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Book Review: The Writing Thief: Using Mentor Texts to Teach the Craft of Writing

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BOOK REVIEW

The Writing Thief: Using Mentor Texts to Teach the Craft of Writing

Author: Ruth Culham
Publisher: S. Viscarra & C. M. Lambert, Eds.
ISBN: 9780872070998
Reviewer: Jennifer R. Jackson, Marshall University

About the Author

Ruth Culham, author of more than 40 teaching resources, holds specialty degrees in Library Science and Elementary, Middle, and Secondary English Education. During her 19 year teaching career, she was honored as the English Teacher of the Year. Culham is a current contributor and Writing Department Editor for the *Reading Teacher*, president of the Culham Writing Company, and former Unit Manager of the Assessment Program at Education Northwest in Portland, Oregon.

Culham is well known as the author of *6 + 1 Traits of Writing*, as well as many other educational books and resources. Her latest work, *The Writing Thief*, is both an information rich text and a kind of “how to” for educators who want to both spark students’ writing interest and give them reasons to write. At first glance, *The Writing Thief* appears to be a guide of strategies for teaching writing, but a deeper look reveals much more. In addition to these teaching strategies, this well-organized text also helps the reader learn ways to strengthen their own writing skills.

Mentor Text and Catchy Titles

A former English teacher, Culham’s extensive range of books and materials help teachers who seek to enhance their teaching of writing. This book follows in that vein, and is written in a down to earth style that helps teachers think about how to successfully use mentor text and about what students think about when it comes to writing. The creative chapter titles, an example of which is, *Start Here: Stop Doing Dumb Things*, reveal the overall tone of the book. The author’s voice is direct, friendly, and personal. The reader feels as though she is attending a workshop and Culham is speaking to her about elements such as the what, why, and how of teaching effective writing by using mentor texts.

Mentor texts are books or other literary formats that students can use to help support them during a particular writing task or challenge. Mentors, of course, guide or support others across important life thresholds, from teenagers in need of role models to employees beginning new careers. The idea of a mentor text is that it can have a mentoring influence on a writer, and can be used to motivate and support student writing. With over 100 pages dedicated to the understanding and use of mentor texts, this book provides rich examples and ideas ready for use in the classroom.

Culham provides examples of mentor texts that are easy to understand. These examples can promote new ideas that may inspire the teacher searching for techniques to motivate and engage students in writing. Culham demonstrates how to use picture books, chapter books, and everyday text as mentor texts. Teachers will appreciate the easy to follow structure and features of *The Writing Thief*.

Chapter Insight

Each chapter provides useful information that builds on readers’ interest in learning how to motivate and engage students in purposeful writing. In Chapter 1, *Time to Rethink the Teaching of Writing*, Culham tackles the need for student writing in a purposeful and meaningful way. This chapter provides sensible things to do in order to strengthen motivation for student writing. Chapter 2, *The Power of Mentor Texts for Writing*, goes further in describing mentor texts, and explaining how to identify and use mentor texts for student writing. The last three chapters of Culham’s book are reserved for specific types of writing. Chapter 3, *Informational Writing*, explains why and how to use informational texts and gives explanations and examples that help the reader better understand this type of writing. Chapter 4, *Narrative Writing*, focuses on the power of both fiction and nonfiction narrative writing, and offers teachers specific ideas for including more nonfiction reading and writing in the classroom. This chapter is of particular interest due to the current emphasis on including more high quality nonfiction in every classroom, which is supported by Common Core State Standards. The last specific type of writing is addressed in Chapter 5, *Argument Writing*. Often thought of as identical to persuasive writing, Culham describes argument writing as being in the “same zip code” as persuasive writing, but she clearly defines the difference between the two genres and demonstrates effective argument techniques that can enhance student writing.

Each chapter of this book is rich with reasons for addressing writing with students, how to effectively attend to student feelings toward writing, as well as providing examples that are ready to use. Valuable information from one chapter to the next keeps the reader motivated and engaged throughout.

Text Features

Culham has designed this book to appeal to anyone who seeks to strengthen not just their students' writing, but their own. Throughout *The Writing Thief*, readers find text boxes and icons highlighting topics such as Author insights, Notes From Ruth, Traits, Key Quality, and Book Type. Authors discuss their experiences as writers in "Author's Insights," underlining Culham's claims that reading and writing are critical to every writer's growth and development. "Notes From Ruth" complements each author's story by offering Culham's response to those stories. "Traits of Writing" and "Key Qualities" guide teachers through a deeper understanding of each writing genre, highlighting ideas, organization, voice, and word choice used in writing instruction. Various book genres are easily identified with icons, which is another feature that makes this book easy to navigate.

Additional features of this book include a table of contents, index, and an appendix that includes reproducible items such as signs, cartoons, and passages. The usefulness of these features further demonstrates Culham's understanding of a busy teacher's workload. As an educator herself, Culham understands how students feel about writing as well as what they need to motivate and engage them in writing. Teachers will appreciate Culham's use of best practices to reach all students and enhance their writing ability.

Summary

Culham's appealing format will provoke those interested in teaching and learning, to pick up *The Writing Thief* and begin thumbing through its pages. Once they discover the very user friendly structure of the book and see the plethora of educational resources it offers, they will likely decide that it is the right one for their needs.

Understanding the importance of literacy and how it encompasses all aspects of the classroom is part of the instructional foundation for teaching. Teachers who approach literacy as a practice that is within all subjects and woven throughout all classrooms, will have a better understanding that writing should be approached the same way. *The Writing Thief: Using Mentor Texts to Teach the Craft of Writing* helps teachers focus on what we need to do in order to strengthen student writing, and to become better writers ourselves.

About the Reviewer

Jennifer Jackson is an Assistant Professor at Marshall University teaching undergraduate literacy courses in the teacher education preparation program. Her current focus is on effectively preparing preservice teacher candidates for the K-12 classrooms. She is interested in following first year teachers to gain a better insight as to how colleges can better prepare future teachers for the classroom, focusing on methods and strategies to motivate and engage students specifically in the areas of reading and writing.