The Writing Thief: Using Mentor Texts to Teach the Craft of Writing
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The Writing Thief: Using Mentor Texts to Teach the Craft of Writing, a follow-up to Culham’s 2004 Using Picture Books to Teach Writing with Traits, shows teachers how to teach slightly more advanced writing skills by using a variety of texts. Culham does not set out to sell a formula or a product; she presents a well-written and honest account of the complex and challenging process of writing. In a clear, straightforward manner, she explains how teachers can use mentor texts to teach writing. Culham offers insights about identifying mentor texts, and she provides examples to demonstrate how to use mentor texts to teach specific writing traits (such as voice and organization) within each mode of writing.

In the first two chapters, Culham emphasizes the importance of teaching writing as well as the role of reading within writing instruction. For the rest of the book, she breaks down writing process by looking at its traits within the context of each of the three writing modes identified by the Common Core: informational writing, narrative writing, and argumentative writing. Alloting an entire chapter to each mode of writing, Culham explains how to teach specific writing traits within the context of the associated mode. For each trait, she provides an extensive annotated bibliography with intriguing summaries that make you want to read every text she mentions. Many of these texts are short, but she also includes suggestions for using longer works, such as novels, by identifying excerpts that exemplify the writing trait being targeted for instruction.

Culham has crafted an accessible resource for new and veteran teachers alike, who can use her recommendations to build extensive classroom libraries for teaching writing. The most compelling, meaningful aspect of The Writing Thief is that Culham’s approach to teaching writing is authentic, rather than trendy. Her advice is perennial. I would highly recommend her book as a part of any teacher education program because Culham does not target a specific grade level, and her literacy techniques could be applied by an instructor of any subject.

Although I believe this book has a lot to offer, it does have one weakness. Periodically, Culham includes “author insights,” commentaries from some of the authors included in her annotated bibliographies. Some of these are pretty lengthy and they do not always flow well with the rest of the text; rather, they feel like interruptions. Although I must admit I did enjoy reading what the authors had to say, shorter quotes inserted in relevant places would have been more beneficial.

Culham recognizes the genres and traits outlined in Common Core State Standards (CCSS), but she is careful to remain neutral about them, choosing to use CCSS terms for the sake of clarity and efficiency. Her references to CCSS and the present emphasis on writing instruction in schools make her book relevant for educators at this particular moment, but CCSS references neither dominate nor frame the text, a perspective...
that contributes to its constancy. Culham understands and explains the process of translating thoughts into language (188–89).

Pinker rebukes prescriptivists for their arbitrary rules but also chastises descriptivists for ignoring standard usage and the fact that less-privileged students often suffer because of their lack of knowledge about norms of grammar (189). Pinker contends that many modern linguists do not cohere with either camp.

By using humor, wit, and skillful diction, Pinker advocates against pompous sentences and tired clichés as barriers to fluid, sensible, authentic writing. The book is designed to promote clear understanding of grammatical rules and concepts, which can help teachers plan instruction for high school and middle school students. Specifically, the fourth chapter “The Web, the Tree, and the String” shows teachers how to demonstrate grammar rules in action through diagrams that resemble weeping-willow trees. In Pinker’s view, teaching grammar using a “strings-within-strings” approach (81) helps learners make connections among multiple parts of speech in relation to meaning making. In a recent interview, Pinker claimed that high school students would benefit from exposure to the weeping-willow tree diagrams, as they might provide clarity to the complex functional mechanisms of syntax (“Book Discussion”).

Through countless examples of good and bad prose, Pinker urges budding writers to ignore the scolding tone of classic manuals of style and instead focus on clarity and the development of personal style. As a psycholinguist and cognitive scientist, Pinker does not blame the Internet and video games for contributing to bad writing, but rather contends that good writing has always required sustained, hard work.

In sum, Pinker’s *The Sense of Style* shows how an underlying knowledge of grammar and language can help students craft a sublime piece of prose. But be forewarned: Pinker’s in-depth discussion of language may provoke readers to rethink fundamental beliefs and reconsider assumptions about pedagogical practices. For teachers, this challenge may be hard to resist.

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**Work Cited**