

Book Review: What A Writer Needs

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Material Learned

Teaching writing to preservice teachers is a topic that has been swept under the rug for years. Truly a missed opportunity to aid teachers in educating young students on the prominent features and processes of writing. The book *What A Writer Needs* by Ralph Fletcher is an incredible resource for all teachers, both new and old. The text has an informational and narrative style littered full of new concepts, new jargon, and chapters that reinforced my current thinking and teaching style. In addition, the book featured student examples, excerpts from Fletcher's life, and a unique perspective on the meaning behind writing. I think this book is a valuable resource that teachers will be able to turn to and get feedback on teaching the various writing features, such as developing the beginning, middle, and end of the piece as they navigate their school year.

There were several chapters I found myself clinging to and presented information vital for myself in both the context of my career and as a writer. For myself as a writer, I have gained quite a few pieces of knowledge that I am going to take in and use throughout my writing career, both as a teacher/ student and, more importantly, as a person who appreciates writing. Fletcher presented the ideology of "stalking your inner voice" (69). As I continue to age and become clouded with life, I have found myself far from the inner voice I once had throughout the past years. As Fletcher described, it is relatively painful to reconnect with your inner voice and ask yourself those hard-to-swallow questions. This is something on an individual level I need to redevelop and fine-tune. I lost my writer's voice somewhere between the pages of expectations and lost time. After hearing what Fletcher had to say, I want to implement smaller writing opportunities with no boundaries and ask myself those questions.

Application of Practices

Fletcher presented new and innovative concepts that I will be able to integrate into my teaching practices. In chapter one of the book, I found myself resonating with what he had to say. The idea of mentorship is something I latch onto and hold dear. Maybe it's just my nature, but I've always looked for mentors for different avenues in my life. Some stayed for years; others helped me at the moment. Fletcher said it best when he described a situation with his first-grade teacher, Mrs. Damon. He recalled his struggles with his handwriting and how she empowered him regardless of his abilities. Fletcher explained that she described the issue as their problem, not as his (11). This is precisely how I want my students to feel; I want them to know that I'm going to have high expectations, but the expectation will be worked on from the both of us as a united front. In continuation throughout this chapter, there was a focus on how mentors build upon existing strengths- this was an oddly beautiful concept for me to resonate and relate to. As Fletcher unveiled, a mentor "...reaches into the chaos, find a place where the writing works, who is it from the wreckage, and makes the writer aware of this emerging skill with words" (14). As put beautifully by Fletcher, it is the job of a mentor to look past the rough and find the diamond; for example, a student might struggle with grammar but have a strong sense of their storyline and character development. When you choose to look deep and analyze student writing, you find their strengths. This is something I plan to implement in the next school year. When I give students feedback, I want to highlight their strengths and find ways to support their weaknesses. In addition, I want them to highlight and feature their strengths along with me to help build a collaborative relationship.

The idea of mentorship is less of an instructional practice and more of a social-emotional practice. However, in chapter six, Fletcher emphasized the importance of finding your writing

voice. I was able to derive ideas and purpose out of this chapter that I will be able to use in my classroom. I love when you can hear a writer's voice within student work. As Fletcher highlighted, young children often write with a sense of intimacy and easily connect their writing to their readers. In my opinion, this exists strongly with students in their age group because there is not an emphasis on word requirements or strict stipulations for their subject matter. As students age, teachers add more expectations which can be restrictive to their writing voice. Something I am going to implement from this chapter is allowing my students to complete more free writing activities and pulling from their strength of vulnerability to then support their conventions as a secondary concern.

Another chapter I found of particular value was chapter 9, Tension. As a teacher, I often don't write narrative pieces anymore, so I miss out on the opportunity to develop tension/conflict in my own writing. Fletcher proposes a switch in language from conflict to tension in his writing, explaining that tension as a term is more inclusive than conflict. This idea was a bit perplexing to me, as I have always considered a story's "conflict" to be the buzz term; however, I find myself in agreeance with Fletcher after he continued his explanation. The idea of calling this portion of the story the tension allows writers to grasp onto the ideology that there are rising and falling moments of action strung throughout the text, not just a singular conflict. Looping back to what Fletcher claimed about tension being an inclusive term also allows students to better understand various types of conflict. As an educator of young students, I find students often think of conflict only as an argument between characters. This shift in language would not only be helpful for them as learners but also for myself when teaching them this concept. My students will not only have a deeper understanding but hopefully be able to feature more complex moments of tension instead of one argument.

Overall, Fletcher presented me with several new ideas and concepts to bring with me as I enter the new school year. Some of the smaller ideas I am taking away lie in helping my students with their character development and revision processes. Fletcher talks about mapping characters out by utilizing the five senses- touch, taste, sound, sight, and smell (57). Character development maps will be a powerful tool for my students as they begin to develop characters, especially focusing on sight, smell, and sound. I will develop a graphic organizer for their characters so they will be able to reference their traits as they write their story. Fletcher ends his book with a chapter on revision (which seems fitting); in the chapter, he draws attention to the idea that we must reflect and reconsider during this process; it is not just a time to check for spelling. The idea of revision is an area I need to work on and help encourage my students to understand. For many of them, once it is finished, they are done with their writing-ready to be rid of it and never look at it again. However, as we know, there is power in revising and adjusting the written piece's organization.

Remaining Questions

Although I do feel Fletcher did an exemplary job of going through several key components of writing, I am left with more significant questions than meets the eye. One is finding the time to foster all of these vital pieces. On a given academic day, I run out of time for all sorts of things that I have to be realistic, although I am passionate about the ideals addressed in Fletcher's book. In addition, I feel that most often, the goal many schools have in mind is to get through the curriculum. If I slow down to ensure all of these themes are well taught, I can't imagine getting through it all. In chapter eleven, Fletcher addresses time and ways to maximize time within your writing piece. He illustrated this idea on page 139, the concept of narrowing in and creating a tight focus. However, all of this provokes me to question why there is pressure to

push through my content. At what point are we forgetting to teach the features highlighted by Fletcher, such as character development, and as mentioned earlier, finding their writers' voice. There is no one-size-fits-all resource for this concern, and maybe that is just part of the gig.

My other question is related to a phonics connection. Fletcher did not address teaching letter sounds, formation, or connections to teaching phonics. As a primary teacher who teaches lower elementary, I find it fascinating that often there is a focus on writing features like developing conflict. Still, several students struggle to get ideas on paper. In the text, Fletcher did feature work from lower elementary that was heavily flawed with grammar mistakes but did not address strategies to teach phonics. Luckily, there are loads of interventions and curriculums that have been developed to help with phonics instruction. For example, my district uses a few different phonics instruction resources: Haggerty and Foundations. I additionally use Words Their Way to provide another layer of support for my students. When they have support for phonics and spelling, I find that my students are more interested in writing and developing more complex storylines with fascinating characters.

Additionally, there are quite a few websites for teachers that support phonics instruction, such as reading rockets and Raz-Kids. Reading Rockets offers numerous resources and suggestions for teaching phonics and implementing lessons. Raz-Kids and Raz-Plus offer a game-based approach to teaching phonics and reinforce the importance of instructing children on phonics and developing their phonemic awareness. Overall, I found Fletcher's *What A Writer Needs* to be highly informative and plan to keep close as I enter the next school year. I hope to implement some of his ideas surrounding supporting student strengths, developing characters, using the term tension instead of conflict, and many more vital strategies.

References

Fletcher, R. J. (2013). *What A Writer Needs* (2nd ed.). Heinemann.