This issue of *Reading in the Middle* offers many practical and hands-on suggestions for your middle school classroom. First, author Julie Chibarro discusses using historical fiction to teach science. Next Melanie Koss and Donna Werderich share practical suggestions for connecting mentor texts to writing instruction. Finally, Vicky Zygouris-Coe presents a new column *Eye on Disciplinary Literacy.*

We know that you will find some useful information in this issue, and we hope that you will enjoy it.

---

**Deadly as a Tool:**
Teaching Science and History Through Historical Fiction
By Julie Chibarro
Page 3

**Eye on Disciplinary Literacy**
by Vicky Zygouris-Coe, Ph.D.
Page 6

**Chester’s Masterpiece:**
Using a Picture Book as a Mentor Text for Middle School Writers to Develop the Trait of Voice
By Melanie D. Koss & Donna Werderich
Page 10

**Picture Books as Mentor Texts for the Middle School Grades:**
A Bibliography
by Melanie D. Koss & Donna Werderich
Page 16
Call for Manuscripts

Reading in the Middle publishes original contributions on all facets of language arts learning, teaching, and research focusing on young adolescents. Reading in the Middle offers middle level educators a practical guide to best practices in middle schools.

Reading in the Middle follows specific submission guidelines. Articles should:

• be approximately 3,500 words and, when appropriate, include photocopied (originals will be requested upon acceptance) samples of students’ work, photographs of students working, charts, diagrams, or other visuals (work submitted by students may be of any length up to 3,500 words);
• offer specific classroom practices that are grounded in research;
• be double-spaced with 1-inch margins in 12-point font;
• include 100-word abstract and bulleted list of key points;
• follow the current edition of the publication manual of the American Psychological Association—please do not include an abstract, footnotes, endnotes, or author identification within the body of the text.
• identify any excerpts from previously published sources; should their use require a reprint fee, the fee payment is the responsibility of the author.

To submit a manuscript:
• submit a copy of your manuscript for blind review as a Microsoft Word file to MSRSIG@gmail.com
• attach a separate cover letter that includes your name, affiliation, home and work addresses and telephone numbers, fax number, email address, and issue for which you are submitting. Your name should not appear anywhere in the text.
If you can find the heart of middle school readers, they are yours. As a young reader, I read with my emotions as well as my mind. Once my heart was captured, for that book, I belonged to the author. From the battle tactics of rabbits in *Watership Down*, to the dynamics of sisterhood in *Little Women*, I learned about life through books. While my novel *Deadly* contains lessons of science and history, in writing it, I was guided by the source of my passion and curiosity, what I call my heart. The teaching arose naturally from that.

At first glance, *Deadly* is a story about the hunt for Typhoid Mary in New York City in 1906. That’s the infamous Typhoid Mary, a cook who spread the typhoid fever, a form of salmonella bacteria, to many households through the meals she prepared. She never got sick herself; in fact, she was the first known “healthy carrier” of disease in the United States. An immigrant from Ireland sensitive to discrimination against foreigners, she thought the accusation of healthy carrier by the Department of Health and Sanitation was just that: an accusation. Tooth and nail, she fought. She had trained to be a cook, she couldn’t stop preparing food for folks! The Department tried to make her become something else. She didn’t believe she should or could. Ultimately, she was sent to a quarantine island, where she spent the rest of her life.

*Deadly* is not just about Typhoid Mary. In fact, it’s the passionate and lonely diary of outsider Prudence Galewski, a 16-year-old Jewish girl from the Lower East Side. Prudence is not like other girls. She’s a natural scientist. She wants to know how the world works, why people get sick, why they die. She goes to a girls’ school, and helps her mother, the midwife, a job that lets her see life and death up close. She’s lost her brother in an accident, and her father disappeared in the Spanish American War. Boys are a mystery to her. She writes through her heart; her diary reveals her as a complex girl of her time. She wants to do something with her life that’s meaningful, something that will answer her questions. But in 1906, girls didn’t look through microscopes.

The two stories of Prudence and Typhoid Mary collide when Prudence gets a job working for Mr. Soper, an epidemiologist for the Department of Health and Sanitation. Their first case is an epidemic of typhoid fever. They know nothing about healthy carriers; in fact, this theory is new. Most people don’t even really understand that other new thing called “germs.” Clues lead Prudence and Mr. Soper to a cook named Mary, a fiesty woman who resists their attempts to test her. Prudence is torn by Mr. Soper’s suspicions of Mary being a healthy carrier. As a Jewish girl, she knows discrimination when she sees it. Is the department really going to treat this Irish immigrant so harshly?

In her writing, and through her drawings, Prudence struggles with this and other questions. At the end, encouraged by the one female doctor in the department, she decides to go to medical school, to take matters into her own hands and learn, really learn, how the human body works. Mary is, of course, put in quarantine, away from the public she continues to harm.

What do young readers come away with after having read *Deadly*? Besides understanding the heartrending frustration of a young girl scientist in the early 20th century, they will see how the past shapes the present: in medicine,
germ theory, epidemics, women’s rights, immigration. They will see the value of reading historical fiction to learn about history. They will be able to compare their time – how girls are treated today, how we now deal with healthy carriers of diseases like HIV and tuberculosis – to a hundred years ago.

Learning is an intellectual practice, but it can also be holistic. Because *Deadly* is a fictional diary with short entries, and not a textbook, reading it, students will learn through their hearts. Understanding the past with their whole selves, through being transported there by a novel, gives students a more complete knowledge of each of the issues brought up. History is not made by one event neatly folding into the next. Science is not discovered one revelation at a time. Life involves people who interact, who hurt each other intentionally or by mistake, who fumble and who adore – and the job of a novel is to weave life into a facsimile of patterns, to untangle it, to frame it and lay it out, to make it make sense. Readers young and old need that.

Here are some discussion questions and projects to try out with your students (taken from the Teacher’s Guide for *Deadly* created by Tanya Anderson at School Street Media. The complete 32-page guide can be found on my website juliechibbaro.com).

**History**

- How can historical fiction give valuable insight into past events?
- What were some stereotypes of women in the early 1900s?
- Have students look at the photographs in Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives*, and compare them with pictures of New York City today. Discuss how life was then and now, and how Mr. Riis’s work helped improve life for people in the city. Compare pictures of your own city a hundred years ago with pictures of today.

**Science**

- What is an epidemic? What are some epidemics we struggle with today?
- Prudence has many characteristics that will make her a good scientist. Name two. Talk about how these characteristics are strengths for being a scientist.
- Why do you think it was so easy to spread diseases in the early 1900s?
- Have students do some research on famous women scientists of the first half of the 20th century, and create a visual presentation for class.

How can teachers meet their requirements by allowing students to learn from the heart? Standards must be met, tests taken and passed. *Deadly* can be used as a tool to help teachers with lessons of science and history, English, and health by getting students fully engaged in the world of the past, while still learning what’s needed to guide them through the world today. *Deadly* can help teach by reaching students’ curiosity, intellect, and hearts.

Calling all Middle Grades English/Language Arts/Reading teachers!

We want to learn what books your students are reading in your classrooms. Please take a moment to complete a brief 12 question survey by going to [https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/62HT57K](https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/62HT57K).
At the Middle School Reading Special Interest Group Presentation at IRA, attendees will participate in an interactive workshop that will demonstrate two teachers used a variety of techniques to build students’ twenty-first century learning and connect with authors of Young Adult literature.

Twenty-first century learning requires that we prepare our students for a world whose wonders we cannot predict. As technological advances and scientific discoveries change how we work, live and play, teachers must assure that students engage with technology, collaborate, think critically, and innovate. This can be accomplished through the integration of Young Adult Literature, technology, questioning, and collaboration.

Lessons learned from classroom teaching will be a highlight of this session with a fifth and eighth grade teachers sharing how they integrated technology, questioning, and collaboration.

The fifth grade teacher, Monique Myers, will share a unit centered around the *I Survived* series by Lauren Tarshis in which her students worked in literature circles to engage in discussions around the text, used iPads to research the facts behind the books, and prepared engaging in-classroom presentations to share each of their texts.

The eighth grade teacher, Bernadette Thompson, created a unit centered on Adam Gidwitz’s novel *A Tale Dark and Grimm* to have students research multiple versions of the Hansel and Gretel tale, analyze narrative voice, and use an online blog to facilitate discussion about the text within and beyond the classroom walls.

### Young Adult Literature

Young Adult Literature (YAL) is the body of literature that is written for young adults with characters who are tweens or teens, whose protagonist’s actions decide the plot and whose point of view is that of the adolescent (Herz & Gallo, 2005; Tomlinson & Brown, 2010). The authors of these texts take special care to assure that readers connect with the protagonists in a unique manner that supports their developmental stage. At the middle level the author must appreciate the changing nature of the young adolescent while supporting his/her desire for trying on new identities. In this presentation we are fortunate to be able to see the contributions of two middle level authors who will discuss their books and what they have learned about writing for middle school students.

- Adam Gidwitz, author of *A Tale Dark and Grimm* (Penguin Books, 2010) will share how he uses his knowledge of middle school students, writing, and the real Grimm fairy tales to connect with readers.
- Lauren Tarshis, author of the *I Survived* book series (Scholastic books), will share how the integration of fact and fiction engages middle level readers.

We look forward to seeing you at IRA!
We know that each content area or discipline has a unique structure, goals, texts, language, and ways of developing knowledge. Mathematics courses are different than history courses; the texts are different; the ways in which teachers and students talk about knowledge in each content area are different. We do not read a science text and an English language arts text the same way. So, if we are knowledgeable about the distinct differences among content areas why are we using generic literacy strategies across the content areas? Generic literacy approaches across the content areas have not produced the results we have been looking for in our students’ literacy or content knowledge, skills, and performance. In addition, how are we planning to address the complex content and literacy demands of each content area in the context of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)? According to the CCSS, close reading of complex texts, deep understanding, collection of evidence across sources, an inquiry approach to learning, collaborative inquiry, and reflection are necessary instructional elements across grade levels and in each content area (Zygouris-Coe, 2012).

What is disciplinary literacy? “Disciplinary literacy involves the use of reading, reasoning, investigating, speaking, and writing required to learn and form complex content knowledge appropriate to a particular discipline.” (McConachie & Petrosky, 2010, p. 16). Disciplinary literacy is not a new term for reading in the content areas (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012); instead, it emphasizes the knowledge, skills, and tools of the experts in each discipline; the mathematicians, historians, authors, and scientists who communicate, use, and create knowledge in their respective discipline. Disciplinary literacy is not about a set of strategies we can use to help students organize text or make connections among words; it is referring to the ways of thinking, knowing, and doing that are consistent with each discipline.

So, why keep an eye on disciplinary literacy? In my view, because we must; we have to if we are to prepare our students to learn and succeed in middle school, high school, college, career, and beyond. We need to move content instruction from an emphasis on generic strategies for reading, vocabulary, and comprehension toward an emphasis on practices and pedagogical frameworks for disciplinary inquiry that will support both disciplinary content and literacy learning.

What Does Disciplinary Literacy Have to Do with Middle School Reading?

Reading in middle school grades “feels, sounds, and looks” different than it does in earlier grades. We know from research that many adolescents struggle with a) engagement with reading (especially expository text) and motivation to read, b) vocabulary, c) comprehension, and, d) self-regulating their own comprehension. Many adolescents face challenges with reading and comprehending the texts of each content area (Lee & Spratley, 2010; Moje, 2002, 2008). Reading in the content areas places many demands both on the reader and the teacher. It requires rigorous content reading and learning. Content instruction and literacy development in the secondary grades should be taking place in tandem.

How can adolescents think and learn like mathematicians, historians, or biologists if we do not teach them how to read, comprehend, and think deeply about the texts of each discipline? To teach students to think like historians, we have to teach...
them how to identify the author, the audience, the context, whether others agree, or whether information is credible. According to Lee and Spratley (2010), adolescents need more targeted, comprehensive, and even tailored support for reading in the academic disciplines because of the different structure, goals, and literacy demands of each discipline. We need to prepare students to successfully deal with the reading, writing, and learning demands of each discipline. We need to teach students how to engage with, read, build their background knowledge, comprehend text, and write in a way that is consistent with each discipline. Comprehension and deep learning are not natural outcomes of teaching students a few effective comprehension strategies; they require rigorous, specialized, and multi-faceted teaching and learning. Key factors for successful content area instruction also include developing a classroom culture of high expectations (Lee, 2007) and delivering instruction that is purposeful, authentic, relevant, and critical. Teachers need to organize instruction in engaging ways, provide guided support in small and whole group work, sequence discipline-specific tasks, include reading of content area texts that will help build background knowledge, teach students how to access texts, develop discipline-specific vocabulary and classroom discourse (Michaels, O’Connor, Hall, & Resnick, 2002), and build students’ self-efficacy as readers.

**What Might a Disciplinary Literacy Learning Framework Look Like?**

There are key questions to ask oneself, as a content area teacher, about disciplinary literacy teaching and learning. Discipline-specific (content and literacy) teaching and learning is complex, rigorous, specific to each discipline, interactive, and collaborative; it places many demands both on the teacher and the learners. For the purpose of this section, I will use History as an example to illustrate disciplinary literacy learning framework principles. I invite you to reflect on the following questions and discuss them with your colleagues; these questions could be used as “conversations starters” in department meetings, professional learning communities, and school-wide literacy efforts in secondary grades.

1. Am I knowledgeable about the unique structure, goals, content and literacy demands of my discipline?
2. What do I do to teach my students about the unique structure and ways of knowing of my discipline?
   a. Do I teach them about how history is designed? How knowledge is organized, learned, and communicated by historians?
   b. Do I teach my students to read, write, inquire, speak, and think like historians do?
3. Do I teach my students the literacy skills they will need to have to meet the demands of history?
4. Am I developing my students’ history and history-specific literacy knowledge and skills in tandem?
5. What is my role?
   a. Am I the sole deliverer of knowledge in my class?
   b. Do I teach content or students?
   c. What are my beliefs and attitudes toward the role of collaboration in my class? Do I expect, model, value, and practice collaborative inquiry?
   d. What kind of classroom environment do I create?
   e. What role do inquiry and collaboration play in my classroom?
   f. Do I teach my students how to read history texts?
   g. Do I model how to think like historians do?
   h. Do I teach my students how to think and write about history?
   i. Do I teach my students how to compare and critically evaluate multiple sources, provide evidence for their assertions (orally and in written form), and provide feedback to their peers?
   j. Do I teach them how to communicate, write, evaluate, and reflect on history concepts, texts, and ideas?
Middle School Reading

k. Do I model history-specific strategies to help my students understand history in a deep way (e.g., close reading, source and document analysis, corroboration, contextualization)?
l. Do I provide scaffolded corrective feedback and support and mentor students along the learning process?
m. Do I allow for extended practice of ideas and learning?
n. Do I teach them how to be committed to meaningful engagement by practicing accountable talk? By being accountable to:
   i. deep thinking about ideas and (accurate) reasoning
   ii. listening to others with purpose
   iii. their classroom community
   iv. providing evidence for their statements
   v. building upon others’ ideas
   vi. contributing to meaning-making in class
o. Do I use formative and summative assessment to guide my instruction?
p. Do I value my students’ efforts and celebrate their learning?

6. What is my student’s role?
a. Do I hold high expectations for all?
b. Do I view them as apprentices in the learning process?
c. When and how do I allow them to read complex texts, problem-solve, inquire, collaborate, experiment, and reflect on their learning?
d. Are my students reading, investigating, questioning, interpreting, writing about, and solving history-specific problems?
e. Am I expecting my students to be actively involved in the learning process?
f. Do I hold them accountable for their own learning and for contributing to others’ learning in class?
g. Do I expect them to value and practice collaborative inquiry?
h. Do I expect them to monitor their learning and progress?

What Can I Do to Learn More About Disciplinary Literacy?

I highly recommend that you study Shanahan and Shanahan’s work (2008, 2012)—they have been doing pioneering research on the topic. In addition, I recommend McConachie and Petrosky’s (2010) book titled, Content Matters: A Disciplinary Literacy Approach to Improving Student Learning; they and others at the University of Pittsburg, Institute for Learning, have been conducting research and have been implementing a disciplinary literacy-learning framework in schools. For instructional suggestions on the relationship between the CCSS and disciplinary literacy, read Zygouris-Coe’s article (2012). If we are to bring about positive change in student learning, we have to change our perspective and practices about the role of literacy in each discipline. Consider developing a teacher study group at your school where you can discuss these issues and learn about ways to help students develop content and literacy knowledge and skills that are consistent with each discipline’s structure, goals, demands, texts, and ways of knowing, reading, writing, speaking, and learning.

Share Your Questions/Comments/Ideas:

Let’s start a dialogue on disciplinary literacy, let’s spread the word about it, and let’s collaborate in our schools with colleagues in developing our understanding of disciplinary literacy and designing instruction that will bring about both content and literacy learning.

References
Join Us!

Membership Application
Middle School Special Interest Group of the International Reading Association

Your Name: __________________________

School: ____________________________

Home Address: _______________________

____________________________________

Home Telephone: _____________________

Email: ______________________________

Please complete the attached survey and enclose a check for $10 payable to:

Billie Jo Dunaway
MSRSIG
4640 Secret River Trail
Port Orange, FL 32129

(We are a non-profit organization.)

Are you a member of the International Reading Association? _______________
If so, Membership #: ______________

Would you be interested in active participation in the planning and development of the following projects/activities?

☐ Annual Convention Program
☐ Professional Development
☐ Teacher of the Year Award
☐ Chapter Membership
☐ Chapter Officer
☐ Membership Committee
☐ Publicity Committee
☐ Web site development
☐ Newsletter
Walking past a middle school writer’s workshop, one peeks in to hear the teacher reading-aloud from a picture book that is displayed on the document camera. The teacher pauses periodically to focus students’ attention on the writer’s craft. For example, she might think-aloud how she analyzes the lead; the author’s use of figurative language techniques; how the author makes use of white space in the layout; the author’s use of repetition; and so on. Next, she distributes copies of the book to small groups of students, and asks them to continue analyzing the text to understand character descriptions. She poses open-ended questions to guide their analysis: What do you notice about how the author describes these characters? What techniques did the author use to create strong, clear descriptions of the characters? How did the descriptions of the characters help you as readers to visualize them? How can you use these techniques in your writing?

Effective writing teachers use literature as mentor texts for writing instruction that clearly exhibits author’s craft and traits of good writing (Culham, 2003; Spandel, 2009). Teachers set aside time during writer’s workshop for students to read and/or listen to a mentor text, to discuss it, to react to it, to study the craft, technique, and genre before they begin writing. This framework encourages teachers and students to explore the reading–writing connection that can bolster students’ writing ability (Goodman & Goodman, 1983; Harwayne, 1992, 2005). To develop as writers, students have to be careful readers so that they can learn how to improve their own writing (Hansen, 2001). Ray (1999) recommends five points to help students read like a writer:

1. Notice something about the craft of the text.
2. Talk about it and make a theory about why a writer might use this craft.
3. Give the craft a name.
4. Think of other authors you know. Have you seen this craft before?
5. Try to envision using this craft in your own writing. (p. 120)

During a writer’s workshop, teachers use a combination of minilessons, mentor texts, and guided practice activities to draw students’ attention to the qualities or traits of writings. These traits include ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation. Culham (2003) briefly describes the traits:

- Ideas: the meaning and development of the message
- Organization: the internal structure of the piece
- Voice: the way the writer brings the topic to life
- Word Choice: the specific vocabulary the writer uses to convey meaning
- Sentence Fluency: the way the words and phrases flow throughout the text
- Conventions: the mechanical correctness of the piece
- Presentation: the overall appearance of the work

To help students understand the key qualities of the traits, teachers choose award-winning and other high-quality stories and nonfiction books that are appropriate for students and that exemplify the
quality of the traits. Middle school teachers should not feel restricted on the types of mentor texts to use to teach craft lessons. Increasingly, picture books are being used as supplementary material in middle school classrooms because the books are "sophisticated, abstract, or complex in themes, stories, and illustrations and are suitable for children aged 10 and older" (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 2005, p. 83). New picture books are being written with more complex content and multiple perspectives, lending themselves to the higher developmental levels of middle school learners. Picture books indeed serve as good models of quality writing. They can serve as “a magnifying glass that enlarges and enhances the reader's personal interactions with a subject” (Vacca & Vacca, 2005, p. 161). As Ray (2002) noted, “Every single text we encounter represents a whole chunk of curriculum, a whole set of things to know about writing” (p. 92). For example, middle school students can improve their craft of organization by imitating the structure or “pattern” found in a picture book story (Neal & Moore, 1992).

Picture books can be the perfect venue for using a mentor text, as the nature of picture books requires very specific and focused word choice. Every word is carefully selected to fit the 32-page standard format, so character development and point of view must be carefully crafted to make the characters vivid and believable for readers. Many picture books also exemplify other literary qualities, such as vocabulary support, picture cues, direct sentence usages, and language play. To gain an understanding of what a picture book as mentor text looks like in the middle school writing classroom, we unpack one picture book that is an exemplar mentor text to use to teach and study author’s craft and the traits of writing. Specifically, we highlight how middle school writing teachers can use Watt’s (2010) Chester’s Masterpiece as a quality mentor text. We provide a few activities that teachers can use to help students unpack Mélanie and Chester’s crafting of the story and the steps they used in the writing process. Middle school teachers can involve students in these activities to expand their knowledge about ideas that make interesting stories and how to apply the elements of characterization and voice to revisions of their own writing.

In Chester’s Masterpiece, Chester, a spunky and bossy cat, decides that his author is irrelevant and that he will write a “masterpiece” of his own without the help of his creator, Mélanie. He hides all of Mélanie’s tools and supplies, including her paper, pencils, markers, and even her computer mouse, and goes at it alone with torn notebook paper, tape, computer paper, and his trusty red marker. All Mélanie has left at her disposal is a pad of sticky notes. When Chester attempts to write his own story, a duel ensues with Mélanie attempting to give constructive criticism to Chester as he struggles his way through the writing process. Chester gets defensive. Mélanie gets exasperated. As the two bicker back and forth, Mélanie subtly guides Chester through the art of writing a story and provides insight into the writing, crafting, and revising process.

What is masterful about Chester’s Masterpiece is how the takeover of the book-writing process is carried through in every detail throughout the book providing a strong model for students. Middle school students can pore over the pages and identify all of the small items that comprise a picture book, including the cover, dust jacket, flap copy, versa page, title page, and even the author’s dedication, biography, and photo image. From start to finish, this book depicts the writing and the book-making process and displays strong models of craft, organization, literary elements such as setting, character development, genre and theme, point of view, voice, and even the process of getting over writer’s block. One challenge for your students is to have them identify the many writing-process elements hidden in the novel. Do they notice that Chester has inserted the words “with NO help from” before Mélanie Watt’s name on the front cover? Do they notice that it
appears he stapled his own book cover on top of whatever Mélanie Watt actually had planned for the book? What do they see on the flap copy that sets the tone for the book and immediately gives clues to the different characters and their individual voices or personalities? An initial discussion of the many details included throughout this book should get a conversation going on the elements of the writing process.

We recognize that a key part of teaching with a mentor text is to select the elements of craft to highlight based on the needs of students (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2007). We feel that Chester’s Masterpiece can be used as an exemplar mentor text specifically to teach the trait of voice, the way the writer brings the topic to life – in this case the topic being the overall writing process, and the recursiveness of the writing process.

Voice is the individual style used that gives writing personality. It is not what is said but how it is said. Voice establishes the tone and sets it apart from other writing. A strong voice is engaging. It is full of emotions and personality and causes a reader to connect to the character. Weak writing can sound monotonous or distant, and only a vague sense of the character’s personality shines through. As teachers, we want to guide our students to create a background personality for their characters and identify personality traits and qualities that can be seen through writing.

In Chester’s Masterpiece, one stand-out trait is the use of voice. Both Chester, the main character, and Mélanie, the author/illustrator and additional main character, have very strong and distinct personalities that come through in the text. What is unique about this book is that the reader witnesses the interplay between Chester and his author, giving a rarely-seen glimpse into the writing process. It is the strong personalities and voices between these two characters that move this story along. So who are these two characters and what is it about their personalities that makes them so distinct and strong?

Creating Character with the Voice Trait

In these activities, students will identify elements of voice and character development within Chester’s Masterpiece and apply these elements into first a modeled writing activity and then a piece of their own writing. Students will identify Chester and Mélanie’s background characteristics and note their personality traits that stand

### Elements of note in Chester’s Masterpiece:

- The overall idea that Chester is taking over the book from his author.
- The commitment to this concept, with Chester taking over and manipulating all of the typical book components such as the dust jacket, flap copy, versa page, and author/illustrator biography.
- The use of different writing media, including sticky notes, paper notes, lined notebook paper, and photos, overlapping depending on the order of what was written. For example, perhaps Chester wrote a page of his story and Mélanie Watt had a comment. Mélanie’s sticky note would overlap and cover some of Chester’s words or art, the piece that she was commenting upon.
- The interplay between Chester and Mélanie, where Mélanie guides Chester to more carefully consider his writing choices throughout the story.
- The idea of writer’s block and how to break it.
- The choices a writer makes when writing a story. What is the setting? The plot? What type of story are you writing?
- The ingredients of a good story: knowing genre and type of story (humor, action, suspense, horror, drama, science fiction, romance); setting; hero (characters, protagonists, antagonists); humor; plot; endings (happy?); artistic expression; ownership of writing; artistic medium.
out in creating their voices. Next, a modeled writing minilesson is shared to show students how to create and revise character development and voice in writing. Then they will develop their own characters and, in pairs, work together to write a story in which both characters’ voices and points of view shine through.

After reading-aloud *Chester’s Masterpiece*, ask students to describe Chester and Mélanie by identifying adjectives and descriptive phrases that depict their personalities. Write their responses on chart paper. Discuss how Watt has developed the characters’ background stories. Ask students to identify or describe their relationship. Do the two characters always bicker with each other? Is Chester bossy? Who else might he boss around? Does Mélanie get frustrated with anyone else? How is their language different? Do they use different tones? As an alternative or extension, you might have students complete a Venn diagram on Chester and Mélanie’s similarities and differences. Ask students to list statements or phrases from the book that really stand out as examples of how the two characters’ personalities are different. Ask students what Watt does to create the various tones, and how the use of different tones contributes to the piece’s overall voice. Display students’ responses in a common place in the classroom for students to consult when they need ideas or strategies for writing.

Next, model creating another character/author duo and begin to create a class story in which you, as the teacher, start writing a story from the point of view of one character, and have the class interrupt you and comment on your writing choices from the collective point of view of another character. After the story is written, this is an opportunity to go back through the story and identify whether or not the characters’ voices and personalities shine through. First, brainstorm with students different types of characters and authors that might have clashing personalities. Chester was a bossy, self-centered big orange cat. Mélanie had a short fuse with Chester and was determined to get the final word. As a class, choose two characters (one taking the role of author and one of story character) and come up with descriptive phrases describing their personalities. Choose one character as your author character and brainstorm aloud what types of words and phrases you might include that will depict the personality of your character. Have the students then begin thinking about the personality of a second character and identifying words and phrases this character might say. List their ideas on chart paper so they can refer back to them during the activity. Tell students you are going to write a story from your author character’s perspective and ask them to raise their hands and interrupt you as you write when they have a suggestion to improve your writing. Remind them that they will be interrupting you with suggestions from their character’s point of view and using words their character might use. Then begin writing a story using the document camera or an overhead projector. Chester began by copying the first lines to *Twas the Night Before Christmas*. You might wish to begin using the lines of a novel you’ve recently read as a class or by using the phrase *Once upon a time...* We recommend you have the beginnings of a story already written or an idea in your head to get you started. You may wish to include some of the writing elements related to character voice used in *Chester’s Masterpiece*, such as having Mélanie getting more and more exasperated with Chester, to encourage students to push you to add more detail. This provides an opportunity to write flat character prose and discuss with your students how to differentiate between characters. When a student interrupts you, have them write their comments on a sticky note and post them up on the white board or screen. Once a shell of a story is written as a class, revisit the story and see if the two characters’ distinct personalities are visible. Go back through and strengthen the voices to fit the original list of brainstormed personality traits and descriptive phrases.

Next, students will have the opportunity to write their own author/character stories. In this activity, students will work in pairs to write about a duo of
characters that would interact with each other from different points of view. In addition to author versus character, have students consider duos such as bus driver versus student on a school bus, superhero versus villain, coach versus player, doctor versus patient, etc. Once they’ve identified their duo, have each student pick a character and a background for the character. Where did the character grow up? What is the character’s favorite food? Who is the character’s best friend? Then identify a scenario of when the two characters might interact. When do the two characters meet? Do they like each other? What tones of voice might they use with each other? What common phrases or attitudes does their character have? Ask students to create a catchphrase for their characters that represents their character’s personality and that can be used to help set their character’s tone. Students can create character webs or draw pictures of their characters to really get a sense of who they are.

As an extension activity during independent writing, challenge students by asking partners to begin writing a story from the point of view of one character, and have the other character jump in to tell their point of view or comment on what the other character is writing. Remind students to consider the different ways Watt builds character development through voice and tone. Have them use their character’s catchphrase to help develop and show their character’s personality. As in Chester’s Masterpiece, sticky notes are a good form of commenting as they provide constructive feedback on a piece of writing without actually marking-up that writing, or have each student use a different color ink. This will allow students to go back and see if their two characters’ voices are distinct.

Conclusion

In “Writing with Voice”, Tom Romano defines voice as “the writer’s presence on the page. It is the sense we have while reading that someone occupies the middle of our mind, the sense we have while writing that something or someone is whispering in our ear.” (2003, p. 50). The trait of voice is often viewed as the most challenging to write and to teach, as it requires more than just a story idea but the development of strong characters and learning to depict those characters through words, but it is also one of the most important traits of writing. As Graves (1983) explains, “To ignore voice is to present the [writing] process as a lifeless, mechanical act. Divorcing voice from process is like omitting salt from stew, love from sex, or sun from gardening (p. 227). Mentor texts such as Chester’s Masterpiece and suggested activities in this article give teachers ways to help middle school students create strong voice in their writing. By using a picture book as a model of quality writing, and giving students the opportunity to unpack the clear depictions of voice and character as described both through pictures and words, students can begin to compare and contrast different characters and identify how different tones and word choices can truly depict those characters. By challenging students to then create their own characters and write using their voices, first through a modeled writing activity and then through a writing with a partner experience, students can begin to experiment with voice in their own writing in a scaffolded manner. Chester’s Masterpiece, with its two strong personalities, leads us through the writing and story-creating process and acts as a perfect bridge between mentor text and student writing. By using the activities described above, our middle school students will be able to create connections, of sorts, between writer and reader, just as Mélanie Watt has done with us.

Other Chester books by Mélanie Watt:
Chester (2008)
Chester’s Back (2009)

References


Picture books are a great tool to use in middle school classrooms as mentor texts as their concise format and use of illustrations and careful word choice make them easy to break apart and study for specific writing traits. We suggest a few quality picture book titles we feel are exemplar texts for teaching the writing process, the craft of descriptive writing, and the traits of word choice and conventions.

Writing Process


A young writer hears about the Red Brick Library’s “write the best story” contest and learns she can meet her favorite author and go on the best roller coaster ever. She’s determined to write the best story ever! There was only one problem; she didn’t know how to start. So she asks her family members what is needed in a good story. Her brother says action, her dad, humor, her cousin, romance. Finally her mom tells her to just write from the heart, and she does! This is an excellent choice for introducing the writing process and brainstorming different ideas to form the best story. The only question is, does she win the contest?


Mouse Sam lives in the reference section of the library – the perfect place for a mouse who loves to read. He scampers about the library choosing a different section each night. He loves mysteries, poetry, ghost stories, biographies, children’s books, and best of all, reference books. He loves stories so much he decides to write his own, and slips his creations right onto the library shelves. The books are a hit! But then the patrons want to meet this amazing author, but he’s a mouse. What is loveable about this story as it shows the joys of not only writing but sharing what one writes. Other books in the series include: Library Mouse: A World to Explore; Library Mouse: A Museum Adventure; Library Mouse: A Friend’s Tale.


Henrietta, the star of Souperchicken, is back, bringing along the puns and word play for which Auch is so noted. In this story, Henrietta loves to read so she decides to become a writer, since "writing books must be eggshilarating." With the help of a writing manual and, annoyingly, the other chickens around her, she creates her own masterpiece. Of course she wants it published, but it is, as many stories are, rejected by the publisher. This doesn’t stop Henrietta, who decides to self-publish with the help of her favorite librarian. Still no luck, it is rejected again. But the librarian shares the book with the children, who love it and want her to read it aloud. However, chickens, no matter how much expression and voice they use, only sound like bok bok bok. The pictures show different word choice ideas, plot ideas, and other rejected scenes, sharing a wide swatch of the writing, revising, and publishing process.
Middle School Reading

Craft: Descriptive Writing


In a non-didactic manner, Nobisso tells the story of a lion who loves to write and shares his knowledge of the writing craft with the other animals around him. He teaches the animals, who all want to be like the lion and become writers themselves, how to use descriptive words, nouns, adjectives, and voice, and most importantly, how to “show; don’t tell.” Minilessons are embedded into the story subtly, so middle school students can be challenged to pick them out for further study. Unique about this book are added elements including a scratch-and-sniff spot, a sound chip, and textured pages, encouraging students to incorporate elements of the five senses into their own writing, of course as a way to show, not tell.

Trait: Word Choice


Max’s brother Benjamin collects stamps. His brother Karl collects coins. But Max has nothing to collect. He decides he needs his own collection and chooses to collect words. He starts small, and begins cutting words out of magazines and newspapers, but his words begin to take over the house! His brothers tease him and tell him how many more coins and stamps they have than Max’s words, but Max decides that words are better because they can be used to tell stories. Adding to the story are clever and fun word choices that add a layer to the story. Middle schoolers can pick out the unique words and first see how the story would be different without the clever words, and then try substituting different words of their own. A second book in the Max series is *Max’s Castle*.


Selig collects words and he cherishes them, writing them down on scraps and stuffing them in his pockets and sleeves. He loves their sounds, their taste, the way they look, and the way they touch him deep in his heart. He focuses his life around his words, which worries his parents and makes his classmates tease him by giving him words like oddball. Turning to a Yiddish genie for advice, Selig sets out to find his purpose and realizes he needs to share his words. He ties them to the branches of tree and sets them free. As they float from the tree, a few especially descriptive words find their way to a poet who was struggling to find just the right words for his latest poetic creation. Selig realizes he can use his words to help others, and goes around sharing his words with others, for example, he stops an argument with the word harmony. He has found a way to use his words for good, and in the process he even finds love. Students can search through and “collect” all of Selig’s words and begin to make word collections of their own.

Trait: Conventions


When the weather turns hot and unbearable, Mr. Wright decides to give the punctuation in his classroom a vacation. The punctuation marks are miffed, after all, they put up with a lot at the hands of Mr. Wright. They are corrected, erased, ignored, and now sent away? So away they go. They send postcards from Take-a-Break Lake, but the students can’t write back since nothing they write made sense without punctuation! The cards make no sense, so the punctuation marks decide to take matters into their own hands. They send riddle postcards filled with wordplay that the students must decipher and, in turn, learn about the different punctuation marks. Eventually the punctuation marks return to the classroom, and the students have a newfound appreciation for their importance. At the end, a list of punctuation rules is included providing answers to all of the postcard questions.