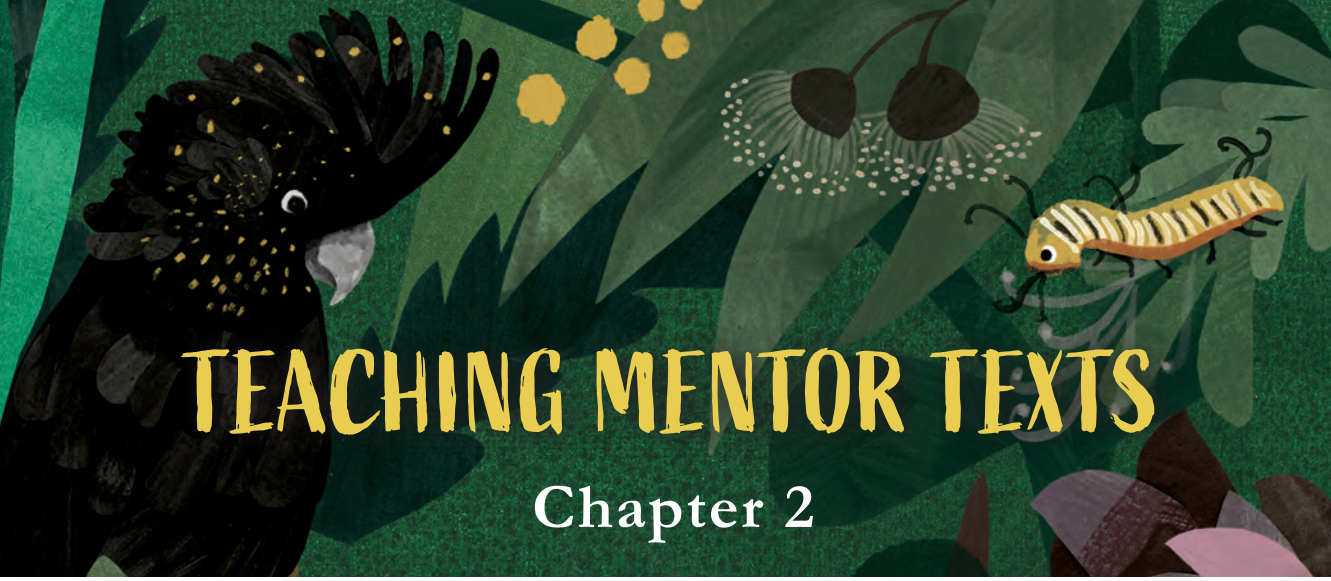


TEACHING MENTOR TEXTS

Chapter 2

A mentor is a person with whom we create a relationship that enables support, encouragement, guidance and modelling. When we have a mentor in a professional role, we walk beside that person and watch them, learn from them and copy them until we have confidence to create our own individual style. A mentor text does much the same thing for our students.

> *A mentor text is a piece of literature that can be used as a model to demonstrate effective reading and writing skills.*
>
> English, 2021, p.37

Students … use personal knowledge and literary texts as starting points to create texts. They create texts with imaginative and literary qualities in different genres and forms, and for particular audiences.

Creating literature, Literature strand, Australian Curriculum: English v9

It is a central principle in contemporary education that learning is facilitated by engagement with experienced others (Vygotsky, 1978). In this context, 'experienced others' are both teachers and quality texts. The intention is that students 'can begin the process of "reading like a writer" – noticing powerful craft, naming it, seeing it modelled by their teacher, and trying it out in their own writing' (Schrodt et al, 2021, p.46). The teacher's knowledge as the classroom authority who interprets the text becomes valuable: they scaffold students' close reading towards a deep understanding of how the text is constructed to project its meanings and engage its audience. The reading–writing relationship is deeply embedded when working with mentor texts.

When *texts are mentors*, they are quality examples of the language and meaning connections which are your teaching point(s). Students become familiar with the overall sequence and theme of the text, they revisit the details of the text/excerpt multiple times, and they are guided to view it through a writer's lens, to examine the composing techniques for their effectiveness and meaning. When *teachers are mentors*, they select relevant texts, decide the focus of teaching language content, design a pertinent teaching sequence that includes talk about the text, guide students' close reading and applicable task work, then hand over to students, empowering them to try something new in their own writing.

Students are 'apprenticed' into literacy (McDonald, 1999) when teachers offer planned or 'designed-in' scaffolding (Sharpe, 2001). For example, the well-known *teaching-learning cycle* (TLC) has four core phases which scaffold the learning: building the field, teacher modelling/

text deconstruction, guided practice/joint construction, and independent construction (Derewianka & Jones, 2016; Humphrey, 2017; Humphrey & Feez, 2016). While this order is not a fixed sequence, typically drawing on and developing students' background knowledge is the starting point. Then, depending on the teacher's purpose and students' level, any phase may be repeated as knowledge develops. In fact, setting up *message abundancy* (Gibbons, 2015) is essential, meaning that key ideas are re-presented in a range of ways. Within the TLC phases, the teacher gradually transfers responsibility for the new information from themselves to the students. The *handover* from teacher to student is part of the planned scaffolding. This *gradual release of responsibility* (Vygotsky, 1986) occurs across and within each phase, and can occur over several lessons. This release of responsibility is often known colloquially as 'I do, we do, you do'.

Texts as mentors

Using texts as models for writing has been common practice for several decades. The teacher modelling/text deconstruction phases of TLC has included teacher-written text models that present the staging and grammar of the focus text type. A narrative text will include a clear Orientation, Sequence of events, Complication, Resolution and Coda, with exemplary grammatical structures appropriate to narratives. These teacher-written texts are mentors for students learning how to compose a range of texts. But teachers would probably agree that their texts lack the sophistication and depth of work found in published authors. ('Oh no!' I hear you say. 'Really?')

This book demonstrates various ways that quality literature can be mentor texts, supported by research that substantiates the relationship between quality reading and good writing (Barrs & Cork, 2001; Weber & Harris, 2022). The term 'affordances' is a collective noun to group 'the elements that are expertly crafted by the author/illustrator/producer' (Wilson, 2022, p.11). Affordances are layered within texts, and their essential element lies in the verbal and visual language selected by the author (see Chapter 1 for further details on affordances).

Guided close reading of the language of the text reveals the affordances that the text offers:

- the elements of genre (realism, fantasy, non-fiction)
- the form (postmodern, poetry, picturebooks)
- the literary elements (setting, characterisation, plot, theme, style etc.)
- the reader's response, engagement with and appraisal of the text
- the selection of effective vocabulary
- how dialogue and description are used.

When students 'read with a writer's eye' (Culham, 2018, p.509), they attend to the use of details, their composition and their purpose. They see how excellent writing works.

While non-fiction texts are not discussed in this chapter, working with these as mentor texts is very appropriate to prepare students for factual writing. Their unique affordances are discussed in Chapter 4 and the preparation and teaching process presented in this chapter would equally apply to a quality non-fiction text.

Any quality text can be a mentor text and your school and class library bookshelves and school librarian are your resources here. While mentor texts do not have to be recently published, an excellent guide is the Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA) Award past and current winners and shortlisted books. Australian states and territories each have their

own quality writing and illustration awards, and children nominate books for the Kids Own Australian Literature Awards (KOALA). The UK's Diverse Book Awards celebrate children's literature, and the Wilderness Society and other environmental, science and social studies groups award exemplary examples of their interests. Quality children's titles can be sourced through STEM children's book awards and Aussie STEM stars. The UK and the USA have several children's literature awards which can be easily found online. Colleagues are a further resource for selecting a quality mentor text.

Picturebooks are strong contenders as mentor texts, for all ages. They can be read in one sitting, the complete text is available for discussion and the visuals work with the verbal text to construct a coherent meaning. If picturebooks are paired with a novel through genre, context or theme, more proficient readers will have an introduction into the meanings presented in the longer text. Often apparently simple picturebooks have deeper levels of meaning in their patterning of words and illustrations (see Chapter 6). These patterns may offer an entry point for introducing complex notions of audience engagement and positioning for more mature and proficient readers. While what counts as a mentor text will vary depending on the maturity and reading ability of the students, selecting texts with a range of cultural and diverse genres, contexts, themes or purposes means that all students read lots of 'complex' texts – texts that offer them new language, new knowledge and new modes of thought (Adams, 2009).

Author studies are an excellent strategy for aligning students-as-authors with what authors 'do' and 'do differently' when they compose different texts. Often authors compose in a genre that you want to study or introduce; for example, Jackie French, Bren MacDibble, Aaron Blabey and Pamela Allen are well-known for their genre and character-linked series. A web link permits engaging contact with the author, their history and motivations. Students often bond with an author, which can encourage them to take up the writing moves of the author they study. The class community's interest enhances connections between their mentor and themselves as student apprentices.

Pairing books by different authors with a similar context, theme or genre is another strategy to highlight composing variations. Teachers typically gather a range of complementary texts for a unit of work. Closely reading the language use for literacy and writing purposes makes links to how the unit content can be presented. It has been suggested that selecting a small set of quality texts for revisiting (five books, for example) allows teachers and students to 'notice small details and how powerful they are in the arc of the story, or how crucial to the argument [or context] being presented' (Laminack, 2017b, p.755).

Selecting mentor texts

Be prepared to spend some time selecting quality mentor texts for close reading: 'Choosing, reading, and analysing the craft of a mentor text for a lesson could take teachers anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour and a half' (Schrodt et al, 2021, p.46). The teacher's learning outcomes influence the selection, as do student enjoyment, interests and needs, as well as the funds of knowledge they bring to the text. Research has shown that when a teacher is enthusiastic as they read the text and guides discussion carefully, even unlikely texts can be appreciated and enjoyed by all students at all reading levels (McDonald, 1999).

However, as Fisher and Frey (2012, p.180) note, 'Not all texts warrant this kind of attention. There's no reason to do a close reading of an easily understood and simply organised piece of text.' Thus, teachers would guide students to read more straightforward texts as independent reading and, in the early years, for phonics instruction. A quality text or excerpt, however, will be more complex in its language, structure and themes, and will perhaps be selected because many of the students may not be able to read and/or comprehend it without support. This

text would be deliberately chosen for close attention as a class community of readers. The point is that mentor texts will offer exemplars of complex and evocative language which stretch students' reading and writing capabilities.

Teachers as mentors

> *Strong writers are well-read readers. Strong writing teachers are well-read readers of children's literature.*
>
> Kissel, 2017, p.92

The most important attribute for presenting a mentor text to your students is that you know the text well. You have read it and noted its range of affordances – perhaps with sticky notes as you read. With practice, this active reading develops a good ear and eye for language, which you share with your students. When preparing, as you read your children's literature text, you are on alert for interesting language moves, where the expression is well-crafted. Obvious points to note are where language is emotional, figurative or uses imagery to provoke the senses – these points will be present in unusual descriptions and evocative vocabulary. You may need to read more carefully to observe specific patterns in a character's dialogue, or the style of the narrator's voice. How the author has constructed the orientation, plot sequence, climactic moments and coda, the relationship between the images or diagrams and the text all can be recorded with a place marker and a brief note about the meaning or language use.

Importantly, the written craft needs to be considered in the light of the text's meaning and author's purpose. Using the stem *Tell me what you think …*, you can ask *Tell me what you think this one detail tells us?, … what is the author's message in these details?* or *… what does the author imply with these details/these words/this language?* These types of questions clarify the effect of the language choices and allow for hypotheses about why the author selected that vocabulary or structure. As you discuss these affordances of language, note where examples are simple and straightforward, and where they are more complex.

Revisiting a mentor text over time allows insights into why particular choices were made in relation to the meaning they create. 'The process of using a mentor text … can involve first teaching students how to closely read for qualities of good writing, and then teaching students how to emulate those qualities in their own work' (Conlon & Jasmine, 2017, p.4; Culham, 2014; Gallagher, 2012; Marchetti & O'Dell, 2015). As students read closely, they learn to read like a writer and to build knowledge over time about how different authors select vocabulary and grammar to convey particular effects and relationships to serve different purposes.

Teaching reading and thinking about writing details

The concept of 'details' may need to be taught to younger students and a picturebook is appropriate to teach what verbal and visual details are. When there are many details in a text, the excerpt can be numbered for easy reference, as in Example 2.1 (see Chapter 8 for reasons for dividing up scenes). Example 2.1 is the first of many excerpts in this book and is typical of the length of excerpts that are the focus for mentor texts. I have omitted lines, which is a strategy that allows a focus on the teaching point. You can tell students you have

adapted the excerpt or read the complete text first. Your text would be projected for viewing by the class, with copies for students if appropriate.

Introduce or review your mentor text for its literal meaning. My example, *Strangers on Country*, is a hybrid and innovative text, telling historical fiction narratives from First Nations and European perspectives, based in fact. The narratives are followed by a factual question/answer structured section. The text contains a map and historical photographs, paintings and drawings. With my example, show the map at the start of the book, locating where this story (story number 2) takes place. Briefly draw on any students' acquired background knowledge about your text – here it could be far northern Australia, how First Nations people lived pre-colonisation and shipwrecks.

This selection is from the Orientation stage of the narrative. Deliberately, it is not an example of dynamic or dramatic writing, but rather builds the scene with a pragmatic narrative first-person voice and a poetic mood. The text is read aloud (probably twice to help recall) and discussed for its literal meaning (or reviewed if it has been read previously): Tomagugu is a Kaurareg Islander, and he is out on his boat after a storm when he sees a white girl in the water hanging onto a log. The people carry her to an Elder, Pequi, who says she is his daughter, Gieowma.

Example 2.1 from *Strangers on Country* (Hartley & Murray, 2020, p.21–22)

This text is a collection of true stories about Europeans who were taken in by First Nations people. These examples are from the section 'The Kaurareg Islanders and the Ghost Girl, Torres Strait, 1844–1849'. This is Tomagugu's story.

Ellipsis (…) indicates omitted lines. The numbered sections support focus on specific details.

1 On the day of the storm I was out on the boat. My scars were irritating me more than sharing my bed with an echidna. It wasn't long before I found out why.

2 'Look, there's someone in the water,' yelled Boroto. …

A white girl clinging to a long piece of timber rose to the surface.

3 When we lifted her into the canoe, her skin was almost pale blue and she was weak.

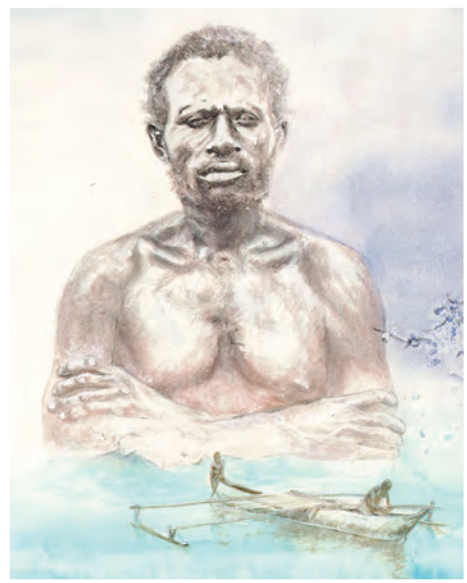
'Is it a spirit?' asked Alikia.

'Maybe, 'I said. 'We must show the Elders.'

4 The other people had disappeared. They had gone to sleep forever, deep in the water. …

5 Pequi held her face and looked at it closely. 'Gieowma!' he cried.

Gieowma was his daughter. We had always called her Giom for short. She had also gone to sleep under the water many moons ago.



Opening image, Tomagugu's story, p.20

Table 2.1 Language and literacy affordances in Example 2.1 (adapted from Wilson, 2022, pp.12–13).

The affordances noted in the discussion dot points on page 19 are indicated by blue font. The last column links to the relevant chapter for more information about that affordance.

Language examples	Literature & literacy affordances	Chapter
Strangers on Country Names: Boroto, Alikia, the Elders, Pequi, Gieowma (Giom)	• historical realism genre • innovative hybrid text • First Nations cultural context • drawing on students' personal, social, cultural and literary repertoires	3 4 7 9
On the day of the storm I was out on the boat	• setting and cause of events	8
I	• first-person narrative voice	8
scars … irritating	• vocabulary • cultural context • attitude	12 17 10
sharing my bed with an echidna	• simile • cultural context • attitude	5 7 10
yelled … asked … said … cried	• dialogue/quoted speech, varied speaking verbs (I noted 'yelled', then checked the other verbs)	13
A white girl clinging to a long piece of timber rose to the surface.	• description • embedded, adjectival clause • vocabulary 'clinging', 'surface'	14 14 12
boat … canoe	• cohesive vocabulary	12
her skin was almost pale blue and she was weak	• description	14
'Is it a spirit?' asked Alikia. 'Maybe, 'I said. 'We must show the Elders.'	• plot mystery • dialogue • social context, gender roles, question/response • engagement through modality 'maybe', 'must'	8 13 7 11
They had gone to sleep forever, deep in the water She also gone to sleep under the water	• emphasis through repetition • metaphor	12 5
many moons ago for short	• idiom	5
Sentence structures, punctuation, layout/surface features		**Chapter**
• varied sentence structures • quotes, commas, question, exclamation marks • dialogue layout • font changes in picturebooks		14 5, 13 13 6

Image of Tomagugu	Reading meaning in the visual mode	Chapter
interaction with the viewer: visual positioning	• direct contact, a medium socially friendly shot, shows power, lifelike painting, serious face	6
composition: visual organisation	• centred image, salient with large human body size, no framing boundaries.	6
representation: visual representation	• total of three human participants and fourth is a canoe, with some action in the canoe; the canoe's angle and vectors lead the viewer's eyes up the body to Tomagugu's face, the curved shapes and pale colours soften the strong body and power symbol of crossed arms.	6

As the teaching focus is to target details, together highlight and/or annotate the words and phrases that students notice. Use the numbered sections to do this slowly. The first four dot points below focus only on the details in section 1 in Example 2.1.

- From section 1, students could suggest such simple details as 'the storm', 'out on a boat' and 'my scars were irritating me'. The more complex detail 'sharing my bed with an echidna' may be noted too. Comment on the first-person narrative voice.
- Then, observe the 'job' the simple details do by naming the setting and stating that the speaker, Tomagugu, has scars that itch.
- Next, consider the complex detail in the simile – *Tell me why you think the author chose 'sharing my bed with an echidna' rather than 'sharing my bed with a mosquito'. Why is 'an echidna' a comparison that would be valued in this context?*
- Finally, hypothesise why Tomagugu would have scars, if possible drawing on students' knowledge about initiation ceremonies. If they are itchy, does this mean they have not healed and the ceremony was recent? This sentence is an example of the 'show, not tell' writing strategy.
- In section 3, the plot complication is foregrounded with the question 'Is it a spirit?', pointing to the mystery of who the girl is.
- In sections 3, 4 and 5, other details need inferencing to grasp their meaning: 'her skin was almost pale blue and she was weak', the repeated 'gone to sleep', and 'many moons ago'. Have students discuss their meaning and the authors' possible purposes for making these language choices.

Quality literature excerpts will offer many affordances for follow up. However, be guided by your curriculum and class level, and target the language that is relevant to your context. Table 2.1 shows a range of affordances present in Example 2.1, though I chose to highlight just a few in the discussion above. You may find others I have omitted from this list.

Once a mentor text is read closely for a specific reason, it can bear repeated readings that, importantly, 'allow students to focus on the skill being taught without the additional cognitive load needed to comprehend the story' (English, 2021, p.38). It is clear from this list that even this short excerpt offers different perspectives for a close reading and viewing focus.

There are many sets of criteria for what counts as good writing, from commercial programs and government testing benchmarks such as NAPLAN. One well-researched set of criteria consists of six traits – ideas, organisation, voice, word choice, sentence fluency

and conventions. These traits were researched in the 1960s (Diederich, 1961) and have been recast as the 6+1 Writing Model (Culham, 2003), with +1 being overall presentation. The traits present a general summary of what is essential in good writing. The Australian Curriculum takes up these principles and my focus on quality literary texts connects quality writing to the language authors employ.

Teaching writing and thinking about reading details

A focus on texts as writing mentors means four teaching stages: from comprehensive reading for meaning, to close reading for language study, to emulating specific language moves when composing a text, to transferring the moves into original writing. These moves do not occur in a vacuum. Assessment of student needs and curriculum requirements influence the selection of your mentor text(s) and what affordances you will employ. Thus, the concept of backward mapping, or Backward Design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2007), starts by identifying the learning goals and student needs, then working 'backwards' to develop assessment and planning for the skills and knowledge students need to achieve those goals.

In the close reading example of *Strangers on Country*, the attention to details implies that the students' writing has been assessed as using a limited range of descriptions. The focused affordances cluster around the setting, use of simile and metaphor, description and interesting vocabulary. Other affordances of cultural context and students' repertoires/background knowledge are included to support meaning but are not the focus of the planned close reading.

Various terms have been used to describe the move from reading to writing:

- Teachers can 'piggyback off reading to teach writing' (Culham, 2018, p.509).
- Students write 'shoulder-to-shoulder' with a mentor text (Schrodt et al., 2021, p.53).
- Students can be magpies, allowed 'to "steal" what they need to add to their writing' (Weber & Harris, 2022, p.8).
- Students need 'nudging' to probe writers' choices and decide what they might use (Marchetti & O'Dell, 2015).
- Teachers and students 'look at … texts differently – like a writing thief … and not leave it up to chance that a technique or idea might show up in their own work' (Culham, 2014, in Baynum, 2014, pp.707–708). Not leaving it up to chance means using the 'Tell me' framework (Chambers, 1994/2011; see Chapter 1) so the students' guided observations and the careful and, hopefully, dialogic talk around the text meld to become the resource for students' writing.

In the teaching focus list above, students' funds of cultural knowledge and learned knowledge were foregrounded, and the excerpt summarised. Then, students named and interpreted details as codebreakers and text participants, considered the authors' purpose for these details as text users, and discussed the value of 'echidna' in this context as text analysts. In the applied version in Table 2.2, I decided not to stay with the cultural context but to use a setting more familiar to me. Drawing on what you know is important when composing – if this text was part of a unit of study on First Nations Australians, then students would have background to remain with the cultural context. I retained some original text and adapted others.

Table 2.2 **Original and applied version of *Strangers on Country***

Original	Applied
1 On the day of the storm I was out on the boat. My scars were irritating me more than sharing my bed with an echidna. It wasn't long before I found out why.	1 On the day of the fire, I was out in the garden. The flies were irritating me more than sharing my chair with a rosebush. It wasn't long before I found out why.
2 'Look, there's someone in the water,' yelled Boroto. … A white girl clinging to a long piece of timber rose to the surface.	2 'Look, there's something on the road,' yelled Ahmed. … A large joey clinging to a long piece of timber rolled towards the path.
3 When we lifted her into the canoe, her skin was almost pale blue and she was weak. 'Is it a spirit?' asked Alikia. 'Maybe,' I said. 'We must show the Elders.'	3 When we lifted it onto the grass, her fur was almost pale pink and she was floppy. 'Is it alive?' asked Astrid. 'Maybe,' I said. 'We must show Mum.'
4 The other people had disappeared. They had gone to sleep forever, deep in the water. …	4 The other kangaroos had disappeared. They had gone bush as always, deep in the trees. …
5 Pequi held her face and looked at it closely. 'Gieowma!' he cried. Gieowma was his daughter. We had always called her Giom for short. She had also gone to sleep under the water many moons ago.	5 Mum held its body and looked at it closely. 'Pinky' she whispered. Pinky was the new rescue joey. We always called our rescue joeys by a name that fit like a glove. Pinky's mum had also gone bush, deep in the trees, many moons ago.

The numbered text streamlines the teacher-student joint composing of a new text, following the pattern of section 1. This could be repeated with section 2, before students are handed over the task to complete in pairs or individually. When handing over, plan for 20 minutes writing time after the mini-lesson (Schrodt et al, 2021). As students gain confidence, they will initiate moves that are further from the text itself. This section of the Orientation presents an unexpected arrival of a person/animal in distress as its starting point, which can stimulate thinking about compelling Orientations.

When composing in front of a class, my writing would contain several 'think alouds' which would echo my draft prepared for the lesson. As the focus was on details of setting, I would think aloud that my model setting would be from my personal experience of a garden and roses, transferring both simple and complex details. As 'irritating' is such an effective verb I retained it, but I would think aloud about considering 'infuriating' and even 'bugging' (and would be guided by student preferences here). Other sentences are patterned on the original, but the garden setting meant that road, path and grass were cohesive choices. I would state that I wanted to keep the repetition, and the idiom, as they are important for retaining the literary quality of the writing. I would have some idioms ready to share to find one that would match my meaning.

This kind of innovation on text has been called 're-visioning' (Dollins, 2020, p.193). Students can discuss alternative language moves as a pre-independent writing task, 'steal' and record descriptive words and poetic phrases, extend the excerpt with a short paragraph, and write another parallel scene. This re-vision advances to 'envision' when students are 'asked to transfer the specific technique being studied [to] revise a draft they are currently working on, or contemplate when and where the move might enhance their future writing' (Dollins, 2020, p.194). The affordances of the example present several opportunities for transferring techniques, especially when Orientation opening sentences and paragraphs are a focus of study. Dollins' (2020) teaching sequence is called EASE and this provides an

excellent mnemonic for the process I have outlined: *examine* the writer's techniques, *assess* the effectiveness of and author's motivations for the language choices, *suggest* a re-vision for the passage, and *envision* how the techniques can be applied in new writing.

Celebrating authors

> *Reworking an existing text is not proof of a lack of originality, it is a tool to create new works.*
>
> Michel, 2018

Michel's (2018) subtitle 'Why it's ok to reuse, repurpose and recycle fiction' captures the spirit of working with mentor texts. Michel makes the well-known point about Shakespeare's borrowings, and pastiche and mashups pervade current culture. In our context, 'copying an idea or a writing style is not plagiarism – it is learning to put new skills into your current repertoire' (English, 2021, p.37–38). Celebrating instances of fine writing can mean organising space to make examples accessible to students.

Book boxes holding familiar mentor texts allow students to re-read them or refer to the sticky notes you added for inspiration (you might want an extra copy for yourself for when needed). A folder or a shared document with copies of instances of fine writing allow easy access. Students could contribute their excellent writing discoveries to these files if appropriate to their level. Categorising the exemplars would take this collection to another level – alliterative headings are always popular, such as 'Vital verbs', 'Special/Startling similes', or 'Outstanding orientations'. An Author Gallery is another strategy, with copies of the mentor text cover, and some notes about the book as well as the ideas and language moves learned from it. When students transfer a language move into their own writing, they could add their writing to the Author Gallery wall (Schrodt et al, 2021).

Expressive and fluent reading and re-reading of mentor texts makes authors' words sing, and students can enjoy texts beyond their reading proficiency. They learn how connections between rich language and meanings are constructed and they are supported in applying the style and fluency of the text. Their writing echoes that of the author.

Reading aloud often and well from a variety of excerpts and genres *inspires* interest and entices students to read for themselves. It *invests* in students' funds of knowledge as they hear vocabulary, ideas and a narrative voice they can transfer to their own composing. Finally, reading aloud *instructs* as students hear the language they will read closely for its richness, clarity, authority and emotion (Laminack, 2017a, pp.33–34).

Summary

In essence, the best literacy practices are what work with mentor texts. As lesson preparation, you 'mine' the text for its affordances and become very familiar with your examples of fine writing. As the most fluent reader in the room, you read the mentor book or excerpt aloud, demonstrating expression. You lessen the students' cognitive load by re-reading aloud often and re-visiting the text. Your 'Tell me' questions ensure students engage in focused talk about meaning, effective language moves and why these authorial choices may have been made. Your prompts and cues support students to experience success. You think aloud as you model how to compose shoulder-to-shoulder with the mentor text. You brainstorm the simple moves and the complex moves, whether these are description, sentence structures or punctuation. Your mini-lessons model how to transfer the language focus into new writing, and you give time for students to apply new words and ideas, honouring their success as authors – 'No one but the teacher can take and make the materials work' (Culham, 2014, p.19).