

Introduction

How This Book Began

One of the very first weird truths you learn about teaching is this: When kids hear something from other kids, they get it so much faster than when they hear the very same thing from us. It's inexplicable. But every teacher has seen it, no matter what the content.

You may be saying, "A concrete noun is something you can touch," and you see blinks.

One of them says, "Something you can touch?"

You say, "Yes, something you can touch." More blinks.

Then a kid pipes in. "Dude. You can touch it," and understanding dawns. Ohhh. You can *touch* it.

Maybe it doesn't matter how this happens, but just knowing that it does provides for us one of the very best tools in teaching. This book is built on two premises, and this is the first:

Students learn from each other faster and more deeply than they learn from us.

In *The Book of Learning and Forgetting*, Frank Smith (1998) opens our eyes about how the quickest, most powerful learning students do is by watching each other. We know this as parents, but we don't always remember it as teachers.

So one day, as we looked at student test essays that our state had released, we realized we'd discovered an instructional gold mine.

And the mining began.

We looked for and found high-scoring essays, obtained permissions from student writers and their parents, and began to explore ways to use these essays in our teaching, mostly as gallery walks.

But soon we realized how useful these essays could be for tightly focused, whole-group instruction in *craft*. Some demonstrated extraordinary word choice; some employed a sophisticated rhetorical device; some displayed an impressive range of sentence variety; some used powerful images. They were all enlightening in different ways. All provided opportunities to teach.

In fact, we discovered the gold mine extended beyond test essays. We began gathering all kinds of writing, at all different grade levels, from all over the country. The pieces we collected range from informal journal entries to formal

literary analysis, but they all have one thing in common: There's a craft nugget in each.

Each craft nugget became the center of a lesson in this book. Using the student essay as a mentor text, we worked backward, designing a lesson based on each one that would teach students how to *recognize* and *replicate* the craft move in their own writing.

The results have been astounding. Teachers all over the country have tried out these lessons in workshops. Here is a sampling of their responses:

"I can't wait to get back to class and try these out!"

"My students will be able to do this!"

"I finally feel like I have a tangible plan for teaching writing, and not just guessing. I also think the kids will *enjoy* it!"

"As teachers, we should aim at starting small and building, and this provides the tools and structure to do this. It is workable and doable with any student!"

We've received hundreds of emails from teachers, and have been encouraged, too, by their students' responses:

"We used these lessons and our 50% benchmark scores jumped to 88% passing on The Test..."

"My students actually asked to keep writing, and I *never* thought I'd see that happen."

Success is transformative for everyone.

The Deception of "Show, Don't Tell"

Ironic, isn't it? Those "show, don't tell" posters we put up in our classrooms? They tell. And they don't show *how*.

It took us twenty-five years to notice the irony. Asking students to "show, don't tell," is telling. Without showing *how*. Showing *how* is difficult without student models. Each one of the unique pieces of student work in this book *shows how to show*, not tell.

When your students experience these fun-size lessons, when they see how to show, you'll hear, "I can do that." When they hear the voices of other students, you'll see the understanding dawning. It's so palpable, you can touch it. Dude.

How the Lessons Work

We've divided up the book into the main kinds of writing taught, tested, and even outlined in the Common Core State Standards:

- narrative
- opinion/argument
- informative/explanatory

The sample pieces we have gathered fall into these main categories. Some states may use different language. For example, what Texas assesses as “expository” at Grades 4, 7, and 9 is known to the rest of the world as “argument.” Persuasive writing, likewise, falls under the category of “argument” for the purposes of this book. Any teacher who is looking for a “how-to” or procedural paper will find it in the “informative/explanatory” section.

Each craft lesson is divided into sections:

- **What Writers Do:** describes a craft move that writers might make
- **What This Writer Does:** pinpoints that move in this specific piece
- **Activity for Your Class:** asks students to reread, identify something, and manipulate it in the student sample
- **Challenge for Students:** invites students to try out this move in their own writing

At the bottom of each craft lesson, we've also included the *text structure* of the piece. This isn't part of the craft lesson but an added feature. One way teachers ask their students to develop essays is to begin with a structure. We place one sentence in each box in the structure to create what we call a “kernel essay” that's modeled on the student mentor text used in that craft lesson. A “kernel essay” is like a kernel of corn, tiny but packed (Bernabei, Hover, & Candler, 2009). The structure, when imitated, provides students with a kernel of an essay.

A collection of text structures like these can help students make organizational choices. You will find the collection of structures at the back of this book. (For more on this feature of the lessons, see How to Use Text Structures on page 6.)

Should the lessons be done in order? No. You should pick and choose on your own and will undoubtedly develop your own favorites.

Soon, you'll have student writing from your own class to demonstrate the craft lessons here, but these pieces of writing are a great starter set. We suggest that as your students write, you might keep some of their writing to use with the craft lessons, replacing the student pieces here. Your students will react more strongly when they recognize the names of the writers. But they will have no trouble identifying real student voices, even when the students come from another school.

You can use any lesson to jump-start and guide students as they begin a new piece of writing or to help them revise and enrich pieces they already have under way.

How to Find Quick Solutions to Writing Problems

What causes students to fail writing assignments or writing tests? Basically the same short list of problems:

- writing that wanders around without a plan
- vague writing
- not enough writing
- listy writing
- disconnected writing
- wordy writing
- boring writing

The lessons in this book focus on *solutions* to these problems. As you browse the table of contents, you will see that the craft lessons explicitly teach solutions, with those solutions modeled in the student pieces.

Learning to Read as Writers

At a recent NCTE conference, Kelly Gallagher talked about the importance of showing students mentor texts, texts written by professionals as well as student models. He said that he uses only excellent writing as mentor texts because “students see enough bad writing.” We see his point.

But in *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*, James Moffett (1986) wondered at the wisdom of expecting students to imitate the prose of John Steinbeck. And Frank Smith's point that students learn most easily from watching the moves of other students is undeniable, too. To us, it is essential for students to see writing in all its various stages, the moves writers make along the way: in early forms, in developed forms, in polished forms.

How will they learn the habits of choice without seeing those choices in action? This leads to the second premise of our book:

Writers make choices.

Classrooms that show extraordinary student gains are classrooms with a safe writing climate. We create safe writing climates in our classrooms only by treating pieces of writing with respect. Most pieces of writing aren't finished, rubric-ready, evaluatable corpses. They are living, growing, organic, in-progress, complex groups of choices. The writer's question should not be, "*Is it done yet?*" or "*What grade did I get?*" but...

- "*What next?*"
- "*How does this work when you read it?*"
- "*What if we tinker with this or that... ?*"

This is how real writers work.

The pieces we share in class are conversations—breathing, ongoing, and revisable. Instead of "grading" a piece when they read it, it's much healthier and much more conducive to learning for students to read like a writer: to see, name, and learn from the moves the writer makes. Our goal is for students to

- accumulate choices
- enjoy the freedom to try out those choices
- get feedback from readers about how well their choices worked

This process is at the heart of learning to be an effective writer.

Or, to look at it another way, students might read a piece of writing—early, developed, polished, or Shakespearean—with this curiosity, through this lens:

- *What choices has this writer made?*
- *What structural moves?*

- *What detailing moves?*
- *What polishing moves?*
- *...and how do those moves work out?*

As students learn these moves from each other, they gain independence from us.

Naturally, we left some mistakes in. Some of these pieces were actually written in timed settings on “test day” of the state writing test. Some were written as classroom benchmark tests, some as regular classroom pieces. Some classroom pieces, of course, are more polished than others, having benefited from spell-check, conferencing with teachers or peers, proofreading steps, reference materials, and time. **It does some students a world of good to see mistakes in a high-quality piece**, potentially calming that demon-teacher-voice in their heads that shrieks at them, “If you can’t write it perfectly, don’t write it at all!”

If you wonder why we didn’t clean them up, why we’re modeling incorrectness, that’s why. These are not corrected for perfection. There’s not a paper written anywhere that couldn’t stand a little more reworking or more editing. But each of these pieces does something magnificent, and we think it’s good modeling to focus on *that*. We believe the most productive thing we can do is to notice strengths and build on them.

About the Grade Levels

At the top of each lesson, we included the grade level of the writer. We did this simply because it’s interesting. But does that mean when I teach my fifth-grade class, I shouldn’t use fourth-grade pieces? Or tenth? Of course not.

We learned long ago from Kenneth Koch’s *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?* (1973) that second graders can look at and imitate the masters. The opposite is also true. Older students can focus on and imitate moves made by younger writers as well. We remember well watching tenth graders absorb a lesson delivered via a fourth grader’s writing. The tenth graders learned how to look for, find, and then plant different kinds of text in their writing, and the lesson stuck. Of course, the content of older writers’ works will be different from the content used by younger students, but craft is for everyone. Anyone can use any lesson with any level. The teacher is the best judge of timing.

Again, classrooms that show extraordinary student gains are those that create a safe writing climate. We create safe writing climates in our classrooms one way: by treating pieces of writing with respect.

How to Use Text Structures

What are these boxes on the bottoms of the pages and what can you do with them?

As we mentioned above, those boxes are a graphic representation of the text structure used by the writer. Each structure provides us with dynamic additional activities for these lessons.

Guided by the structure, which is the “blueprint” of the piece, students can collaboratively deconstruct an essay and strip it down to its kernel essay form. A kernel essay consists of one sentence for each part of the structure.

To collaboratively analyze the essay, take the following steps:

1. Give each student a copy of the student essay.
2. Read the piece of writing.
3. Show the text structure to the students.
4. Ask students to circle the parts of the essay that match each box in the text structure.
5. Ask students to write a one-sentence summary for each circled chunk of text.
6. Take turns reading the summary sentences aloud to hear the kernel essay of the piece.

To use the structure to generate new writing, continue with these steps:

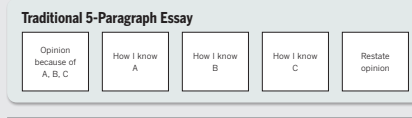
1. Look again at the structure.
2. Invite students to write their own content for the structure, writing one sentence for each box of the text.
3. Flesh out the sentences with details to create a full essay.

Here is an illustration of the steps outlined above:

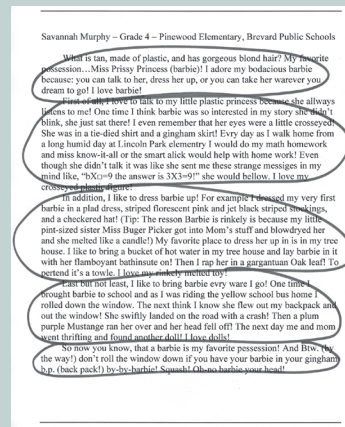
First, have students read the piece.



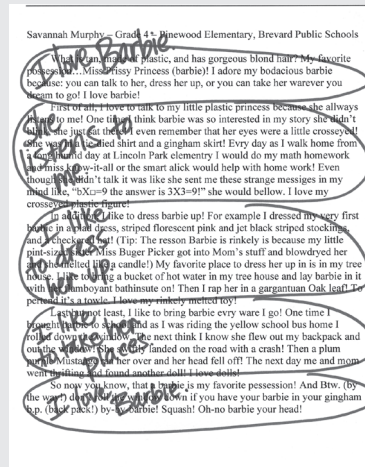
Take a look at the structure of the piece, identified in text structure boxes, located at the bottom of the craft lesson page.



Ask students whether they can identify the five chunks of text. Where does the first one start and stop? Where does the second chunk start and stop? Can you tell? Circle those, like this.



Write short summary sentences for each chunk of text.



Read the short sentences aloud to hear the kernel essay.

(A kernel essay is one sentence for each part of the structure.)

I love Barbie.

She listens to me.

I like to dress her up.

I like to take her places.

I love Barbie.

Look again at the text structure.

Traditional 5-Paragraph Essay



Have students use the structure as the basis for a new piece of writing by beginning with a kernel essay. Students use their own new content, one sentence per box.

Horses are wonderful animals.

It's fun just to be around them.

You can get into great shape by riding them.

They are as interesting as people.

Horses are the best animals.

Here is how the process would look on another piece, a narrative, with a different text structure.

First, have students read the piece.



Take a look at the structure of the piece, identified in text structure boxes, located at the bottom of the craft lesson page.

Memory Reflection



Ask students whether they can identify the five chunks of text. Where does the first one start and stop? Where does the second chunk start and stop? Can you tell? Circle those, like this.

Elizabeth Stewart - Grade 4

I looked up with amazement as the sun's light made its way through the trees along Holly Lake. I could've watched it all day, but I had a bet to win.

"10 dollars for who catches the most fish!" exclaimed my Grandpa. Still a little lanky on thought I nodded my head making sure my Grandpa knew the bet was on. I spun around toward my red, sparkly pole and started to set up.

It seemed it took ages to set up, but I knew it barely took 5 minutes. I studied the water while waiting for my Grandpa to be ready. Before I could realize it, I saw my Grandpa's bobber in the water. Was he cheating, he was supposed to wait for me? I didn't care I had to get my hook out in open water for a fair game. Even though anyone could win, I had a doubt that I will, my Grandpa's a wonderful fisherman.

I looked back over at my Grandpa, he had already caught 2 fish, and I didn't even have one. At that moment I knew I had to step up my game. I quickly power walked over to the fish food and threw three handfuls over to my bobber. I glanced back at my Grandpa, he had only caught 1 more fish. I slowly sighed with relief, but my bobber was dunked under the surface. Once the fish was out of the water, I was stunned. It was marvelous, with red and blue scales that glistened in the morning light. I don't know but it somehow gave me hope. I then quickly sent the fish back into the lake. I caught one more fish. It wasn't quite like the other one, but it still gave me hope. My Grandpa nodded and I still had 2, until the amazing hour I had been hoping for appeared. I caught 8 fish and my Grandpa caught 4, making the score 10 to 2.

More and more tugs came along, some were mine and some were my Grandpa's. Questions were dancing in my head, "Did I win? Was it a tie?" I looked over at my Grandpa and started walking toward him. The wooden dock seemed to squeak a tune beneath me. I didn't know who won but I had a feeling I was about to find out.

"I won?" I yelled in delight. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Yes the score was 10 to 2," explained my Grandpa. We walked through the forest. I thought to myself "I can't believe I won and I can't believe how much hope you can find in the smallest thing. I can't wait to come back here to once again challenge my Grandpa!"

259

Write short summary sentences for each chunk of text.

Elizabeth Stewart - Grade 4

We were at Holly Lake.

I looked up with amazement as the sun's light made its way through the trees along Holly Lake. I could've watched it all day, but I had a bet to win.

We started fishing.

"10 dollars for who catches the most fish!" exclaimed my Grandpa. Still a little lanky on thought I nodded my head making sure my Grandpa knew the bet was on. I spun around toward my red, sparkly pole and started to set up.

It seemed it took ages to set up, but I knew it barely took 5 minutes. I studied the water while waiting for my Grandpa to be ready. Before I could realize it, I saw my Grandpa's bobber in the water. Was he cheating, he was supposed to wait for me? I didn't care I had to get my hook out in open water for a fair game. Even though anyone could win, I had a doubt that I will, my Grandpa's a wonderful fisherman.

My grandpa caught more than I did.

I looked back over at my Grandpa, he had already caught 2 fish, and I didn't even have one. At that moment I knew I had to step up my game. I quickly power walked over to the fish food and threw three handfuls over to my bobber. I glanced back at my Grandpa, he had only caught 1 more fish. I slowly sighed with relief, but my bobber was dunked under the surface. Once the fish was out of the water, I was stunned. It was marvelous, with red and blue scales that glistened in the morning light. I don't know but it somehow gave me hope. I then quickly sent the fish back into the lake. I caught one more fish. It wasn't quite like the other one, but it still gave me hope. My Grandpa nodded and I still had 2, until the amazing hour I had been hoping for appeared. I caught 8 fish and my Grandpa caught 4, making the score 10 to 2.

I caught more and won our bet.

More and more tugs came along, some were mine and some were my Grandpa's. Questions were dancing in my head, "Did I win? Was it a tie?" I looked over at my Grandpa and started walking toward him. The wooden dock seemed to squeak a tune beneath me. I didn't know who won but I had a feeling I was about to find out.

You can find hope in small things.

"I won?" I yelled in delight. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Yes the score was 10 to 2," explained my Grandpa. We walked through the forest. I thought to myself "I can't believe I won and I can't believe how much hope you can find in the smallest thing. I can't wait to come back here to once again challenge my Grandpa!"

259

Read the short sentences aloud to hear the kernel essay.

We were at Holly Lake.

We started fishing.

My grandpa caught more than I did.

I caught more and won our bet.

You can find hope in small things.

(A kernel essay is one sentence for each part of the structure.)

Look again at the text structure.

Memory Reflection

Where you were	What happened first	What happened next	What happened last	What you thought
----------------	---------------------	--------------------	--------------------	------------------

Use the structure for a new piece by writing a kernel essay with new content, one sentence per box.

Julian was in the living room.

He bit down on his pizza slice and started to cry.

His tooth almost came out.

It finally came out after he went to bed.

Nobody can be happy when their children are afraid.

We included the text structure for every piece of writing to widen your instructional choices.

You may notice in the first example and in some other places in the book a text structure labeled “Traditional 5-Paragraph Essay.” I am not a fan of teaching students this structure exclusively, as I hope the lessons throughout this book demonstrate! But I do think it’s important that students learn to jump through any situational hoop that their academic life hands them. And some teachers in their futures will insist on this particular structure. Beyond that, though, for the function of this book, it’s important to me that you see that this structure, *along with many others*, can work for a variety of purposes.

As a class, if you build a collection of text structures that you find useful, students may find themselves harvesting text structures from surprising sources and filling them with their own content—with surprising results.

Whether you begin with the text structures or the craft lessons that go with each piece of writing, we hope that you will enjoy the play of learning with the models and revel in the writing that your students produce.

Have a great time with these!

References

Bernabei, G. S., Hover, J., & Candler, C. (2009). *Crunchtime: Lessons to help students blow the roof off writing tests—and become better writers in the process*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Koch, K. (1973). *Rose, where did you get that red?* New York: Random House.

Moffett, J. (1986). *Teaching the universe of discourse*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Smith, F. (1998). *The book of learning and forgetting*. New York: Teachers College.