

# Mentor Texts for Writers

Webinar Presentation Notes, January 15, 2014

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## Who Am I?

I'm Marcie Flinchum Atkins. I'm a teacher and a children's writer. I've been teaching elementary school for 16 years. My favorite thing to do teach is writing. I have two graduate degrees in children's literature from Hollins University, and while I wrote during both of those programs, I realized after the birth of my second child that I had to be pretty serious about writing. I could just do it when I felt like it and make any progress. So I started writing in the mornings before I go teach and before my kids get up in the morning. On my blog, [www.marcieatkins.com](http://www.marcieatkins.com) I feature two things: tips for organizing your writing life and making time to write for writers. And I feature writing tips for teachers. Because I teach kids to write using mentor texts, I started sharing some of what I do on my blog. If you know any teachers, please point them my way because I've just launched a teacher newsletter.

## Housekeeping

All handouts are on [www.marcieatkins.com](http://www.marcieatkins.com)

Notes

Printables

Bibliographies

Everything referenced here

Write down your Q&As

Don't stress if you don't get notes taken down like you want to. I will be including the notes from my presentation, along with other pertinent resources on my website. It is supposed to be live at 8:00pm EST. I will also post a link on the Facebook page after the webinar is over. So all of the links and notes you'll need will be there.

## We Spend a Lot of Time Writing

According to Malcom Gladwell's book, *OUTLIERS*, it takes 10,000 hours to really become a master at something. For most people that's 10 years.

We spend a lot of time writing and honing our craft. For those of us who write in multiple genres and for multiple age groups, it seems to take a very long time.

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## **But we get frustrated when we can't get it to go from our heads to the paper**

We know what we want to write. We probably even know what books we'd like to see ours with. We have the vision in our heads, but it often doesn't make it to the paper. In the notes for this webinar, I'm going to include a video to Ira Glass talking about this very topic.

## **We Have Finite Resources**

Many of us would like to spend all of our time with famous writers (just ask me, I spend 10 years in grad school getting two different degrees because I love hanging out with writers). I love going to conferences, workshops, retreats. But many of us have limitations in our schedules, in our family responsibilities, and our money. So we can't always hang out with the brilliant folks in our field all the time. And many brilliant folks in the field also have limited time to focus on mentoring. They want to spend their time writing as well.

## **We'd All Like to Have Our Books on the Shelves**

We'd like to see our books go from our computers to an agent to an editor to the bookshelf and into the hands of readers who want to read them over and over again.

## **We Can All Learn From the Masters**

Even if we never get to meet our favorite author. And even if we do get to meet them, but we never get to pick their brains about how they do what they do so well, we all, every one of us, regardless of your situation or expertise level, you can learn from the masters.

## **Mentor Texts**

**A stellar text that can be used as a model for good writing.**

This is where mentor texts come in. A mentor text is a stellar text that can be used as a model for good writing. Regardless of our limited time, family responsibilities, finances, we probably all have access to good books. In fact, it's probably good books that first stoked your fire to become a writer in the first

place. Chances are, if we love to read them, something about them sticks with us for a reason. Something about that book or books makes us stand up and shout, “This! This! I want to do this with my writing!” We may have varying levels of access to books. For example, if you are living overseas, I realize you may have limitations to free libraries. I grew up in Thailand, and books were pricey to buy, and there were no public libraries. So I read my way through the school library and all of my friend’s limited libraries. But I did have access to books. My parents still live in Thailand. They both have Kindles and unlimited supplies of books via the internet. So, we may not all be able to order the books and pick them up in a drive thru, like I do at my local library, but we all have access to books. Therefore, we all have access to mentor texts which can really be key in helping us learn how to write better.

## **Design Your Own Personalized Course**

What do we do with these mentor texts? How do we take good books and have it affect our writing? We design our own course. Sure, you can take classes. But you can also design your own course to help you learn what you need to learn about what you’re writing.

## **Choose Your Course Based on Your Needs**

In college, you have to take all of those prerequisites. Even in grad school where you can pick your classes, there were still a class or two that were required. In making your own mentor text course, you can plow your own way. If you are writing picture book biographies, you can study that. Magical realism middle grade, science related picture books, character driven picture books, you name it, you can hone in and design your own course.

## **Design the course focusing on: YOUR WEAKNESSES** **Plot? Characters? Setting?** **Structure? Dialogue?**

The first thing to think about it is WHAT you need to focus on. What are your weaknesses? What really needs work?

## **Make two lists:** **Strengths      Weaknesses**

Start by making two lists: Your strengths and your weaknesses. You may have

one major weakness (like PLOT) that can affect many other aspects of your writing. But also list your strengths. Don't ignore those. You may even have a strength that is non-writing focused, like research or interviewing, but it most definitely affects your writing. So count it as a strength. Get it down on paper.

You can either do this for you as a writer as a whole, if you are trying to figure out an overall weakness of yours. OR, if you are having trouble with a particular manuscript, you can make a list of strengths and weaknesses of a particular manuscript. Sometimes there will be overlap. You can do this on a piece of paper OR get a printable on the resources page for this webinar.

## **How do I figure out my strengths and weaknesses?**

Well, what if you don't know your strengths and weaknesses? Don't ask a non-writing related person. They probably won't be able to articulate for you very well.

1) Ask a critique group friend. If you've been critiquing with one person for any length of time, they can probably tell you what they see as your strengths and weaknesses.

2) Take a look at your rejection letters. I've been getting a lot of specific rejection letters. Some of them are very specific. While this can be discouraging at first, it's very helpful to me as a writer. They are articulating what's working and what's not. It's very clear on what I need to work on.

## **Look for books that are strong in your area of weakness.**

For example, right now I'm working on a character-driven mentor text course I'm creating for myself. I have some character-driven picture book manuscripts that are lacking. So I want to find some books that are strong character driven books to look at and to study. Just on a side note, I'll be articulating this study in more detail in a guest post I'm doing for Alayne Christian. Stay tuned, we'll let you know when that is up. If you are struggling with finding a unique angle for your nonfiction picture book, then you need to check out books on familiar topics that come at them with unique angles. I'm including a few recommended books on nonfiction in my resources.

## Where do you find the books?

- 1) Amazon—If you find a book that you like, take a look at the bottom where it says “Customers who bought this item also bought” Sometimes these books won’t be what you’re looking for, but often it will be a rabbit hole for you to find other books like it. Then make a list and get them from your library.
- 2) Ask on Facebook groups. I’m a member of a plethora of Facebook groups that are always good resources. Anytime anyone asks for a book that’s similar to.....they always get a ton of responses. That’s the power of the community.
- 3) Ask a librarian. Librarians love to help. Use them as resources. Google it. I often google things and find bloggers who have made great lists.
- 4) If you have time and are nerdy like me, use THE HORN BOOK and SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL. They have reviews and they are current.

## Design the course focusing on: YOUR INTERESTS

Think of this as picking out your classes. What class do you want to take, or in this case, what class do you want to make for yourself?

Maybe you haven’t written anything in this particular genre yet. Maybe you want to delve into a new genre or you’re new to writing. Then focus less on your strengths and weaknesses and more on your interests. What do you want to write? Picture book biography, a nonfiction book about a little known event x, a fractured fairy tale based on x. Once you know what you’re interested in, then you can collect books and start to read.

## 3 Piles of Books to Study

Candice Ransom, a very prolific children’s author, and one of my professors and friends from Hollins, mentioned this in her picture book class. Check out a bunch of books at the library. Read through them all and separate them into three piles as you read.

## Books that you don’t like at all

The first pile is books that you don’t like at all. They might even be books that are you’re thinking, “How did THAT get published?” or “This doesn’t hold my interest at all, but maybe it would be good for kids who like X.”

## **Books that you like but couldn't write**

The second pile is books that you really like or admire, but are not your style of writing. For me, this is Mo Willems. I think the man is brilliant. I could survive on a deserted island with my kids and a pile of Mo Willems books. BUT, these don't fit my style of writing. I just don't think like that and I don't write like that. I'm also only a writer, not a writer/illustrator like he is.

## **Books that are similar in style or books that you'd like to write like**

The third pile should be books that are styles you really like and books that you imagine you could one day write. For me, that's Jane Yolen (ha! in my dreams, right). She writes very lyrical, sometimes less plot-driven picture books. Btw, the one that is circle is a book by Barbara Joosse, who I also admire. **THIS IS THE PILE OF BOOKS YOU WANT TO STUDY.** Study what makes them work. Be really systematic about it. Write down what you love, what works.

This works well if you are studying a particular genre, but it also works well if you are trying to figure out what type of book you want to write.

## **Design the course focusing on: HOW you want to study**

Think of this as collecting school supplies. Do you like shiny new pens, notebooks, highlighters, sticky notes? Or are you better at doing things on the computer?

## **Digital or Analog**

Are you a notebook kind of person? Or do you keep things in files on your desktop? Either one is okay. I do keep a notebook where I write things down, especially if they're short pieces.

- 1) Show notebook
- 2) Show index cards that I used for studying plot
- 3) Show sticky notes that I put on books for mentor texts
- 4) Type out the text for picture books
- 5) Charts—When I'm teaching 4th graders we write down on big chart paper as we're studying, we write on sticky notes, and we highlight copies of the text

6) You might be an app person and type everything into Evernote or make a mentor text document in Scrivener. Or make a file on the computer. Whatever you use is fine as long as you use it.

## **Study the mentors**

Once you have your mentors picked out and you have your method or methods picked out, then it's time to study. Really study. This means you have to crack open the book and pick it apart. Figure out what makes it tick.

## **Macro and Micro**

I am including this as a printable on the resource page, so do NOT feel like you have to write these down here.

Big picture writing items—Macro Writing Skills

Sentence or Word level—Micro Writing Skills

This is NOT all-inclusive, but these are some things you could take a look at.

## **Macro Level Studies**

There are two ways of looking at mentor texts that I'm going to cover here: MACRO LEVEL and MICRO LEVEL. Big picture and little picture. I'm including a printable of MACRO AND MICRO LEVEL STUDIES on the resource page.

One way of looking at a macro level is to type up the text. If you are looking at picture books, they are usually under 1000 words. You can type that up. Take a look at what it would look like as a manuscript. We did this in Candice Ransom's picture book class, and it singlehandedly, has helped me more than anything. You get the feel for pacing, page turns, and how little text is really used to tell the story. I do this on the computer usually.

## **Structures**

Structure is a MACRO or big picture item. If you are writing nonfiction picture books, there are many ways of structuring a picture book and multi-levels of ways you can get information to the readers. The best way to see all of the varieties of structures are to look at these nonfiction books. Examples: A Seed is Sleepy, Thomas Jefferson Builds a Library, Here Come the Humpbacks, Martin and Mahalia, and Moonshot. These are all amazing nonfiction titles with different

structures. Look at a bunch.

## Plot, Plot Clock

Plot is a MACRO or big picture item. I'm going to refer you to some great resources on plot in picture books in the resource page, but one example is to chart the plot of mentor texts that you are looking at. Rob Sanders talks about the plot clock in his blog as does Joyce Sweeney. Rob does a great example of using *Mostly Monsterly* by Tammi Sauer to track the plot. I'll give you the link on the resource page. If you've typed out the text, then you can do what Rob Sanders did with the book that you're studying.

If you are looking at big picture items, then plot out masterfully done books. I was looking at plotting in a middle grade book. I worked through *THE SMALL ADVENTURES OF POPEYE AND ELVIS*, writing down the plot on index cards because I wanted to see how the whole thing fit together and how Barbara O'Connor paced her book. I got the idea for this in James Scott Bell's book on Plot & Structure.

## Character Development

How are you developing your characters? This can actually be big and little.

Character driven picture books

Character arcs in fiction

Character—how the person is introduced and drawn in a nonfiction text

This is something I'm going to be going into great detail about in a guest post for Alayne.

If you've typed up the text, then you can figure out how they developed character by analyzing the typed up text.

## Micro Level Studies

Micro Level is looking at the small stuff. Sometimes it's the little things in picture books that really make me love reading. I'm getting read to feature some books on my blog that are great books, but there are certain lines that I'm just in awe of. This is micro level stuff.



## Scene Level

How are scenes structured. Sometimes even paragraphs, not whole scenes. Recently I was looking at how a minor character was introduced in *LIZZIE BRIGHT AND THE BUCKMINSTER BOY* by Gary Schmidt. It was only a couple of paragraphs, not quite a scene. But I wrote down the words. Then I made notes to myself for why I thought it worked. What technique did I think he used?

## Sentence Level

### Titles, Beginning Sentences, Endings, Refrains

I could spend my whole life looking at sentence level brilliance and applying it to my own writing. If you are having trouble starting your book, take a look at different leads in your genre. Write each one down. What does each lead accomplish in one line?

I have trouble with endings, though this is less of a sentence level issue and more of a plotting issue for me, but looking at endings of books. How is the twist at the end handled? What lingering thought are you left with?

I love refrains in picture books, but I haven't yet mastered this myself. When I was looking through some sample mentor texts, I was surprised at the amount of nonfiction books that have refrains in them (*George Did It*, *The Tree Lady*). I also took a look last year at the refrain and how it changes in Tammi Sauer's *MR DUCK MEANS BUSINESS*.

Descriptions can also be included here. And not lengthy ones. A favorite nonfiction with great descriptions is *MOONSHOT* by Brian Floca.

## Word Level

- Specificity
- Onomatopoeia
- Strong verbs
- Sensory Words

At the word level, what makes work really sing?

- The use of specific language. If you are writing nonfiction, this is going to be essential. What are the words that are specific to your topic? How can

you make them really stand out and be understandable to your audience. One really great example of this is NOAH WEBSTER'S WORDS.

- Strong verbs, onomatopoeia, similes, and sensory language are all really important at this level. If you want some good examples of this, I have a mentor text spreadsheet that will give you some good sample texts. I'll provide a link for you in the resource page.

## **Test your knowledge**

### **Apply it to your OWN writing.**

The last part of this is the TEST. Although, I will see that test is not the end of the road, like it is in a college course. The test is just the beginning. This is where you will take all that you learned and apply it to your own writing. You want to make it your own, not set out to do what's been done before. Here some examples.

## **Borrow a structure**

Sometimes structures work for a reason. As long as you are fitting your story to a working structure, then try it out.

## **Use a structure of the whole book you like and test drive it.**

### **Example: M, T, W, Th, F**

Use a structure you like. For example, in Ann Whitford Paul's book on writing picture books, she talks about different structures for fiction picture books (days of the week for example). If you are writing non-fiction, take a look at the various structures of books that are out there. Poetic fact based, main story line plus extra information boxes, interesting angle. There is tons of great nonfiction out there with lots of different structures to look at. Take one that you like, adapt it for your story.

## **Use a technique to write a scene.**

Earlier I mentioned I wrote down a few paragraphs from LIZZIE BRIGHT. Schmidt used a zooming in technique that I liked. It was short but it showed a lot of things—setting, character, main character reaction—all in a few sentences. I

tried out this technique—the zooming in—but I used my characters and an event from my middle grade work-in-progress to try it out. Trying it out doesn't mean you have to keep it. But it hones your writing skills. When people suggest an idea for changing POV or PLOT points, try it. If you are writing a picture book, write the whole thing. If you are writing novels, try a scene or chapter using their suggestion. If it doesn't work, it's okay. It's practice.

## **Restructure your draft into something new.**

If you are blocked, try something new. It might not be a structure you want, but it might jiggle something loose in your brain.

## **Try a hands-on technique**

These are getting down and dirty with your own writing and application of mentor texts ideas to your own writing.

## **Plot Clock**

After I studied the plot clock and read Rob Sanders' posts, I knew I wanted to try it with my own work. I typed up the plot clock pieces that he mentions and I made my own little signs. Then I cut up my own picture book to see what I was missing or where things were too heavy or too light. Cutting things out and laying them on a table a great way to see your text differently. This is different than storyboarding. [show cut up examples] I also am including this template that you can cut apart in the show notes.

## **Highlighting**

Just like we analyzed the typed up text in other books, I do the same for my work. In one of my books, I highlighted all of the animal idioms in one color, the descriptions in another color, the verbs by characters in another color. I also made lists because I didn't want to repeat a single one.

## **Build on your STRENGTHS and strengthen your WEAKNESSES.**

Continuing education

Once you have a good idea of what you need to work on, I make a continual list

of things to work on, books to look at. Once you have intensely studied and applied these techniques, the goal would be to have your weaknesses become your strengths.

## **Create Your Own Toolbox**

Create your own toolbox. You might try some of the things that I mentioned like creating a notebook, typing up the text, sticky notes, analyzing plot on index cards, highlighting, cutting up your text. But they may not all work for you. Pick the ones that work for you. Use those.

## **Make it your own**

The biggest thing I can emphasize is this

1) Don't just study the mentor text, actually try apply what you learn to your writing. I think this is the most important part. Not everything will work. But you can try many things.

2) Make it your own. Obviously, you can't write another book just like your favorite author. But study what works in your favorite books. Then make it your OWN. Make it work for your style.

**[www.marcieatkins.com](http://www.marcieatkins.com)**

Send me Questions to [marcie@marcieatkins.com](mailto:marcie@marcieatkins.com)  
by Sunday, January 19

I will do a follow up blog post with answers