

Workshop 7

Learning From Professional Writers

“Writers are not these amazing, special people who are visited by the angel of inspiration. They’re people who work very hard at what they do.”

—Christopher Myers, author

Introduction

Apprenticeship. Modeling. Imitation. Whatever we call it, from infancy forward, humans learn by observing those more experienced and more proficient. As we watch expert performances and try to replicate them, we advance our own levels of expertise. Writing teachers have a long and well-established tradition—dating back to Plato’s and Aristotle’s use of imitation—of using professional models to grow as writers. Almost any kind of literature available to students—essays, poetry, short stories, novels, drama—offers opportunities to learn from professional writers.

Video Overview

The teachers in this video address a number of ways in which they use the work of professionals to help their students increase their proficiency as writers. In addition, both the teachers and the professionals interviewed talk about the ways in which they have been—and continue to be—influenced by the work of others.

The teachers present several activities they use to turn their students’ attention to the way professional authors craft their works. These include activities such as reading a teacher- or self-selected text in order to look closely at the voice and style of the writer, annotating the text to mark items that are particularly compelling to the reader, building on that analysis to talk about techniques students can employ in their own writing, and writing in imitation of a model or mentor text. Professional writers underscore discussion among the teachers by pointing out that good writers must push through imitation to inspiration, because the uniqueness of each writer’s voice and style is something born from the fruit of personal experience, knowledge, opinions, and dreams. These writers also talk about their own writing practices, clearly demonstrating the joyful but hard work that writing is.

In the writer’s workshop, Judith Ortiz Cofer asks the group to think about segmenting student assignments into smaller parts. To illustrate this, she directs the writers to use this session to concentrate their writing on one part of their body, writing a description in which the part stands in for the whole.

As you watch the video, think about both your students and yourself as writers. What can professionals teach you? How can you make those lessons accessible to your students?

Key Points

- Many writers—including professionals—find inspiration for their own writing in the work of other writers.
- Many writing teachers see writing and reading as intimately interconnected activities.
- Asking students to choose “mentor texts” and apprentice themselves to an author is an effective way to help them expand their range as writers.

Learning Objectives

After participating in this session, you will be able to:

- Describe several techniques that can help students learn to read as writers, looking at a wide assortment of texts to see how good writing works and to learn ways to apply similar techniques to their own work,
- List several advantages of asking students to write in imitation of published texts to experiment with form in their own writing, and
- Demonstrate one strategy to use in encouraging students to apprentice themselves to an author in order to understand his or her style from the inside out.

The Classrooms in This Video

- MaryCarmen Cruz, 9th–12th grade. Cholla High Magnet School, Tucson, Arizona
- Charles Ellenbogen, 11th and 12th grade. Baltimore City College High School, Baltimore, Maryland
- Susie Lebryk-Chao, 12th grade. Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, Alexandria, Virginia
- Lori Mayo, 9th grade. Far Rockaway High School, Queens, New York
- Kelly Quintero, 12th grade. Huntington High School, Long Island, New York

Featured Voices in the Conversation

- Kylen Beers
- Kevin Brooks
- Judith Ortiz Cofer
- Raphael Jesús González
- Margo Jefferson
- Patrick Jennings
- Maxine Hong Kingston
- Tracy Mack
- Ruthanne Lum McCunn
- Christopher Myers
- Amy Tan

Background Reading

Lori Mayo. "Making the Connection: Reading and Writing Together." *English Journal*, March 2000 74-77. This article is available in the Appendix of this guide.

Optional: For additional resources, visit the *Developing Writers* Web site at www.learner.org/channel/workshops/writedevelop. Select Workshop 7 and Additional Resources.

Workshop Session (On-Site)

Getting Ready (30 minutes)

Discuss

Discuss the following questions:

- Who are some authors that you really admire?
- What is it about their writing that appeals to you?

Reflect in Workshop Journals

Respond to the following in your workshop journal:

- What have you learned about writing from your favorite author?
- What is one concrete activity you can use to bring this lesson to your students?

Facilitator: Use the questions below to spark discussion before viewing the workshop program. Participants may write answers to the questions in their workshop journals, as time permits. You may use all of the questions or select only a few.

Watch the Workshop Video (60 minutes)

Watch and Discuss

Questions to think about and discuss as you watch the video:

Pause at the title card "From Imitation to Invention." This follows comments by journalist Margo Jefferson.

- What professional writers have you looked to as models for your own writing? Why were they inspirational?
- What do you think about using mentor texts as a source for imitative patterns? How else have you used these texts in your writing classes?
- While professional writers offer beautiful and unusual options for language choice, style, and voice, they can also offer a close analysis of ways to structure writing to capture and advance an idea. What are some techniques you can offer your student writers to help them see professional and published writing in this way?
- What strategies that you saw demonstrated in the video would you like to adopt for use in your classroom? Why do you think they would work well with your students?
- What questions or concerns come to mind as you watch the video?

Facilitator: If you are watching on videocassette, you may pause at the segments indicated below to give participants opportunities to discuss, reflect, and interact with the program. If needed, rewind and replay segments of the program so that viewers can thoughtfully examine all pertinent information. If you are watching a real-time broadcast, ask participants to consider the questions as they view the program and discuss them later.

You may select any or all of the questions below to discuss, as time permits and according to the interests of your participants. Encourage participants to respond to the questions they didn't have time to discuss as a group in their journals or on Channel-Talk.

Workshop Session (On-Site), cont'd.

View program until the end.

- What did you learn from the writers appearing in this video? Did anything they said surprise you? Which of their thoughts and impressions would you like to share with your students?
- How can you adapt Stephen King's "what if . . ." questions to apply to planning for, writing, revising, and editing essays? How do the thoughts or the structure of the thoughts expressed in "what if" narratives differ from those expected in an essay format?
- In the video, Ruthanne Lum McCunn talks about the differences between organizing nonfiction and fiction writing. Do you agree that there are differences? Are there any commonalities that you see in organizing both forms of writing? How can information like this be helpful to student writers?
- What strategies that you saw demonstrated in the video would you like to adopt for use in your classroom? Why do you think they would work well with your students?
- Professional writers often break the "rules" that have been a traditional part of the English curriculum for many years. How do you help your students understand the difference between using nonconventional formats to express oneself and making construction mistakes?
- What questions or concerns come to mind as you watch the video?

Going Further (30 minutes)

Spend 15 minutes imitating the following passages. Try to keep the syntax, or sentence structure, as similar to the original as possible while you rework them with your own topics and diction. (See provided example.) Form groups of four and share your imitations. When you meet again in the whole group, discuss your processes. Was it difficult to write the imitations? Why or why not? What did you learn as a writer by doing this activity?

Sample Imitation:

"He looked at her then, closely. Closer than he had when she first rounded the house on wet and shining legs, holding her shoes and stockings up in one hand, her skirts in the other. Halle's girl—the one with iron eyes and backbone to match." From *Beloved* by Toni Morrison.

She looked out the window then, sadly. More sadly than she had when she first went to the window with dark and sorry eyes, holding a broken vase in one hand, two roses in the other. Cousin Sarah—a woman of few joys and a life to match.

Passages To Imitate:

1. "Before the lodge door I stop, afraid. I wonder if my people will remember me. I wonder—'Am I Indian, or am I white?' I stand before the door a long time. I hear the ice groan on the lake, and remember the story of the old woman under the ice, trying to get out, so she can punish some runaway lovers. I think to myself, 'If I am white, I will not believe that story; if I am Indian, I will know that there is an old woman under the ice.' I listen for a while, and I know there is an old woman under the ice. I look again at the lights, and go in." From "Blue Winds Dancing" by Tom Whitecloud.
2. "'Hurry it up with the prayer,' his wife shouted from the kitchen. She was an agnostic, a believer in ambition, not grace. She frequently complained that his prayers had gotten so long that soon he wouldn't have time to go to work, play duplicate bridge with the Ghosals, or play the table in the Bengali Association's one Sunday per month musical soirees." From "A Father" by Bharati Mukherjee.
3. "None of them knew the color of the sky. Their eyes glanced level, and were fastened upon the waves that swept toward them. These waves were of the hue of slate, save for the tops, which were of foaming white, and all of the men knew the colors of the sea." From "The Open Boat" by Stephen Crane.

Workshop Session (On-Site), cont'd.

4. "A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead." From "The Dead," *Dubliners* by James Joyce.
5. "I tried to notice everything so I could later tell GaoLing what I had seen, and tease out her envy. The floors of the shop were of dark wood, polished and clean, no dirty footprints, even though this was during the dustiest part of the summer. And along the walls were display cases made of wood and glass. The glass was very shiny and not one pane was broken." From *The Bonesetter's Daughter* by Amy Tan.

Between Sessions (On Your Own)

Homework Assignment

Journal

Respond to the following in your workshop journal:

- Why might imitation work as an effective teaching tool for apprentice writers?
- What concerns do you have about students writing in imitation of other's texts?
- What are some books or authors that your students might like to imitate?

In your journal, you may want to include answers to any remaining questions from this session that you did not have time to discuss, as well as thoughts, questions, and discoveries from the workshop itself and learning experiences that take place in your own classroom.

Reading

In preparation for the next session, read the Background Reading for Workshop 8: Gregory Shafer. "Composition for the Twenty-First Century." *English Journal*. 90.1 September, 2000: 20-33, available in the Appendix.

Optional: For additional resources on topics discussed in this session, visit the *Developing Writers* Web site at www.learner.org/channel/workshops/writedevelop. Select Workshop 7 and Additional Resources.

Teacher Tools

The following Teacher Tools are included in this guide for your use in planning classroom activities:

- What Works? Reading Like a Writer
- Just the Beginnings
- Form and Meaning in Poetry

Ongoing Activities

Channel-Talk

Send comments and questions regarding the workshop to other participants around the country with Channel-Talk. Consider sharing ideas that came up as you wrote in your journal, questions you did not have time to discuss in this session, and experiences from your classroom.

The Web Site

Go online for materials and resources to deepen your understanding and implementation of the practices shown in the workshop.

Between Sessions (On Your Own), cont'd.

The Classroom Connection

Student Activities

Try these activities with your students.

- **Lessons Learned:** Apprenticing yourself to a master to learn an art, a trade, or a craft has always been a satisfying and successful way to allow young talent to emerge and grow. Talk about apprenticeships in general with your students, discussing traditional (often legal) as well as nontraditional arrangements. Brainstorm virtual apprenticeships—ones in which the master teaches by example, not by presence—and how they might work for your young writers. Explain that you want your students to apprentice themselves to a particular writer for a certain period of time. Together, construct a list of expectations for the project (how many texts to be read as exemplars, how to report findings, number of expected original responses, etc.), as well as some model authors that might be selected (models might include published authors or professional writers such as columnists). Ask your students to write a brief outline of the scope of their intended apprenticeship, indicating the author they have selected to study. Devote some time each week for the apprenticeships or discussions about lessons the apprentices have learned.
- **Deconstructing an Essay:** Select an essay that your students have not read. Duplicate it and cut it apart into paragraphs. Give each student a set of paragraphs for analysis. Challenge them to reconstruct the essay, organizing the paragraphs into a cohesive whole. Ask them to compare their constructions with the actual essay. You can also use the same technique on a sentence level, cutting a paragraph into sentences and asking students to reorganize them into a coherent paragraph. Ask them to conclude this activity by reflecting on what it has demonstrated to them about constructing an essay.
- **Poetry Pickings Collage:** Give each student a poetry anthology (alternately, make several copies each of 30-40 poems that you think will appeal to your students). Have students spend a class period exploring the poems available, and picking favorite phrases and/or poems and writing them in their journals. In the next class period, have poster paper and craft materials available (glue, scissors, markers, etc.) and ask students to make a Poetry Pickings Collage of their favorite passages. You may wish to allow them to augment their collages with materials cut from old magazines, or you may prefer that they work only with the language they have collected. In either case, suggest they think about choice of color, size, and text shape as they compile their collages. Have students share their work with the entire class, explaining why they chose the words they did.

Teacher as a Reflective Practitioner

What appeals to *you* as a reader? Is it a strong story line? Character development? A particular style? In your journal, list—as precisely as you can—what draws you to an author and his or her work.

Notes
