

# Read Like a Writer

by Lisa Burman

**“Read, read, read.  
Read everything -- trash, classics, good and  
bad, and see how they do it.  
Just like a carpenter who works as an  
apprentice and studies the master.  
Read! You'll absorb it.”**

*William Faulkner  
Nobel Prize-winning novelist*

Authors purposefully use literary devices and techniques to hook and engage their readers. They think about how words work together, the rhythm and cadence of sentences, the richness of vocabulary to evoke a strong mental image or emotional reaction in their reader. As teachers of writing, we instinctively know that these are the things we want to teach about writing. However, so many of us were never taught about these literary devices ourselves and so it can be difficult to know exactly how to teach them in ways that are meaningful and motivating to young writers.

Once I discovered the power of using literature as a teaching tool in my Writing Workshops, a whole world of possibilities was opened for me. Understanding how literature, and in particular, picture books, can mentor writers has enabled me to study what other writers do and to emulate this in my own writing as well as to enrich my teaching. **To mentor, used as a verb, means: “to teach or give advice or guidance”** (*Merriam Webster Dictionary* downloaded 28/3/16). In other words, how can more experienced authors and illustrators teach, advise and guide younger, less experienced writers?

I have developed a great passion for **Author and Illustrator Studies**. These aren't my Author

Studies of old, where we learnt about the person behind the books, listened or viewed them reading their texts and read their words with great appetite. Most definitely, these things are still part of the Author and Illustrator Studies I now plan, but they have been expanded and enriched by my new understandings about the teaching of writing.

Author and Illustrator Studies provide a meaningful context for the learning of writers of all ages. Our youngest writers will engage in the same thinking as their older peers as they craft their texts through illustration, thinking purposefully about the experience they want for their reader. They think and act as writers through illustration and oral language as they read their books to their audience. In this way, illustration and writing are intertwined – the process of composing involves both illustration and word-crafting.

**“Writing taught once or twice a week is just frequently enough to remind children that they can't write, and teachers that they can't teach. They are both like athletes who never get in condition, yet have to play the game before derisive spectators.”**

**Donald Graves (1983)**

**“Writing: Teachers and Children at Work”**

*I think of Donald Graves as the 'grandfather of writing'.  
He truly was our respected, wise elder and this  
quote still rings true today.  
If you don't know his work, don't be put off by  
the dates of his writing.  
He provides such insight into the teaching of  
writing that his wisdom will live on  
for many years to come.*

# Read Like a Writer

There is a great, often untapped, energy for learning in the investigation and close study of illustration. It seems we are so keen to get to the word-crafting part of being a writer, that illustrating is too often missed. Artists employ their own set of devices and techniques to engage their viewer and in the case of the picture-book illustrator these intertwine with and add power to the words crafted by the author. Illustrators think purposefully about their craft, in the same way that authors think intentionally about the words they choose to craft into a sentence, a persuasive essay or a memoir. In this way, studying the choices made by an illustrator should not be limited to teaching in the early years of school.

## Studying an author and/or illustrator brings an inquiry stance into the teaching of writing.

Three year old writers can immerse themselves in the “Spot” series and understand that they too can be like Eric Hill and make lift-the-flap books. Six year old writers can study the words and illustrations of Nick Bland and notice how he uses line to create a sense of motion in his illustrations and his powerful use of **BIG** and **bold** font to tell the reader to change their voice as they read. The ten year old writer can study how Mem Fox creates rhythmical, lyrical sentences by the use of alliteration, rhyme and repetition.

An Author or Illustrator Study provides motivation and an authentic context for stretching ourselves as writers. Through inquiry, and multiple opportunities to read, notice and name, we can wonder about the crafting moves and decisions a writer and/or



illustrator makes on each page. Together, we wonder and theorise: Why do you think Nick Bland decided to use **BIG** and **bold** here, with these words? What does it tell his reader? What do we notice about how Nick Bland helps his reader know how each of the characters is feeling?

Gradually, we realise that if Nick Bland can do this, then we can too. As Katie Wood Ray (2006) so clearly puts it, we are empowered to ‘*write under the influence*’ of Nick Bland and try these moves in our writing too. When this happens we excitedly witness children adding movement lines, ellipses and **BIG** and **bold**, in their books. We notice how the young writers are very purposeful and intentional in their writing: not only are they using these writing and illustrating devices, they confidently explain why they chose to use it on a particular page. They know just the right place to use **BIG** and **bold** for effect and choose the exact right word to add an ellipsis after. This is where intellectual stretch is found for writers from three to a-hundred-and-three!

Once you start reading like a writer yourself, you too will notice the huge resource available for your teaching.

# Read Like a Writer



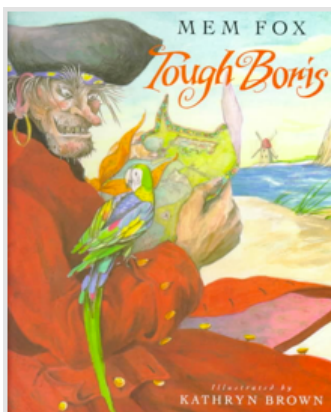
I believe it is important to always read a text as a reader first: to enjoy it as a whole, to read it as the author intended. In the re-readings of the text, we can dig deeper as a reader and as a writer.

Reading like a writer invites us, along with the young writers we teach, to wonder why authors and illustrators made certain decisions. We're invited into their thinking and to notice ways their sentences are put together, how the illustrations provide depth and the kinds of words they have chosen for us, their reader.

You'll soon have your own favourite authors, illustrators and texts that will become great friends to your Writing Workshops, to your Kindergarten library and to the community of writers in your prior-to-school settings and classrooms.



Here are just a few of my favourites that I have used with all age groups of writers. Please don't limit them to the youngest of writers just because they are picture books. I use Tough Boris with 10-12 year old writers because there is so much depth in the illustrations. I hope you enjoy them as much as I do and also discover some of your own favourites to add to this list.



## Tough Boris by Mem Fox

- Use of colour to convey tone and mood
- Telling two different stories – one in words and one in the illustrations
- Structuring a book with a see-saw pattern
- Page with no words to slow down the action and create mood/tension
- Showing size & importance in illustrations by placing the main character in the foreground



## The Very Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle

- Structuring a book through time (days of the week)
- Repeating line
- Crafting illustrations to show size (small caterpillar on large leaf)
- Crafting illustrations over two pages (large butterfly)
- Zooming in to show only part of the whole (one leaf not the whole plant)

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## The Tickle Ghost by David & Brett McKee

- Direct speech punctuation
- Powerful speech vocabulary (words other than 'said')
- Commas
- Keeping static details consistent in illustrations
- Adding interesting details in background illustrations

## The Very Cranky Bear by Nick Bland

- Ellipses...
- Crafting movement – lines, characters facing same way, cards in the air, hair/mane moving in same direction
- Big and Bold
- Repeating words for emphasis
- Onomatopoeia
- Drawing emotions on character's faces
- Crafting sentence fluency with rhyme

## Back-to-Front Bob by Belinda Ellis

- Ellipses
- Hyphenated-words
- Italics and capitals for emphasis
- Crafting sentence fluency with a mix of short and long sentences
- Crafting part of the word-text within the illustration
- Creating a secret for the reader hidden in the illustrations
- Powerful speech vocabulary
- Thinking bubbles

## Unseen by Paul Jennings

- Grabber leads – chapters begin with different leads
- Onomatopoeia
- Direct speech – punctuation, start new line for new speaker
- Crafting sentence fluency with a mix of short and long sentences
- Crafting sentence fluency with a mix of sentence beginnings
- The power of the short (two or three word) sentence

Reference: Katie Wood Ray (2006) Exploring Inquiry as a Teaching Stance in the Writing Workshop, NCTE.



Don't forget informational mentor texts too! More about *writing to teach your reader* later in the year...