TEACHING THE Writer's Craft

Help young writers hone their craft through rich independent reading, modeling, engagement—and most of all, meaningful daily practice.

Penny Kittle

Writing is a core skill for living, not just for school. Writing sharpens our vision, tunes us in to what matters, and helps us think through what we must live through. We write to express what we know and see and believe, and we have the power to determine exactly how readers will hear our work: where sentences will glide and where they'll stop. That power is writing craft.

We want students to know this and to write with clarity, voice, and authority. We want them to listen to their writing, and then use punctuation to fasten parts together. Sentence structure is creative work. Yet teachers too often act like scolds, red pens in hand, stamping out sin and punishing errors. There's a better way; we can lure students into crafting artful sentences through systematic and playful practice.

Understanding the Problem

In too many classrooms, we assign and assess writing without teaching the craft of it. I understand why this happens. Teaching hundreds of students means reading hundreds

of papers that we sort into *A*s, *B*s, and *C*s. Many teachers spend hours circling errors, expecting that students will work to correct that kind of error in the next assignment. Most do not. Students rarely pay attention to teacher comments on finished work.

I think back to my high school tennis coach reading from her clipboard at the end of a match: *You put your backhand here, and it should have been here.* This error analysis didn't make me a better tennis player. Why? It couldn't change the outcome of that match. I was only half listening—I was already looking ahead to my next match. On the other hand, when she stood beside me at practice and helped me read the shot, when she adjusted the line of my racquet and I could see the difference, when she assigned 50 practice serves for every double fault—those moments of modeling and practice improved my game.

I once worked at a school where the 5th grade teachers had a policy—on the third error, the writing went in the trash. There was a ceremony to this shaming. The student came to the front with his or her paper; the teacher called out an error, "One!" and at "Two!" let the student have a chance to take the paper back and look for more errors. If the teacher called "Three!" it fluttered to the bottom of the steel bin. At an English department meeting recently, a teacher shared a list of "11 Grammar Rules We Are Done With" and her penalty of a point off for each mistake.

But worry creates constipation. It's not surprising that many students come to writing reluctantly—like I drag myself to the dentist, expecting distress. If we teach 10-year-olds or 18-year-olds that writing is about avoiding hazards, their fear will create dependence. Instead of producing writing that's alive with confidence, they will ask for teacher guidance on every paragraph.

It's time to stop scolding and start teaching.

Six Practices That Build Savvy Writers

Independent Reading

Students need rich reading lives of depth and complexity and power. They need to be exposed to the fine craft of skillful writing in large doses. In school, we can lead students to build an individual reading life of challenge, whim, curiosity, and hunger.

This idea of a reading life is different from "proficiency" and "complexity." It is larger—it contains multitudes. It is Leo Tolstoy and Sherman Alexie and Billy Collins and shelves of young adult literature consumed like the last deep breath you take before a dive. When books reach students, students reach for books. I expect my high school students to read 25 or more books independently this year, and I nurture that mission through my daily work conferring with readers and matching them to books. I press them to read more.

Reading provides constant visual clues about the look of sentences. Readers see and hear how punctuation creates rhythm as they listen to narrative and nonfiction.

Today in class, I ask students to find a passage of powerful writing from the books they are reading independently during our school's daily reading break. Students add these examples to our book graffiti board on the south wall of the classroom. We fill our room with beautifully crafted sentences, which we use for imitation or sentence study. A student posts this passage from *Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt (1999):

> From October to April the walls of Limerick glistened with the damp. Clothes never dried: tweed and woolen coats housed living things, sometimes sprouted mysterious vegetations. In pubs, steam rose from damp bodies and garments to be inhaled with cigarette and pipe smoke laced with the stale fumes of spilled stout and whiskey and tinged with the odor of piss wafting in from the outdoor jakes where many a man puked up his week's wages. (p. 12)

There is much to study here. If McCourt had said, "The weather was dreadful," readers would miss the tweed and woolen coats sprouting vegetations. Without concrete, specific nouns (cigarette, pipe, whiskey, Limerick) we would see less and experience less.

Writers craft experiences not just through word choice but also through sentence length. In this passage, my students and I look at the length of his three sentences and wonder why the last is so long—what is the writer's purpose? Billy says, "He wants you to smell all of it at once. If he breaks it up into shorter sentences, you won't."

I also lead students to read like writers in books across one subject. Today Cal finished *Escape from Camp 14: One Man's Incredible Odyssey from North Korea to Freedom in the West* by Blaine Harden (Penguin, 2012). His engagement with the book had propelled him to read obsessively, unlike any reading he had done in high school so far. I encourage him to read *Nothing to Envy* by Barbara Demick (Spiegel & Grau, 1999) next because it is also about North Korea (and he has deep, recent background knowledge of this topic) but is written in a different

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voice. I suggest that we discuss these differences in our next conference. Because we have set a purpose for his reading, Cal will read with intention as well as interest. He will be a more engaged and thoughtful reader because he will read like a writer.

Students become better writers when they read voraciously, deeply, and often. The lack of books in our schools, the closure of libraries, and the lack of time to read impair student understanding of writing. We can and must change this.

Providing Topic Choice

I write best when I care about my subject and my audience. Students who choose what they write about bring passion and focus to the task of writing. Don't ask students to write only about *Walden* or the impact of slavery on early America; let them write about what captivates them. Ask them to argue for changes they believe in. Give them audiences throughout the school and the world. As Donald Graves said,

> Our anxieties about child growth lead us to take control of the writing away from children. . . . When children feel in control of their writing their dedication is such that they violate the child labor laws. We could never assign what they choose to do. (Newkirk & Kittle, 2013, pp. 52–53)

This week, Keenan, a struggling 10th grade writer, writes in his notebook about his mother's incarceration. Her absence has been a strain exacerbated by the holiday season. In line after line of tight print, filled with spelling and punctuation errors, Keenan rants about the injustice of her arrest for stealing at her workplace. It is raw, first-draft thinking; but his passion for telling this story is the fuel for research and revision. He crafts a letter to her former boss; and although he may never send it, imagining his audience forces him to pay attention to correct punctuation and smooth, clear sentences. Keenan rereads his draft and questions his choices, practicing the process of bringing rough thinking to clarity.

Daily Revision

I teach students to listen to their writing. My students and I respond freely to a poem or a graph or an editorial for several minutes each day. We then reread as though we were strangers to the piece of writing, sharpening ideas and images while shaping our sentences to be clear and smooth. We collect this low-stakes, ungraded practice in writing notebooks. This daily rereading, listening,

Writers on Writing

MAGGIE STIEFVATER
on Looking for the Black Sheep

I think the most surprising thing I've learned about writing isn't about writing at all. It's an insight into myself and the way I see the world. I have long known that I'm a thief rather than a true creator: I construct my fictional worlds and characters from bits and bobs that I gather during my real life. These odds and ends have taught me about what I value in the world, and I've now written enough novels that I can see a pattern to the things that catch my eye.

Writing has taught me that I look for the black sheep. The exception to the rule. I am interested in patterns and society but only as a backdrop for the people, events, and objects that don't fit into it. I don't so much mind whether it is a positive outlier or a negative one, only that there are few other pieces in the puzzle that match it.

I suppose I always knew that these outliers interested me as a reader, and it follows that they interest me as a writer. But it's only recently that I realized that these are the things that interest me as a human as well.

Now that I've learned that about myself, I'm presented with a host of questions to ponder: What do all of these black sheep have in common, if anything? What else have I discovered? Can I use what I've learned about these unusual people and things in my books in real life?

Ask me again in 10 years and I might have an answer or two.

Maggie Stiefvater (www.maggiestiefvater.com) is the author of multiple series of novels for young adults. Her most recent book is *The Dream Thieves,* the second book in the Raven Cycle (Scholastic, 2013).

PHOTO BY STEVEN VOSS

and tuning of their writing has a huge effect on my students' understanding of the power of their voice and the rhythm of their words.

I ask students to find a place in their writing where specific detail like what Frank McCourt shows us could make their writing stronger. As they work, I confer with them and nudge them toward specific nouns and clear images. At the end of class, students share these revisions with partners.

Molly shares her first draft, "My feet knock under the table," and then reads her revision, "My feet, clad in cheap turquoise canvas sneakers perforated with puncture wounds from four years of constant abuse, knock together under the table, and wads of salt and sleet dribble onto my socks."

"That right there is good writing," Mackenzie comments.

"Why exactly?" I press.

"You know why, Mrs. Kittle. You can just see it—the sneakers, the puncture wounds, the salt. . . ."

Frequent practice with writing and revision should not be limited to English class. Ideas and thinking are not just expressed in language; they are *constructed* through language (Vygotsky, 1986). We help students write about a subject to increase their understanding of it. Yet the mastery of mechanics is an illusion; errors increase when we are unsure of what we are trying to say. Students who conquer conventions when writing stories may stumble when composing a market analysis. We need ungraded practice across the school day.

Sentence Study

Students can learn to write with a sense of craft guiding them. I ask students to imitate interesting sentences, noticing how punctuation works in a sentence and then practice using it as they craft their own sentences.

We study the opening sentences of Kevin Powers's Iraq war novel *The Yellow Birds*, a 2012 National Book Award finalist. I have a copy of the following passage for each student. As I read it aloud, I ask them to think about what the writer is up to, why he is crafting words in this way. What effect is he hoping to have on a reader?

> The war tried to kill us in the spring. As grass greened the plains of Ninevah and the weather warmed, we patrolled the low-slung hills beyond the cities and towns. We moved over them and through the tall grass on faith, kneading paths into the windswept growth like pioneers. While we slept, the war rubbed its thousand ribs against the ground in prayer. When we pressed onward through exhaustion, its eyes were white and open in the dark. While we ate, the war fasted, fed by its own deprivation. It made love and gave birth and spread through fire. (Powers, 2012, p. 1)

I give students a few minutes to reread and annotate the text before turning to share their thinking with another student. I listen in as they talk, writing notes to share with the class.

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Video Bonus

To watch Sam, one of the author's 10th grade students, discuss how his reading helps him develop his writing craft and how he was inspired to write "Trigger," go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=shODcaAI5aU.

Students mention personification, repetition, and parallel sentence structure. We look closely at how long sentences sit near short sentences, and we talk about how variety gives the passage rhythm.

I ask students to collaborate or work alone to imitate Powers's craft using any topic they choose. Here is Ryan's imitation:

> Idleness threatened to kill me. It waited, hiding in the shadows until my actions lapsed, until I stopped for one second to catch my breath, and then it overtook me. It pounced, secured me in its grasp, held on until I gave in and stopped struggling. Once it had me, I was powerless to resist. The idleness was draining me of my drive, my dedication. It told me to stop trying, stop fighting, just sit . . . and wait. . . . It was deadly, and I felt my time slipping away.

Combining Sentences

In their meta-analysis of writing instruction, Graham & Perin (2007) cite combining sentences as one of 11 strategies that move adolescent writers forward. This strategy helps writers experiment with possibilities.

I give students four sentences: *Biff graduated #7 in his high school class and missed only three questions on the SAT. He was undefeated in tennis senior year. He received a generous scholarship in math. He was denied admission to three universities he hoped to attend.* I ask them to combine the information into one or two sentences, applying their understanding of complex sentences. As students work, I teach in the moment to correct misunderstandings or reinforce smart choices.

Issac says, "You'll like this, Mrs. Kittle: It was the best of times; it was the worst of times. Biff was undefeated in tennis and graduated #7 in his class with a generous scholarship in math due to his stellar SAT performance; however, he was denied admission to three universities he hoped to attend." He's right. I love it.

Modeling the Writer's Craft

I write in front of my students, demonstrating the decisions I make to clarify and tune sentences. I model the composition of essays, letters, and stories that matter to me, that I am deeply invested in crafting.

I revise phrases to create parallel structure, demonstrate how a semicolon clarifies the relationship between parts, and show students how I vary the length of sentences to help readers pay attention. My students watch me choose punctuation to ease reading. I allow my students to watch me struggle. Passion is contagious.

One Writer

At the center of teaching writing craft is what is at the center of all good instruction: the student. We don't teach semicolons; we teach students how to use them well. This is a subtle, but essential difference.

In class one morning, Sam, a 10th grader, heard a classmate say, "I don't know how you can be out there killing," and he wanted to show her what it is like to shoot a deer. He wrote one blast of thinking in his writing notebook. (You can view his handwritten first draft at www.ascd.org/el0414kittle1.)

The beauty of his language—which included such phrases as "you can't undo that bullet" . . . "not moving or blinking, nothing" . . . "they cling to the roots of life" . . . "something different, different than a love connection, far deeper"—was no accident. It was built on the volume of his independent reading and the poetry he had heard daily in class. It was also built on the writing process. All writers need a gathering place for thinking that allows for the mess of the first draft. In my class, Sam could freely write his thinking and then decide whether he wanted to continue to revise the piece to produce a best draft.

The topic that students are writing about—and their investment in a reader understanding it—has everything to do with their attention to conventions. Imagine if I had given Sam a list of errors and penalties before he had even begun to explore this idea. He wouldn't write with intention, he'd creep across a minefield of errors. Mistakes have to be OK as we struggle to get ideas on the page. We can create a place for ungraded practice where mistakes are not carelessness, but rather evidence of the messiness of our first thinking.

Sam eventually wrote three drafts of this glimpse of hunting, not only adding some additional reflections, but also honing his sentence structure (see www.ascd.org/el0414kittle2 for his final draft). I remember well the day he called me over in class. "Mrs. Kittle, I need punctuation that is bigger than a comma. What are my options?" He wanted the reader to be held in the moment when a deer struggles, then falls. Together we read the sentence, listening to how punctuation could extend that pause. Sam will forever remember the sound of a terminal ellipsis because he used it to slow down the reading of his story at that key moment.

As I talked through the options with Sam, all of the students nearby could benefit from our conference. When students hear this kind of problem solving routinely in class, they see beyond rules to a writer's intention. They see punctuation as a tool they use, not just something they can name. They become the independent writers we desire.

A Lifelong Relationship

Busy students and teachers often truncate the writing process. We push composing into homework, which students avoid. They procrastinate; we nag. They turn in a rushed draft, run it through spell check, and await a grade.

The best teaching and learning are not rushed; they are thorough. Imagine a whole-school effort to greatly increase the volume of reading at every grade level and to teach students to hear the rhythm of language in what they read. Imagine teachers modeling the decisions we make as writers, inviting all students into a lifelong relationship with the power of language.

Imagine the power of that. EL

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