

# Mentor Texts as a Bridge to Independent Writing: Supporting Young Writers Through Sentence Imitation and Craft Study in the Elementary Classroom

**Jolene Reed**

*Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX*

**Melinda Miller**

*Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX*

## ABSTRACT

This article explores the use of mentor texts as a powerful strategy for developing independent writing skills in elementary students. Drawing on classroom experience and inspired by the sentence composing approach of Don and Jenny Killgallon, the authors demonstrate how mentor texts can be used to support craft study and sentence imitation across a range of writing skills--from prepositional phrases and parallel structure to adjective and adverbial clauses. The article provides practical, developmentally appropriate examples for teaching students how to analyze and mimic writing moves of professional authors. It also illustrates how mentor texts can be used to teach students to craft engaging leads and build narrative depth. Through a gradual release of responsibility, students gain confidence and independence as they begin to internalize sophisticated writing techniques. The authors conclude by emphasizing the importance of thoughtful scaffolding, patience, and high expectations in helping students of all levels grow as confident, capable writers.

## KEYWORDS

mentor text;  
elementary  
writing  
instruction;  
gradual release  
of responsibility

A common frustration of the classroom teacher when trying to elicit good writing from students is helping the student understand how to hone their craft. This is consistent from the beginning Kindergartener to the student on the university campus. An effective and practical approach is to use mentor texts that model professional writing, allowing students to analyze and practice diverse styles found in published works. This can be done not only at the sentence level, but also at a larger level to add interest to the writing and engage the reader.

Mentor texts provide examples of well-crafted writing, allowing students to observe how authors use different writing techniques. By analyzing these techniques, students can learn how to incorporate that craft into their own writing. When students see what is possible in writing, they are more likely to experiment with their own ideas and styles. Mentor texts can serve as springboards for creative writing activities, encouraging students to explore their own imaginations.

Our work regarding the use of mentor text was highly influenced by Don and Jenny Killgallon's (2008) *Story Grammar for Elementary School: A Sentence-Composing Approach*. In this book, the authors give multiple examples from texts that are familiar to the students, then

break down the structure of the professional sentence, and finally ask the students to create an original sentence using a similar structure. In this article, we will illustrate the same process beginning with some simple examples and moving to more complex sentences. We have experienced great success with this approach with students of various ages and abilities, beginning in the third grade and continuing through university courses. We have been able to help students learn to imitate sentences written by professional writers. In addition, we have helped students realize that different placements of prepositional phrases can make their writing more interesting, and that moving prepositional phrases around creates a more pleasing flow to their writing piece. Finally, we were able to introduce the concept of incorporating adjective and adverbial clauses through the context of literature, a more interesting approach than isolated “drill and kill” instruction.

### Teaching with Mentor Text Using Gradual Release of Responsibility

This section describes examples of teaching different types of sentences and clauses using excerpts from literature. Working with students on the following examples requires patience, support, and a belief that the students will perform. In reflecting on our use of mentor texts, we realize how nicely this technique fits into the gradual release of responsibility (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). We start with the author’s text, we model with our own writing, and then we work through examples with the class as a whole or in small groups. Over time, students develop independence. In the beginning, students need us to show our thought process as we delineate the “formula” used by the author. Eventually and gradually, we pull back, and progressively, students take control of more and more of the process of looking closely at how the author developed their craft. They are eventually able to easily (sometimes not so easily) emulate the style of the author. The process takes patience and perseverance on the part of both teacher and students. However, the process should always be underscored by our belief in their ability to succeed.

#### Sentence Imitation

In our first example, we give a very specific illustration of the process we went through to guide children through the procedure of using a mentor text to write a more precise sentence. The remaining examples can follow the same general steps.

We begin with an example of a third-grade class using a sentence taken from *Stuart Little* (White, 1945): “When the people in Central Park learned that one of the toy sailboats was being steered by a mouse in a sailor suit, they all came running” (p. 43). We selected this sentence because the book was being used as the read aloud to the class and was meaningful to the children. We displayed the model sentence using the document camera. We then demonstrated to the students how to analyze this sentence by thinking of it as the following: When the (who) (where) (learned/saw) that (what) (doing what/where) (what was he wearing?) (what did they do?). We gave an example of a sentence written in the same format. Using a think-aloud process, we wrote our own sentence as a model for the students:

*When the mother saw that the child was playing in the mud while still wearing his best Sunday clothes, she screamed at the top of her lungs.*

Once the children saw the process modeled, the class, as a whole, created a different sentence following the same pattern. Together, the class came up with the sentence:

*When the piano student at the recital learned that one of the other piano students had spilled punch all over her recital music, she burst into tears and ran out of the room.*

Notice that even though we did not follow the exact planning format, we were given the opportunity to discuss how they do not always have to follow the pattern precisely. They can make it their own. This realization helps the students not to be intimidated by the process. Next, we had each student (or pairs of students) write their own sentences based on the pattern. Students volunteered to share their example sentences with the whole class. The final step was for the students to find a sentence in their own creative writing pieces and revise it to follow the pattern they had been working on. Mimicking this example, one student wrote the following to be incorporated in their piece:

*When the dogs in the schoolyard saw that the children had treats in their outstretched hands, they all ran to get their share.*

Notice that this example does not exactly follow the guide that the students were given. The student made it their own. To follow it verbatim and talk about what the dogs were wearing would have detracted from the beauty of what they did write.

Another craft utilized in writing is that of parallelism. Parallelism in writing is a powerful technique that enhances clarity, balance, and rhythm, making sentences more engaging and easier to read. It can be introduced and modeled for students by beginning with examples from professional writing. One such example can be found in *Flight 116 is Down!* (Cooney, 1992). “Pieces of tree, pieces of metal, pieces of seat and airplane wing gleamed in the moonlight” (p. 48). Students can be led to discover that in this example of parallelism, there are three items listed, each of which uses a three-word phrase. The example ends by telling what those items were doing. As instructors, we came up with the following to model parallelism:

*Bowls of peaches, bowls of tomatoes, and bowls of half-eaten spaghetti were spread across the table.*

Imagine our delight when the students came up with this sentence:

*Fans dressed in purple, fans dressed in red, and fans waving banners poured down the streets to the playing field.*

### **Prepositional Phrases**

Our students were very familiar with prepositions and prepositional phrases because we had discussed and identified them previously through the context of reading and writing. Prepositional phrases can occur at multiple points within a sentence. You will find them at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end. Using mentor texts, we were able to demonstrate examples of all three locations of prepositional phrases. In addition, we had practiced adding prepositional phrases to simple sentences. We displayed examples of prepositional phrases with subject/verb splits in texts, and we had students practice making their own on sentence strips.

As our example of a prepositional phrase at the beginning of a sentence, we used the following from *Bad Boys* (Palatini, 2003): “With Betty’s prodding, they queued up next to each other in back of two long lines of sheep.” When we asked students to begin a sentence with a prepositional phrase using the same process we described earlier by showing examples on the document camera, one animal enthusiast wrote the following sentence:

*Like a sloth in its natural state, the boy slowly slid out of bed.*

We used *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* (Speare, 1958), with its beautifully written text, to introduce the use of a prepositional phrase with a subject/verb split. “Captain Eaton, in his good blue coat, was shouting orders from the quarterdeck” (p. 3). One student incorporated this technique when they changed an original sentence from:

*The grizzly bear walked to the lake.*

Into the more stylistic sentence:

*The grizzly bear, with lumbering movements, made his way down to the lake.*

The student was extremely pleased with the way this simple change enhanced their writing and seemed to make the grizzly bear come alive.

Our last work with prepositional phrases focused on placing them at the end of the sentence. We chose the following excerpt from *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1984) for our example of this sentence type. Sandra Cisneros described the sudden development of a teenage girl’s hips by stating, “One day you wake up and they are there. [They are] Ready and waiting, like a new Buick with the keys in the ignition” (p. 49). Notice that this quote ends with three prepositional phrases in a row. The three prepositional phrases are: “like a new Buick,” “with the keys,” and “in the ignition.” Our students, in following this pattern, created the following:

*Galloping on horses refreshes your mind as the wind blows against your face,  
through your hair, and down your spine.*

*The House on Mango Street* is adolescent literature. Notice, however, that the level of the book from which your examples are derived is not that important. You could also use picture books when teaching at the secondary level or secondary texts as examples for primary children.

### **Clauses for Sophisticated Sentences**

Adjective and adverbial clauses are types of dependent clauses that add depth and detail to writing. They help to create more sophisticated and precise sentences. Using these clauses allows writers to connect ideas smoothly, show relationships between thoughts, and add layers of meaning. The clauses make the sentences clearer, richer, and more engaging.

An adjective clause contains a subject and a verb but cannot stand alone as a sentence. It is used to modify a noun, just as individual adjectives do. The following quote comes from *The Polar Express* (Van Allsburg, 1985): “We traveled through cold, dark forests, where lean wolves roamed.” “Where lean wolves roamed” is the adjective clause describing the forest. After seeing this example, one student wrote:

*We sat by the lake where the fireflies sparkled.*

Like the adjective clause, an adverbial clause contains a subject and a verb. However, the adverbial clause must play the part of an adverb. The following example is from *Frog and Toad Are Friends* (Lobel, 1970): “He ran up the path to Toad’s house because he wanted to see Toad” (p. 4). “Because he wanted to see Toad” modifies the verb ran. In describing his family’s trip to Tanzania, our student wrote:

*We rode in the hot air balloon because we wanted to see the Serengeti.*

### Crafting Interesting Leads

In addition to working at the sentence level, mentor text can also be utilized to help students hone their craft in a bigger picture, such as developing provocative leads. In the following examples of using texts as models of leads, we will start simple and move to the more complex. A fun book to begin with is *Roger the Jolly Pirate* by Brett Helquist (2004). This book begins as follows, “Before anyone had heard of Black Beard, Long John Silver, or Calico Jack, there was a pirate named Roger.” To use this text to support students, begin by pointing out the structure of this lead. The text starts by saying “Before anyone had heard of . . .” and then it names three individuals who have something in common. It then says, “There was . . .” and names the main character of the story. This is a fairly simple pattern that is easily followed by students. We invited students to follow this format to introduce a story. We received some amazing results. One aspiring rock star thought of her own future career and began as follows:

*Before there was Cher, Madonna, or even Beyoncé, there was Eloise!*

Another dog lover wrote about his favorite, using the lead:

*Before there was Lassie, Rin Tin Tin, or even Benji, there was the best dog of all—  
Max, the black lab.*

The class could then more fully understand the importance of an attention-grabbing lead that immediately engages the reader and compels them to read on.

Another book we have used for a model of an interesting lead is *Albert the Bear* (Butterworth, 2002). This is an excellent text to teach the craft of flashback. The story begins, “From the front, Albert the Bear looks very sad indeed. He has the saddest eyes you ever saw. Which is strange, because Albert . . . But wait. Let’s tell his story from the very beginning.” Notice how the story really begins at the end, and now the author is going to nostalgically recall and tell a reminiscence to continue the story. We encourage students to think about how their story would end so that they can do the same. One young sports fan wrote:

*The crowd roared and cheered as #19 threw the pass to its intended receiver, who turned and ran for the winning touchdown. Which is remarkable, because everyone thought #19 would actually be playing in the World Series . . . But wait. Let’s start from the beginning and tell this young man’s surprising journey to fame.*

The young author then proceeded to tell the rest of his hero’s story.

You will notice that we started with a somewhat simple lead that was easily replicated, then went to an example that was somewhat more challenging by introducing the flashback. The truth is that any book can have its lead imitated. Different leads lend themselves to different stories. Children can learn to use the lead from any story they enjoy to create the beginning of their own story.

Let us look at an example of a lead that might be a little more challenging to deconstruct. *Zachary’s Ball* (Tavares, 2000) offers a bit more of a challenge. The book begins as follows:

*I had never been inside a ballpark until that day. Everything felt so close to me—the outfield fence, the players warming up, even the man who watered the field. I was jealous of him because he got to walk on the same grass as Buck Spoonwell and all the other heroes my father talked about so often.*

Let us take a close look at how Tavares began this story. The author begins by bringing us into the setting. He then uses a listing technique to describe what he sees. The list is followed by

a feeling. One student was excited to share her travels to the Grand Canyon. She began her story with this:

*This was my first visit to the Grand Canyon. Everything was overpowering, vibrant, and strange—the distance to the wall on the other side, the colors of the rocks, even the knowledge that it creates its own weather! Standing at the precipice and gazing out across the horizon, I immediately knew why it was called the Grand Canyon.*

## Conclusion

Mentor texts are powerful tools that help students internalize the techniques of skilled authors. If teachers carefully select professional examples of craft they would like to see emulated, students can be taught to deconstruct what the writer created. Once the deconstruction has occurred, students can learn to produce new writing using the professional writing as a model. If this process is used on a regular basis, students will learn over time to internalize more sophisticated crafting moves. With thoughtful scaffolding, students of all ages and abilities can use these models to enhance their writing. Through patience, encouragement, and practice, we can help all students grow as writers.

## References

- Killgallon, D., & Killgallon, J. (2008). *Story grammar for elementary school: A sentence-composing approach*. Heinemann.
- Pearson, P. D., & Gallagher, M. C. (1983). The instruction of reading comprehension. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 8(3), 317–344. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0361-476X\(83\)90019-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0361-476X(83)90019-X)

## Literature Cited

- Butterworth, N. (2002). *Albert the bear*. Harper Collins.
- Cisneros, S. (1984). *The house on Mango Street*. Random House.
- Cooney, C. (1992). *Flight 116 is down!* Scholastic.
- Helquist, B. (2004). *Roger the jolly pirate*. Harper Collins.
- Lobel, A. (1970). *Frog and Toad are friends*. Harper & Row.
- Palatini, M. (2003). *Bad boys*. Harper Collins.
- Speare, E. G. (1958). *The witch of Blackbird Pond*. Dell Publishing.
- Tavares, M. (2000). *Zachary's ball*. Candlewick Press.
- Van Allsburg, C. (1985). *The polar express*. Houghton Mifflin.
- White, E. B. (1945). *Stuart Little*. Harper & Brothers.