessons from model texts, we need to teach them what to look for. For instance, if students are going to be writing poetry, we should begin by giving them lots of poems to read. But while students are immersed in the poems, we also need to teach them how to read like writers—to notice the techniques, moves, and choices that poets make.

Students are used to being asked *what* is written, but asking them to recognize *how* a text is written is a shift for many of them. This shift is essential in meeting three of the 10 Common Core anchor standards for reading:

of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text . . . relate to each other and the whole.

- Standard 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

All these standards ask readers to answer the same basic question: What did the writer do? To help students sharpen their ability to discern the moves writers make, I give them passages like this excerpt from Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" and ask them to identify the techniques that elevate this to a great piece of writing:

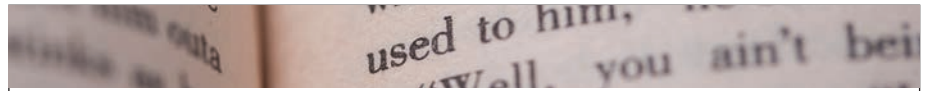
Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, “Wait.” But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your 20 million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society . . . then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

With some prodding, my students notice King’s use of complex sentence structures, intentional repetition, semi-colons to separate lengthy items in a series, strong diction, and metaphor.

Having students recognize these techniques positions them to infuse them into their own compositions—and I explicitly assign students to do so. For example, as students read *Of Mice and Men*, I highlight Steinbeck’s description of the men’s living quarters:

The bunk house was a long, rectangular building inside, the walls whitewashed and the floor unpainted. In three walls there were small, square windows, and in the fourth, a solid door with a wooden latch. Against the walls were eight bunks, five of them made up with blankets and the other three showing their burlap ticking. Over each bunk there was nailed an apple box with the opening forward so that it made two shelves for the personal belongings of the occupant of the bunk. And these shelves were loaded with little articles, soap and talcum powder, razors, and those Western magazines ranch men love to read and scoff at and secretly believe. . . . Near one wall there was a black cast-iron stove, its stovepipe going straight up through the ceiling. In the middle of the room stood a big square table littered with playing cards, and around it were grouped boxes for the players to sit on (Steinbeck, 1937/1993, p. 17).

Students then imitate this passage. Here’s Eduardo’s description of the



To learn to do something unfamiliar, we stand next to someone who knows how to do it.

subway he takes to school each morning:

The #6 trains are rectangular cars linked together, making a silver metal sausage, with the decal number 6 on the side rectangular windows of the cars. Inside, the baby-blue seats line both sides of the car, above a black-and-white speckled floor. People sit opposite each other, sleeping, gazing off into space, or silently wondering about the lives and problems of their fellow passengers. Metal poles are strategically placed through the middle of the car, giving standing passengers a place to grab. Above the seats hang advertisements for sleazy lawyers or television shows, many of which are inappropriate for the youngsters on the train.

I’m constantly on the lookout for good mentor sentences. Reading Donna Tartt’s novel, *The Goldfinch*, I noticed this whopper of a sentence describing the rat race of modern society:

People gambled and golfed and planted gardens and traded stocks and had sex and bought new cars and practiced yoga and worked and prayed and redecorated their homes and got worked up over the news and fussed over their children and gossiped about their neighbors and pored over restaurant reviews and supported political candidates and attended the U.S. Open and dined and traveled and distracted themselves with all kinds of gadgets and devices, flooding themselves incessantly with information and texts and communication and entertainment from every direction to try to make themselves forget it: where we were, what we were.

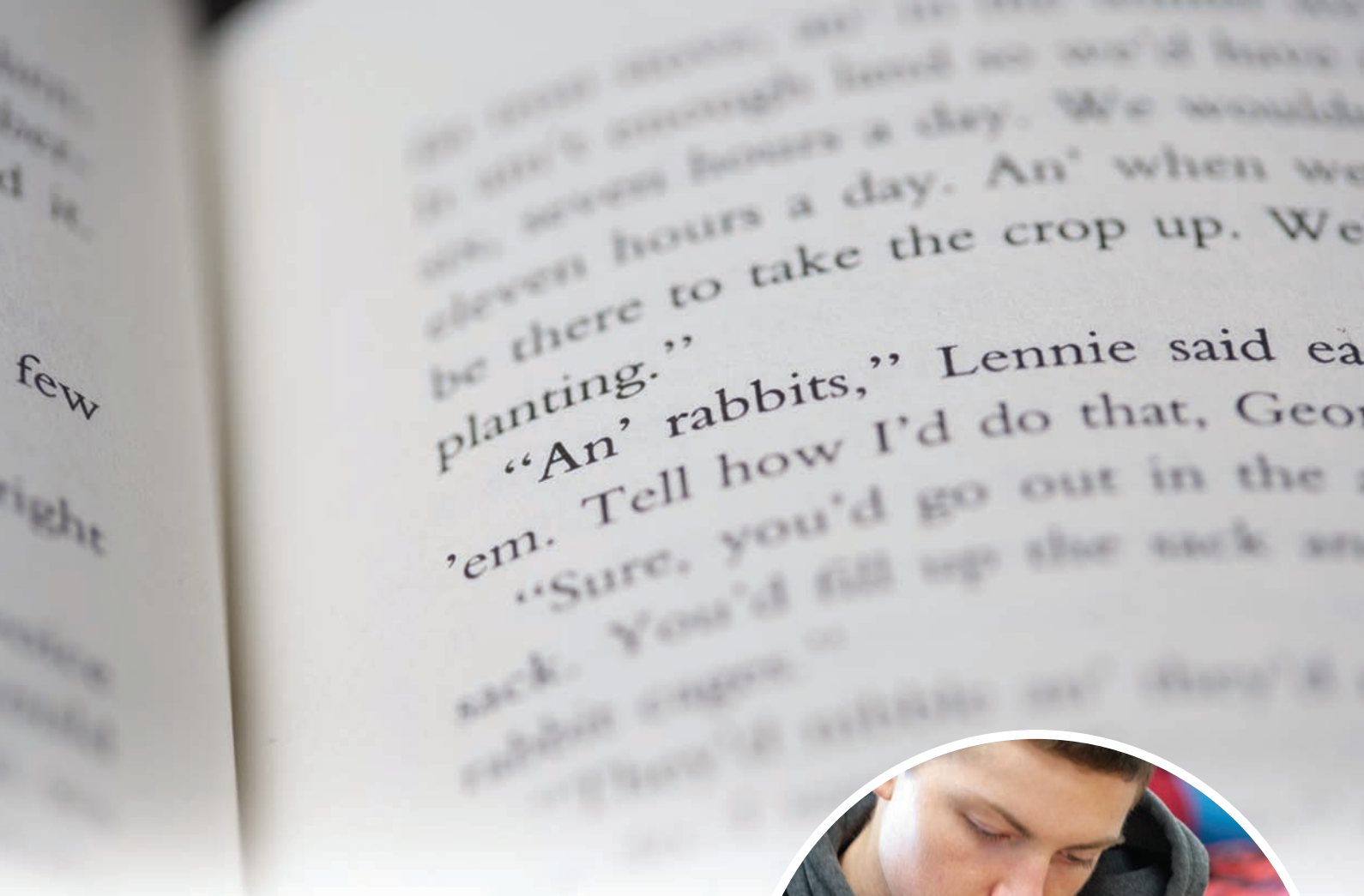
My students and I examined this sentence, discussing how its intentional excessive length and list of verbs reinforces the pressures of daily living. Students then imitated the sentence, noting the pressures of school. Here is Shaniah’s:

Students press their alarm clocks and roll out of bed and get ready for school and wait a long time for the train and arrive to school late and get lectured by the attendance lady for their tardiness and read lots of long novels and study SAT vocabulary and wrestle with chemistry formulas and tackle pre-calculus problems and annotate primary source Civil War documents and work their way through a 6.5 hour day and meet with teachers and have mountains of homework and get report cards and get yelled at by parents and go to study halls and take numerous tests and stress over their grades and sacrifice sleep, just to get to this finish line we call graduation.

Language traditionalists may be shocked that I use such a lengthy sentence for emulation. But I believe it’s OK to break the rules if you understand the rules—and if you have a stylistic reason for doing so.

Drafting: Keep Your Eye on the Model

When I sat down to write my first grant proposal, I propped up a previously successful proposal right by my side. As I drafted, I repeatedly returned to this model, taking careful note of its structure, language, syntax, and tone. When my students sit down to write their first drafts, they also benefit from



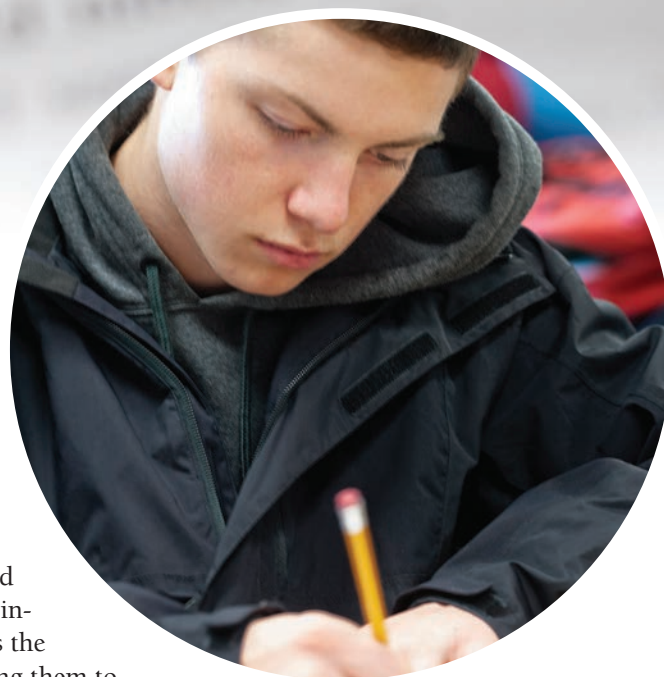
having exemplary models to analyze and imitate as they compose.

These models shouldn't come solely from professional writers. I start students on the process of writing with a model at hand by trying something light. They emulate one of the essays found on the "100 Words" website (www.100words.com), which encourages any budding writer to compose and post a piece of writing that's exactly 100 words long. We examine techniques that lead to economical writing. Composing something that's precisely 100 words teaches kids to economize their language, combine and branch sentences, and repeatedly revise until they hit the exact word count.

From there, I move students into deeper waters. Last year, my seniors wrote historical investigations into the events of September 11, 2001.

Some of them had never written a three-page paper, but at the end of the unit they'd written papers averaging 25 pages. I used numerous strategies to move my inexperienced writers into writing such in-depth pieces, but perhaps the most effective was allowing them to study exemplary papers from previous years. When students hold models of such research papers in their hands, they pay close attention to structure. They notice tone and voice. They see how research is properly embedded and learn how to write works cited pages. Students need to be allowed to study mentor papers long enough to understand the task at hand (but not long enough for plagiarism to occur).

Students also gain from studying



models produced by the adult writer in the classroom—the teacher. I'm not suggesting that we should make students sit still while the teacher drafts an entire essay in front of the class. But teachers should frequently write in 5–7-minute blasts in front of their students, thinking out loud while composing. For those who are reluctant to write in front of students for fear that they may be revealed as mortal,

remember that students benefit greatly from seeing their teacher struggle with writing. It reinforces a central notion: that struggle is a central part of the writing process for everyone, even the teacher.

Mentor texts are also effective in improving the writing of highly skilled student writers. Consider, for example, how you might prepare your students to answer this prompt on the 2013 advanced placement exam for the AP English Literature and Composition course:

A bildungsroman, or coming-of-age novel, recounts the psychological or moral development of its protagonist from youth to maturity, when this character recognizes his or her place in the world. Select a single pivotal moment in the psychological or moral development of the protagonist of a bildungsroman. Then write a well-organized essay that analyzes how that single moment shapes

the meaning of the work as a whole. (College Board, 2013)

The best advanced placement teachers I know prepare students for rigorous questions like this by having them analyze previously scored essays.¹

Revision: Modeling Improvement

Comparing model texts with examples of lower-quality writing gives students a lot of insight into how to improve a first draft. Earlier this year, I showed my 8th grade students who were drafting personal narratives two drafts of the beginning of a piece I was working on (see Figure 1). I wrote Draft A as a typical student would, straightforward in sequence and devoid of the many craft moves we'd want students to make. For Draft B, I wove in craft techniques such as imagery, deliberate repetition, and

sentences of varying length. I asked students to pick the draft they thought was best.

Once students recognized that Draft B is better, I had them identify specific elements that made it better. For instance, Grace noted that the first line of Draft B builds suspense; that intentional repetition (of *daring*) is used well; and that dialogue makes this draft livelier. Another craft move Grace highlighted is that this draft first “reveals the moment,” then uses flashback to show what led to that moment. Grace immediately went back to her first draft and started experimenting with sequence.

Yolanda, an inexperienced writer, was drafting a narrative about being stood up by a boy at a dance. She wrote this lead:

I was in summer camp and there was a dance that was happening tomorrow

FIGURE 1. Which Draft Is Better?

Decide which draft is better and identify elements in the writing that make it better.

Draft A

The day that changed my life was the day my father died. My father, Big Jim, and his wife, Sylvia, were home that fateful Saturday, preparing to meet some friends for dinner. Before leaving the house, however, my dad decided he needed to water a couple of plants in his greenhouse. He told Sylvia he would be right back. When he did not return, she grew worried and stepped outside to check on him. She found him slumped over in the greenhouse. She hurriedly ran and called 911. When the paramedics arrived, they told her there was nothing to be done. He had passed away. In a panic, she called my house, but I wasn't home. She got my voicemail and that is where she left the message that my father had died. I came home shortly after she left the message. Unfortunately, I did not see the red light flashing on the answering machine. A couple of hours went by before my daughter noticed the blinking red light. She was the one who first heard the terrible news.

Draft B

A tiny blinking red light changed my life. It had sat there blinking for a couple of hours before being noticed. Flashing. Daring someone to pay attention to it. Daring someone to push it. While it sat there flashing, I went on as if life was normal. I swept the leaves off the back patio. I threw the ball to my dog, Scout. I relaxed, reading my *New Yorker* in the backyard, continuing my “normal” Saturday, oblivious to the little red light flashing a few feet away from me. As it turns out, I would not be the one to discover the little red flashing light. My daughter, who was home visiting for the day, saw it first. It was my daughter who pushed “play” on the telephone answering machine, and it was she who was the first to hear the fateful words: “Kelly, I have terrible news. We lost your father today...” It was my daughter's horrific screams that brought me rushing into the house. My father, Big Jim, had died.

...with your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and
...thers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen cut
...s, and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see
...vast majority of your 20 million Negro brothers smothering
...airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society
...you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech
...nering as you seek to explain to your 6-year-old daughter
...he can't go to the public amusement park . . . then you w
...and why we find it difficult to win.

night. I decided to ask my first crush, who was Australian. His name was Vincent and we were friends since the second day of camp.

After examining introductions in other mentor texts, Yolanda changed her lead to this:

Where is Vincent? Did he forget? Did he change his mind? Standing alone in a ravishing dress, I am shocked, feeling a heat wave come across my face. Where is that boy?

If It's Good for *Star Wars*. . .

Before I sat down to write this article, I read through previous issues of *Educational Leadership*, paying close attention to the style and tone of the articles. Once I began drafting, I again revisited these articles, checking to see if what I was writing was aligned with what has traditionally been published in these pages. (For instance, is it OK to use first-person point of view?) Revisiting the articles once more before I actually submitted my article told me my first draft was too long and that I needed to trim a few hundred words.

Having issues of *Educational Leadership* next to me before I wrote, while I wrote, and after I wrote was invaluable. Providing the same level of modeling support to students will prove invaluable to them. If it worked for me—and George Lucas—it will work for your students. **EL**

¹The College Board posts examples of high-, middle-, and low-quality student essays on its website for teachers and students.

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