

READING LIKE WRITERS

I sat down beside Justin on a Friday morning. I was a guest writing teacher in his fifth-grade classroom, and I had brought with me that day a huge box full of books of poetry. Justin was looking at Georgia Heard's poetry collection *Creatures of the Earth, Sea, and Sky* (1992) and he had stopped on the poem "Frog Serenade," a poem for two voices. His fingers were moving back and forth across the widely separated lines of the poem. "I can't figure this out," he said to me as I moved in beside him. I knew what he was going through—I too remembered being unsure of the structure of one of these poems the first time I saw one. I explained to him how the left and right sides were for two voices, and then we began to read it together. When we finished, Justin called one of his friends over and we performed the poem again for him, and then again for a group of girls who had overheard and wanted their own reading. We were a hit because of our brilliant performance, of course, but also because we had introduced Justin's friends to this wonderfully exotic kind of poem. I moved on to other students and other poems and left Justin with Georgia.

As I was leaving his classroom later that morning, Justin caught me on my way out the door. Shyly, he slipped a piece of paper into my hands. “I wrote this,” was all he said.

Something Dead

Boom

Boom

Boom

I hear a noise

Boom

a gun is firing

Boom

Boom

Boom

People are crazy

Boom

Something is dead

Boom

Boom

Boom

Cause buzzards are flying

Boom

That’s not nice

Boom

Boom

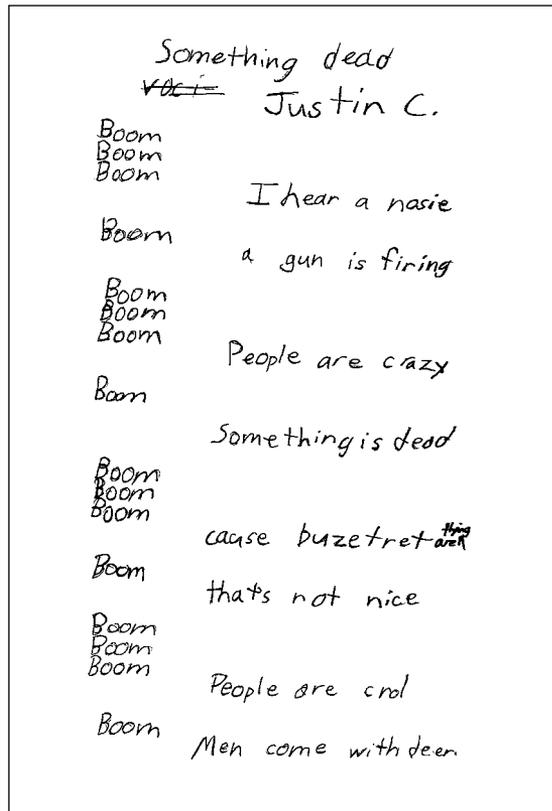
Boom

People are cruel

Boom

Men come with deer.

As I read through “Something Dead” I knew that I was experiencing one of those moments we all live for as teachers. Right before my eyes I was watching a child do something he couldn’t have even dreamed of doing only an hour before. I mean, he had never even *seen* a poem like this. In one short hour Georgia Heard had given Justin a new vision of what was possible in writing, and Justin had used that vision to see his way into saying a big important thing in his life: *People are cruel—Boom—Men come with deer.*



Justin's poem

ADDING A NEW FOCUS

When I first began teaching writing, I found tremendous satisfaction in helping children like Justin find those big important things to say in their lives. I loved living in a classroom where, day after day through our writing, we laughed and cried and gasped in awe at our own storied lives. My students and I each used our writing to say, “This is who I am, this is what I wish for, and this is what I care about. . . .” There was a satisfaction in this that I had never known from school writing as a student myself, and so as a teacher of writing I found confidence in my ability to rise above what I had known as a

student. That my students wrote about topics that really *mattered* to them was more important to me than anything else.

Time and experience haven't changed this focus. My number-one priority in teaching writing is still this: "Write what matters." But time and experience have shown me that helping students find what matters to write about just isn't enough. It's a good start, but it isn't nearly enough. To see what else there is, it helps to first go back in time. My "good start" teaching, without too much exaggeration, used to go something like this:

So, you've decided to write about how much your mother means to you. Great idea—it'll be such a special piece! Have at it! Let me know when you're finished.

And then I was off to encourage the next child writing about the destruction of the rain forests or the death of a beloved pet. We all felt so good about our writing topics that it was easy to get a false sense that there couldn't possibly be anything more than this, anything more than writing about these dear, dear topics in our lives.

But that sense was false, and I saw it exposed more times than I'd like to mention on the faces of children who, when they finally shared their published writing with us, knew that writing just didn't convey the passion they felt for their topics. Kyle, a second grader, was one of those children. He was trying to write a piece for his mother for Mother's Day, to let her know how special he thought she was. He had all the good reasons a writer needs to write—an audience, an occasion, and a thing he wanted very much to say. He was editing his "final draft" when I came to confer with him.

I hope you like the book. I love my mom and I will always love my mom and she will always love me too. Roses are red, violets are blue, I love you and that is true. Roses are red, violets are blue, you like flowers and that is true. I love you and you love me, you are my mom and that is true. You are my mom and I love you. Roses are red, violets are blue, you are my mom and I love you. I wish you a Mother's Day that you will always remember. I wish you a happy mother's day because that is what you deserve.

He read his piece to me, and I could see the look on his face. The poem wasn't doing what he'd hoped it would do. Kyle knew I couldn't see his mom in what

he'd written. Despite its nice rhythm, he knew his poem didn't do the work of showing how special she was. Looking back, I know that Kyle was using all he knew of poetry at that time—the rhythm and rhyme of that one, classic, framing line—to write this piece about his mother.

“It sounded so good when I was thinking about it, it just didn't *turn out* that good,” a writer finishing a memoir about the Dominican Republic once said to me. And I had to ask myself, “Where was I, his teacher of writing, while he was *turning out* this piece that mattered to him?” I had caught Kyle in the act of turning out his piece. What would I do to help him? What should I do?

Facing enough writers like Kyle finally made me realize something very difficult and important as a teacher: The ideas behind my students' topics were often way better than much of the actual writing they ever did about these topics. Quite simple—it's hard to admit—but there for me to face. How much power could my students' writing have to help them make waves or build bridges in the world if I only helped them to find good topics? Didn't I also have a responsibility to help them write about these topics *well*, to do these huge, important life topics *justice* with good writing?

The answer I found to this question was “of course.” I had to start doing more to help my students write well. If they were brave enough to go for these life topics, then I had to match that with brave, bold teaching.

Coming to this realization and then coming to a place where I really felt like I was helping students to write well has been a long journey. What I have found on this journey is that helping so many students write *well* about so many important topics is an overwhelming job I can't do by myself. That's right. I can't help students to write well by myself. I need lots of help doing this teaching work, and I have found that help on the shelves of my library. Think about Justin, for instance. In his case, my really hard teaching work involved carrying all those heavy books from my truck to his classroom. Georgia Heard taught him to write that poem, not me. Georgia Heard showed him how to write well about this injustice he felt in his heart that morning. And day after day as I teach writing to many different students, I let writers like Georgia and Gary Paulsen and Cynthia Rylant and Jane Yolen help me do the important work of teaching students to write well.

Bravely, still new to bold teaching and still afraid to step on toes, I went and got the Eloise Greenfield book entitled *Honey, I Love, and Other Love Poems* (1986), the morning Kyle read his poem about his mother to me. I

showed Kyle the title poem, and I showed him how Eloise Greenfield was also trying to show a love for something, how she was writing just like him, but the difference was that Eloise said very specific things about what she loved. Her “loves” applied only to her. After studying this poem a bit, making a list of specific things he might write about his love for his mother, Kyle began a completely new draft of his poem.

Mom, I love a lot of things about you. Like you drive me to school when it rains and the way you let my friends spend the night. I love a lot of things about you. Like the way when I walk in the door you ask me did I have a good day at school and the way you kiss me good night before I go to bed. And the way you wash my clothes for me and the way you give me toys and the way you play with me when I don't have no one to play with. I love you mom for lots of things, but most of all you love me too.

There's Kyle! There's his voice, and there's his mother! Eloise Greenfield helped Kyle see a different way to describe something through poetry. Eloise Greenfield showed Kyle that poems can do more than rhyme; she showed him that poems can say things, big important things, about our lives. I believe we have a responsibility as teachers to get the Georgias and the Eloises into our students' hands to help them know how to write well about the things that matter most to them.

Many of us who teach writing have learned to let authors like these help us show our students how to write well. Reading-writing connections have gone beyond written responses into actual craft apprenticeships in the writing workshop. Rather than garnering ideas for *what* to write about from their reading, students are learning to take their own important topics and then look to texts to learn *how* to write well about those topics.

Writing well involves learning to attend to the *craft* of writing, learning to do the sophisticated work of separating *what it's about* from *how it is written*. Justin didn't get a new idea for writing something about frogs from Georgia's poem. He got an idea for a new way to structure a familiar genre. He was able to see the craft of Georgia's writing as separate from her meaning. Kyle didn't get an idea to write about love from Eloise Greenfield—he already had that topic in mind. Eloise just helped him see how to *show* love rather than *tell* about it.

When students are taught to see how writing is done, this way of seeing opens up to them huge warehouses of possibilities for how to make their writing *good* writing. The key is in learning how to learn to write from writers, and teaching students to do this is the instructional challenge faced by teachers who want to help students write well.

LEARNING TO WRITE FROM WRITERS

As teachers it seems we have to spend a lot of time fighting against what our own educational histories have taught us to believe. We were not taught to learn to write from writers. Oh, in high school and college we analyzed the texts of brilliant (if not mostly dead) writers, but we always did it as an end in itself. No one ever said to us, “Hey, you could try and write *like* Robert Frost if you want.” In this school world we were taught things like “everyone writes differently” and “everyone has her own unique style,” and we were led to believe that good writing required nothing less than a writer inventing a new wheel to get attention. Who could write with that kind of pressure? Not many of us did, unfortunately.

So learning how to write from writers is a fairly new concept in many classrooms. Not surprisingly, however, it isn't at all new to professional writers. Countless interviews, articles, and memoirs by and about famous writers attest to the fact that writers learn to write from reading the work of other writers. In an article in *Workshop Two* (1990) about the teaching of writing, Cynthia Rylant says, “I learned how to write from writers. I didn't know any personally, but I read . . .” (19). Gary Paulsen would agree with her. Speaking at an NCTE conference he gave this advice to aspiring writers: “Just read for about four years before you even start. Read everything you can get your hands on.” And in *Radical Reflections* (1993) Mem Fox talks about listening again and again as a child to the actor John Gielgud reading Shelley's “Ode to the West Wind” until she knew the poem by heart (113). Today, she says, she still has “Shelley in her bones” and his rhythms help her write. Like any other craftspeople, professional writers know that to learn their craft, they must stand on the shoulders of writers who have gone before them.

But how is this done? How does a writer learn to write from other writers? Is it a simple process of imitation? Or is it a more sophisticated gathering

of both explicit and inexplicit technical knowledge about writing craft that we find across many different kinds of texts?

I've spent the last six years in writing workshops, grades kindergarten through graduate school, where I've worked as both teacher and staff developer, trying to answer this question. Together, the teachers with whom I've worked and I have nudged students to learn from more experienced writers by studying the craft of their writing. We've developed habits of inquiry to engage students in learning to write from writers, and used our own growing knowledge of the craft of writing to help students, in focus lessons and conferences, to write well. These experiences have helped me to understand a lot about what it means to learn to write from writers in both explicit and inexplicit ways, both within classrooms and outside of them. *Wondrous Words* is a book that will help you teach yourself and your students how to learn to write from writers, outline for you many common crafting techniques that good writers use, and help you rethink your teaching of writing to incorporate the teaching of craft in conferences and focus lessons.

Before launching into explaining the classroom practices that teach students to learn to write from writers, it is important to establish what I think are three important concepts that form the foundation for this kind of teaching. These concepts are as follows:

1. What it means to read like a writer.
2. The difference between writing as unique and writing as individual.
3. The difference between a descriptive and a prescriptive approach to teaching writing.

READING LIKE A WRITER

What does it mean to read *like a writer*? How does a writer read? To understand this it is helpful to think about how any craftsperson would study the techniques of others who practice the same craft—how a chef would visit a restaurant, for example, or a potter another pottery gallery, a painter an art exhibit. My husband is in the knife-making business, and recently one of his bladesmiths visited the shop of another bladesmith to study a particular

technique of knife making. Reading is the writer's way of visiting another craftsperson's "gallery." If the writer knows what to look for, he or she can learn a lot from looking closely at another craftsperson's work, and the text, of course, is the writer's work "gallery."

To illustrate this point I often tell students about my friend who is a very accomplished seamstress. I explain learning a craft from a craftsperson this way:

Because my friend is a seamstress, she goes to the mall or to the dress shops differently than the rest of us who aren't seamstresses. First, it takes her a lot longer than a normal person to make her way through the store. She turns the dresses and jumpers and shirts inside out, sometimes sitting right down on the floor to study how something is made. While the rest of us mere shoppers are looking only at sizes and prices, my friend is looking closely at inseams and stitching and "cuts on the bias." She wants to know how what she sees was made, how it was put together. And the frustrating thing for anyone shopping with her is that as long as it takes her, she hardly ever buys anything! You see, my friend's not shopping for clothes, she's shopping for *ideas for* clothes. After a day at the mall she goes home with a head full of new ideas for what she might make next on her trusty sewing machine.

This story about my seamstress friend helps students understand how a writer must read, gathering ideas from text to text to text about what the possibilities are for writing. Students can easily see how a writer in a library or a bookstore is like a seamstress in a dress shop.

The key part of the story is "the rest of us who aren't seamstresses" because it hints at the importance of identity in learning to read *like a writer*. My friend's identity as a seamstress means that she sees herself as someone who makes clothes. She knows that this act, making clothes, will be a part of her future, and so she lives with that expectation, watching clothes in the world to see what "clothes possibilities" exist. First-time expectant parents watch families differently for the same reason—they are looking for family possibilities. A man planning a garden looks at gardens on his way home from work for just the same reason—he's looking for garden possibilities. And when writers read, they can't help but see writing possibilities in the texts they encounter. If we know that a particular activity is something we will be doing (writing), if we see ourselves as someone who does this thing

(writes), then we have a different way of looking at that thing (text) as we make our way through the world.

Now, conversely, if we do not see ourselves as the kind of person who would ever do a particular thing, then we do not live with this “craftsperson’s vision” for this thing. Take for instance my interest in music. Music is something that I love purely as a spectator. I have no desire to be a musician. I do not see myself as a musician, and when I listen to music I don’t hear what a musician hears when she listens to music because I do not *need* to hear it. Making music will not be a part of my future (I can hear those of you who have heard me sing saying “Thank God” here). And when my friend and I shop together I will always be only a shopper, a good shopper, but only that. Never a seamstress. I need only look at price and size to satisfy my needs as a shopper.

So what is essential here is to understand that for our students to learn to read like writers, they first have to see themselves as writers. They have to know that poems and letters and stories and editorials are a part of their futures. To learn from other writers, students have to live with the kind of expectations that come from being *people who write*. Once students see themselves this way, they are able to lay their work down alongside that of other writers and see habits and crafts mirrored there, and also extend their own understandings of what it means to write.

Lisa Cleaveland, a brilliant kindergarten teacher in western North Carolina, has done such a good job of helping her five- and six-year-olds see themselves as writers, that she routinely gets asked writerly questions from her young students at work. Recently, one of them asked her, “Ms. Cleaveland, when authors write, do they staple their books first and then write, or do they write first and then staple?” Sam was so sure that his stapling process was the work of a real writer that he wondered about the fine points of that process in other writers’ work like Eric Carle and Ezra Jack Keats. Seeing his work as like the work of the writers he’s read at home and in school causes Sam to think about what he reads as being like what he writes—the all-important connection necessary to read like a writer.

So in order to gather a repertoire of craft possibilities that will help a writer write well, that writer first has to learn how to read differently, how to read with a sense of possibility, a sense of “What do I see here that might work for me in my writing?” This is what reading like a writer means—to read with a sense of possibility.

FRANK SMITH'S LEGACY

The whole idea of reading like a writer stands squarely on the shoulders of Frank Smith's work in learning theory development. Smith uses the expression "reading like a writer" in *Joining the Literacy Club* (1988) to describe how a writer must acquire the vast amount of knowledge necessary to write anything successfully. Smith points out that the knowledge needed to write successfully is so vast that it could never be covered or contained by a systematic instructional program. Quite simply, he says, students must learn what they will need to know about writing from reading. He is quick to point out, however, that this knowledge is only available to those who see themselves as part of "the club of writers." Smith calls on teachers to make it their main goal to help students see themselves as writers and then find the mentors students need. He says,

Teachers must also ensure that children have access to reading materials that are relevant to the kind of writer they are interested in becoming at a particular moment. Teachers must recruit the authors who will become the children's unwitting collaborators. (26)

Smith focuses on the *vicarious* learning that takes place when a writer reads, and he points out that this learning happens at an overwhelmingly effortless and speedy pace as writers learn words, phrases, spellings, and authors' "stylistic idiosyncrasies" as they read. He goes on to say that "Teachers do not have to *teach* children to read like writers" (26). And I agree that writers cannot help but learn vicariously from their reading, and so in that sense they do not need to be taught to do this kind of vicarious learning.

I do believe, however, that there is a different kind of intentional and deliberate reading that writers can learn to do in order to grow in their knowledge of the craft of writing (Smith would call craft "stylistic devices"). While Eloise Greenfield and Georgia Heard were certainly "unwitting collaborators" as two young writers learned from them, Kyle and Justin were quite deliberate and intentional in their collaboration with these mentors. This kind of reading like a writer is undertaken by those who pursue writing as artists or craftspeople, writers who, like any other artists, jump at the chance to learn from a master craftsperson. But to learn from another

craftsperson, it helps to know what kinds of things to be watching in that craftsperson's work. Imagine being in a gallery of oil paintings with an accomplished painter to show you around. The painter might show you things about the paintings that you would never see on your own. Smith talks about writers rereading something because "something in the passage was particularly well put, because we respond to the craftsman's touch" (24). I believe that writers can deepen their understandings of what it means when something is "particularly well put" or the result of "the craftsman's touch," know better what to watch out for, study more deliberately how a writer managed to "put it well," and in doing so be better able to imagine crafting writing this way in their own texts.

Smith goes on to say that when writers notice something and reread, it's also because "we have read something we would like to be able to write ourselves but also something we think is not beyond our reach" (24). My experience has shown me that many more things become "reachable" to writers who live in communities in which they read like writers and study together the craftsmanship of writers. The conversations that happen during an inquiry into craft make many techniques available to inexperienced writers that, without such inquiry, might have seemed out of reach. Slowing down to do more than simply reread something you've noticed an experienced writer doing in a text, slowing down to name it and figure out how it was done, helps you better imagine doing this kind of crafting in your own writing. If we travel back to my friend in the dress shop, we know that certainly she can gather ideas from simply walking through the shop, but true craft inquiry is the slowing down to sit on the floor and turn the dress inside out, not just seeing possibilities, but studying them as well.

So the inquiry structures we've been working with in writing workshops do simply this—they slow down and make more deliberate the reading like writers that happens vicariously when any writer reads. Slowing down lets writers apprentice themselves very deliberately to other writers, developing a line of thinking during inquiry that, with use over time, becomes a *habit of mind* that writers engage in without effort and without intentional inquiry. I have so developed my "reading like a writer" habit of mind that I can catch myself saying "Now look at how that's written" most every morning as I read the newspaper or look at billboards on the way to work.

As you will see explained in detail in Chapter 6, inquiry structures are used in classrooms to teach this reading-like-writers habit of mind to young writers.

And while lots of curriculum about good writing is generated from this kind of inquiry, the curriculum itself really isn't the point. The habit of mind, the habit that will outlive our moments in the classroom and continue to teach students throughout their reading and writing lives, is the point. So if we want to help our students write well, we first need to teach them to read like writers.

WRITING IS INDIVIDUAL—IT IS NOT UNIQUE

For you and your students to learn to write from other writers, you will need to first think a little about “writing style.” I’m defining style here as the manners of expression a writer uses, the ways in which a writer crafts words to make meaning on the page. Consider this: While any writer’s style is individual, it is not unique.

The definitions for “unique” in my trusty old *Webster’s* dictionary are

1. one and only; sole,
2. different from all others; having no like or equal,
3. singular; unusual; rare.

Once you begin to really look at texts and see how they are written, you soon realize how absurd it is to define writers’ styles as “unique.” As a matter of fact, the styles in which different writers write are more alike than they are different. Take for example the crafting technique of combining words with hyphens to make a new, just-right word. Lots of writers use this very handy technique. Jerry Spinelli uses it often in *Maniac Magee* (1990) to describe things like “That’s why his front steps were the only *un-sat-on* front steps in town” (italics mine, all such). In *An Angel for Solomon Singer* (1992), Cynthia Rylant describes a waiter in a café as a “*smiling-eyed* waiter.” And Libba Moore Gray uses this technique throughout *My Mama Had a Dancing Heart* (1995) in lines like “the sand stuck between the toes of our *up-and-down squish-squashing* feet.” In the two chapters of this book which outline various structural techniques and ways of using words, you will see many different writers using words in exactly the same ways to make meaning in very different kinds of texts.

You see, when we write, we are not doing something that hasn't been done before. As a matter of fact, we are doing something that is very like what has been done for centuries. Our writing acts are all individual in that we are one person writing about one topic at one moment in time for some purpose, but the act of how we go about doing that is not unique. Language is defined by the very ways in which we *share* its use. So the decisions about which ways we will use language in a given piece of writing are individual, but the ways themselves are not unique.

When I'm explaining this concept to students I often go back to my story about the seamstress. I tell them that one of the reasons my friend likes to design and make her own clothes is that she never has to worry about showing up at church or at a restaurant wearing something that someone else is wearing. She hoards material of all sorts—linens and wools and gabardines—saving each piece for just the right plan for how to “make it up” into something snazzy and wonderful. Her material, and her exact plans for what to do with it, are what give her an individual style. But what she makes is not unique. Like anyone else who makes clothes, she makes vests and skirts and tops and little sarongs like she saw on her trip to the islands. How she makes clothes and the shapes and forms of what she makes are not unique, she shares the possibilities for these with all other seamstresses.

I tell my students that

[A]s writers, you're a lot like my friend. You have hoards of material, hoards of stuff you might write about. But how you go about writing about all that stuff will be in some way the same as writers who have gone before you. You'll write poems or stories or memoirs. You'll use lines that repeat and rhetorical questions and stunning verbs. Writing, like making clothes, is not a unique process each time someone engages in it. It is individual, but it's not unique.

We make a big mistake when we persist in this notion that every time someone writes it is an event that is unique in the history of the world—that everyone who writes has his or her very own style made up of totally unique ways of using words. Nonsense. Everything we do as writers we have known in some fashion as readers first.

A few years ago I worked with a group of middle school students in a summer writing camp. I asked the group during one of our first mornings

together to talk about the writers whose styles matched their own. After they'd been talking a few minutes, Aaron, a brave soul in the group, spoke for the rest of them. "Katie," he said, "we were talking about it and we really don't think we write like anybody else. Everybody in my group—we all have our own unique style." They were really quite insulted that I had even suggested they might have something in common with other writers. That good writing was a unique act was something they had been taught in sometimes subtle, sometimes very direct ways in schools.

We spent a lot of time that summer rethinking the notion of a writer's style being something that is unique. I have learned from experience that making this false assumption and sticking to it shut down a writer's ability to learn from other writers in any intentional way, though the vicarious learning will still take place. Writers can't help the vicarious learning, and of course it is this vicarious learning that keeps writing style from being unique and makes language use (written or spoken) a shared commodity. We can't help the learning we do from other writers; what we can help is to help ourselves to even more of that learning! Once we embrace our individuality and let go of a misguided, impossible-to-fulfill need to have a unique writing style, we can get on to the business of really learning to write *well*.

DESCRIPTIVE VERSUS PRESCRIPTIVE TEACHING

These two key understandings—reading like a writer and understanding the individual (not unique) nature of writing itself—are necessary for both students and teachers to learn to write from writers. The final key understanding is really only necessary for you (the teacher) to understand before pushing further—because it has to do with a shift in thinking about how we teach writing. If you are going to teach your students to learn to write from writers, you are going to have to switch from a *prescriptive* approach to teaching writing to a *descriptive* approach. What does this mean? I'll illustrate by sharing with you the classroom encounter I had years ago that taught me the difference in these two ways of teaching about writing.

When I first started using inquiry as a way to learn to write from writers, I didn't really know what I was doing, what we might find in this inquiry, or

where we would go once we were under way. I just thought we needed to “learn to write from writers” the way Cynthia Rylant said she had learned to write. You might say I was teaching with a bit of blind faith. So since Rylant had gotten me into this, I decided we would use her texts to start our study. While looking at one of her texts, a fourth grader named Jennifer raised her hand, vigorously, in my face. I responded, and when I did she said, “Cynthia Rylant starts three sentences in this book with ‘and’ and my daddy told me you were not supposed to start sentences with ‘and.’ It’s against the rules.”

Uh-oh. The rules.

No fragments. No run-ons. No pronouns without antecedents. All paragraphs with topic sentences. No split infinitives. No ending sentences with prepositions. All stories with clear beginnings, middles, and ends. Don’t repeat a word too often. And on and on and on.

We all know THE LIST, but incidents like this one early into my study of craft had me asking, “Didn’t someone tell these award-winning authors about this list?” My students and I kept running into things involving language use that I had always been told not to do with my writing, and by that time in my teaching career I had “preached from the list” more than a few times myself. Now, I had seen enough student writing to know there were bad fragments that just left you hanging, run-ons that never ended, ‘and’s’ used like marks of punctuation instead of conjunctions, and split infinitives so far apart you forgot what was happening in between. But that’s not what we were seeing in these texts. We were seeing fragments that *were* complete thoughts, run-ons conveying a sense of desperation or excitement, texts that flowed beautifully but—belying clear beginnings, middles and ends—could have been organized in many different ways. And sentences starting with “and” that made perfect endings to perfect texts.

Through experiences looking at many different texts in inquiry with children, we came to realize that there was a difference between *describing* good writing and *prescribing* good writing. When we really engaged in *describing* good writing, we found ourselves talking about how it all works quite differently than we did when we only *prescribed* good writing, far away from the beautiful texts those prescriptions were meant to help create. And of course we had to face the fact that many of the things we had been taught about good writing simply were not true. As we looked and described what we saw, we were rewriting our own understandings about how good writing happens.

I would be lying if I didn't say that in these early describing days we (the other teachers and I) were at times fearful that what we saw writers doing signaled the end of the civilized world as we knew it. It wasn't until we looked at some of "the old masters" we'd read in school, and saw them doing the same things, that we realized using language in interesting ways has been going on as long as people have been writing. Crafting writing is nothing new. Describing the craft of writing was what was new to us. We were never taught to look at *how* Hemingway or Swift was writing. When it came time to learn how to write we were given prescriptions far removed from the texts we were asked to read.

Over time, as we *really looked* at writing, we found that there was nothing to fear. Good writers don't pursue their craft with a reckless abandon. Instead, they have come to realize that language is there to be used, in any manner possible, to make meaning. Human beings invented language. Its use is not a fixed, rule-bound principle of the universe that existed before us or outside of us. Its use is an exchange between human beings, and because of that, it is alive and changing and growing, and it is never static, never one thing or one way you can put your finger on. To learn to write from writers you will have to make peace with understanding language in use, rather than language in principle.

Once you do make peace with this and start describing what you see in beautiful texts, you may start celebrating as I have this new way of thinking about good writing. I am celebrating because finally I have found a fascination with language study. That's right—language study. Not mindless drudgery grammar and diagramming lessons, but language study that allows me to describe good writing and learn how craft happens.

Describing good writing requires you to get words into your classroom that let you talk easily about what you are seeing in texts. Usually young writers don't have the words I have to talk about writing, words like metaphor and simile, personification and alliteration, parts-of-speech names. But this inexperience with language terminology actually helps them more than it hurts them in the inquiry part of reading like writers. When we first started I found that I went to texts looking for things I knew the names of, rather than just looking at how the writing was done. So I might see what I was looking for, but I missed a lot of other things that the students were seeing. Early on, if I didn't have a name for it, I didn't see it. My expectations about what I thought I should see limited my ability to truly inquire as the

children were. Many of the crafting techniques the students found did not have names in the literary devices I had known. I could describe them, often pulling up my parts-of-speech knowledge, but I didn't have a name for them in my adult repertoire.

For example, in Rylant's *The Relatives Came* (1985), a group of students was interested in "wrinkled Virginia clothes" and "hugging time." The students said things like "they sound neat" and "they sound weird together." And they did, but I didn't know a *name* to call what Rylant was doing. What I could do, however, was use my knowledge of parts of speech to first realize and then explain to the students that what made these phrases stand out was the fact that Rylant had used two words that aren't usually adjectives ("Virginia" is a proper noun and "hugging" is a verb, a present participle) as adjectives. Explaining it this way allowed us to think of other examples of our own such as "Tuesday was a sweating day" and "My dog gave me a jumping kiss." We could figure out how to do it; we just didn't know what to call it.

This language issue, this "what are the words we use to talk about writing" issue, was the source early on of another very significant insight into teaching writing from a descriptive rather than prescriptive stance. In these early inquiries I was finding many very natural opportunities to supply children with the language they needed to help them name what they were seeing. I was daily having to pull from my memory parts-of-speech names, pronoun categories, and names for literary devices to help children *and to help me* understand what we were seeing as we described texts. Embedded in all our talk about writing were many grammatical terms and usage concepts that the children picked up almost effortlessly, as they do most new words used in sensible ways within real contexts. Even kindergartners commenting that they loved a word like "luscious" were told, "Oh yeah, that's an adjective. It tells how something is. Isn't that one wonderful?"

I had always been taught concepts about how our language works in a way that was very removed from actual pieces of writing, from that language in use, and for this reason learning them was always hard. Some concepts never made much sense to me, and even with the ones that did make sense, I didn't see them as having an impact on my writing life beyond making my subjects and verbs agree. I was amazed that certain grammatical concepts, not named literary devices but grammatical concepts, could actually help me think about the craft of my writing. And this amazement grew from simple

statements like, “It’s got a lot of words that end in *-ing* in it” and questions like, “Do you think this really happened to Cynthia Rylant?”

Let me explain. Two stories.

Once, as a group of writers was looking at the Cynthia Rylant text *This Year’s Garden* (1984), one of the things someone in the group noticed was, “It’s got a lot of words that end in *-ing* in it.” And he was right. Twenty-one to be exact. Words like *squatting*, *sitting*, *bending*, *digging*, *waiting*, etc. The group talked about this observation.

I said to them, “You call those ‘participles.’ They’re verbs called ‘present participles.’” That was about all I knew about participles. Someone in the group suggested that having all those *-ing* words in there made it feel sort of like you were planting the garden right along with them as you read it. Like you were “do-*ing*” all those things. A tiny whisper of a thought entered my mind. I shared it with the group. “I wonder if that’s what ‘participle’ means? It sounds like ‘participate’ so maybe it means that when you use that kind of verb, it makes a piece of writing feel like you are participating in it?” This sounded promising, so we got a dictionary and looked it up and sure enough, “participate” and “participle” are closely related.

I felt slighted, cheated. I had only known participles as one of the conjugation columns on the board in my English classes. Why hadn’t anyone ever shown me how functional they could be for me as a writer? Shown me that if I wanted to make a text feel participatory, I should use them, in abundance?

In another gathering of writers, an inquiry group raised this question to the whole class of third graders: “Do you think this [the story in *The Relatives Came* (1985)] really happened to Cynthia Rylant?” I thought this was an interesting question, so I asked the group how it became a question for them. One child explained, “Well, we noticed that in *When I Was Young in the Mountains* [1982], Cynthia says ‘I’ all the time so you know it is her own life memories. But in *The Relatives Came* she never says ‘I,’ but it still seems like it should be something that happened to her.”

Guess what lesson I taught that day? You’ve got it—first-person pronouns, singular and plural. I knew that part, fed it to these third graders, and they got it in a snap. (Is that concept even *in* most third-grade curriculum guides?) But the understanding I didn’t have, and what I figured out that day with that group of children, was what a difference the plural and singular forms of that pronoun make in a piece of writing. As a writer, if you want

your piece to have an inclusive feeling, a feeling like it's anyone's story, anyone's essay, write in first-person plural as Rylant did in *The Relatives Came*, using "we" and "us" and "our." On the other hand, if you want it to sound very singularly "memoiry," you had better use the old standby "I." Did you learn pronoun cases this way? By what work they could do for you as a writer? This was radical to me.

So classroom encounters like these, happening over and over again, taught me that grammatical and usage concepts made a lot more sense when they came from the inside out, from looking at language and wondering, "How does this work?" And they also taught me what it means to know these concepts as a writer, something I had never been shown before. Language study had always been very separate from my actual work as a writer, and except for editing purposes, the concepts I learned in language study were never joined with my decision-making process as a writer.

A descriptive approach to teaching writing forces us to look at language as something that gets *used* by writers, and in this way it creates a marriage between the study of language and the teaching of writing that has been sadly absent from traditional, prescriptive approaches to language study. As you look at texts with students you discuss everything as a "writer's move." You form most every question about the text with the writer's name in it—"Why did Rylant choose not to use 'I' in this text?" Language is seen for what it really is, something that gets used in real ways by real people, not a land-mine field of "rules" set up for writers to cautiously make their way around. Language is beautiful, alive, wondrous, and studying the craft of it in use will remind you of this again and again.

References

- Fox, Mem. 1993. *Radical Reflections: Passionate Opinions on Teaching, Learning, and Living*. New York: Harcourt, Brace.
- Rylant, Cynthia. 1990. "The Room in Which Van Gogh Lived." In *Workshop Two: By and for Teachers, Beyond the Basal*, edited by Nancie Atwell, 18–21. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Smith, Frank. 1988. *Joining the Literacy Club: Further Essays into Education*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.