

A QUICK GUIDE TO

Reviving Disengaged Writers

5–8

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WORKSHOP HELP DESK

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Reviving Disengaged Writers
5–8

CHRISTOPHER LEHMAN

Workshop Help Desk Series
Edited by Lucy Calkins
with the Reading and Writing Project



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Portsmouth, NH



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An imprint of Heinemann

361 Hanover Street
Portsmouth, NH 03801–3912
www.heinemann.com

Offices and agents throughout the world

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lehman, Christopher.

A quick guide to reviving disengaged writers, 5–8 / Christopher Lehman.
p. cm. — (Workshop help desk series)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 13: 978-0-325-04280-0

ISBN 10: 0-325-04280-2

1. English language—Composition and exercises—Study and teaching (Elementary). 2. English language—Composition and exercises—Study and teaching (Middle school). I. Title.

LB1576.L376 2011

372.62'3—dc23

2011020225

SERIES EDITOR: *Lucy Calkins and the Reading and Writing Project*

EDITORS: *Kate Montgomery and Teva Blair*

PRODUCTION: *Victoria Merecki*

COVER DESIGN: *Monica Crigler and Jenny Jensen Greenleaf*

FRONT COVER PHOTO: *Peter Cunningham*

BACK COVER PHOTO: *Yesenia Garcia*

INTERIOR DESIGN: *Jenny Jensen Greenleaf*

COMPOSITION: *House of Equations, Inc.*

MANUFACTURING: *Veronica Bennett*

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

15 14 13 12 11 VP 1 2 3 4 5

*To Mom, Dad, and Amy.
Always engaging.*





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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My deepest appreciation to Lucy Calkins for her unyielding belief in children and the educators who serve them; my gratitude for her mentoring and encouragement could never be put into precise enough words. Additionally, to Mary Ehrenworth, Laurie Pessah, Kathleen Tolan, and Kathy Neville for your leadership and care.

To all of my colleagues at the Reading and Writing Project, your ideas and inspiration are the DNA of everything I do; including Kate Roberts, Maggie Beattie, Audra Robb, Janet Steinberg, Garret Kyle, Jerry Maraia, Cia Pinkerton, Elisa Zonana, Stacey Fell-Eisenkraft, Jen Serravallo, and Emily DeLiddo.

My thanks to Kate Montgomery; your wisdom is unmatched. Your careful insight brought this title into being and your care for this profession continues to inspire. Also, thanks to the members of the Heinemann team: you are a pleasure to create with.

My endless awe for the teachers and administrators from around the world who I have been lucky enough to study alongside and whose work are woven throughout these pages; your students are lucky to have you; including Sharon, Ron, Barbara, and staff of IS 230; Zoi, Barbara, Brenda, and staff of JHS 67; my friends at the Queen Rania Teacher Academy, Jordan; Elaine, Cynthia, Nora, and staff in Livingston, NJ; Steve

and staff in Washington Township, NJ; everyone in Union County Middle Schools, NC; and the inspiring staff of Rancho Santa Fe, CA.

Finally, and most important, to Yesenia, Tahlya, and Marcos for your time, belief, and love—thank you.



INTRODUCTION

I know I do not need to tell you this: our students are masters of disengagement. They have millions of ways of checking out, though the reasons why are somewhat more elusive, and what to do about it is an even greater challenge. There is that student who every time writing workshop begins suddenly asks to use the bathroom. “But lunch just ended,” you say to her. “I know, but I really have to go,” she says as she jumps up to the door. Her notebook has day after day of half-written pages. Or the class that after a few productive minutes of writing suddenly erupts into conversation. You walk the room, shooting disapproving glances and making mysterious marks on a clipboard, “Jeremy, Mario, that’s a minus point. Get back to writing, stop talking.” The trick works for today, but every day you find yourself becoming more and more the writing police, not the writing teacher.

I am sure you find, too, that it is not just students you might refer to as “struggling” who become disengaged in your writing workshop. Even your most adept writers either seem to shut down or, even more commonly, switch to a mindless autopilot that leads to task completion but not writing growth. Therefore, I argue that disengagement is an issue broader than simply *struggling* writers; instead it is about all middle school writers who lose steam at times and need a jump start.

This book is written for you, to help you create the kind of writing workshop in which all of your students can thrive, despite some of their best efforts not to. While this book could be for any classroom, and probably some of these strategies could work across even other subject areas, it is written with the general assumption that you are supporting your students' learning in a workshop format, where they have time to write for long periods of time, on subjects of their own choosing, with your guidance, modeling, and conversations. What I make no assumptions about is that it is an easy thing. Instead, I am quite certain that whether you are a first-year teacher or someone who has been studying workshop for twenty-five years, you have moments—probably several a month—where you scratch your head and say, “Okay, now what?” Because you are making a commitment to student-centered, not program-centered, instruction, your teaching is constantly evolving with your changing clientele. So consider this book as part of that figuring out you do all the time, a conversation we can have together about trying to tackle one faction of your writing workshop: your disengaged writers.

The book is also written with the unique challenges of a middle school classroom in mind, although the ideas here can be used with students both older and younger. Middle school grade levels are quite different from district to district across states, some consisting of fifth through eighth grade, others only seventh and eighth grade (like the one I attended), and still others contained within a larger elementary or high school. When I use the term “middle school” in this book, I am referring to our ever-changing, always interesting young adults from fifth through eighth grade.

The chapters are organized with the intention of being a quick resource, one you can reference over time. The first four chapters are intended to help you consider ways you might counteract certain troubles brewing in your room, like overly talkative classes or students who constantly need your approval. The strategies presented are ones developed with hundreds of teachers across the country faced with disengaged writers. This book contains some of the most effective fixes from the many, many “uh-ohs” I have faced while standing alongside many of you. The last chapter then suggests an inquiry process you could follow to support you in developing your own approaches to reviving the disengaged writers in your room.

I hope you will think of this book as a companion to others in this “Quick Guide” series, as well as to the *Units of Study* books developed by Lucy Calkins and the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project community. While this title addresses middle school writers’ disengagement, you might also look to M. Colleen Cruz’s *A Quick Guide to Reaching Struggling Writers, K–5*, which gives practical tips for students who specifically struggle with writing in the elementary grades. Tips in both this book and M. Colleen’s could realistically traverse across grade levels—as our students’ abilities are bound not by a grade number but instead by their own developmental needs. Therefore, you might consider looking between them, and at other titles, as you shape your writing workshop.

So, grab your notebook, a pen, maybe some colleagues, and let’s go into your classroom together.

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CHAPTER ONE

Writers Who Are Nearly Allergic to the Writing Process

This chapter will help you to:

- ▶ Make their efforts measurable: teach them to create quantitative goals
- ▶ Reframe revision: make it an act of experimentation, not correction
- ▶ Connect them with texts they love: help them apprentice themselves to books they admire

Case Study

During a day in a middle school outside of Oakland, California, some teachers and I sat down next to two writers. Earlier in the period I taught a fiction revision lesson to the class and then left them to work on their writing. Many of

their classmates were busily writing their drafts, but two sat mostly uncertain from the start, reading and rereading, instead of using their pencils to do much of anything. The teacher said that they were some of the stronger writers in the room, and one in particular loved to write. Though, he added, it was not uncommon to find them stuck with “what to do next.”

The girls sat at the table; a group of teachers and I gathered around. I wanted to get in good with them, so I started with a compliment and then moved to figuring out what was going on. “It looks like you wrote tons on your draft. It’s so impressive how you did not hold back and just wrote out everything you had to say. Though I also was noticing that both of you were not writing much during the first part of the period today. Instead it seemed like you were sitting and reading a lot. Could you tell me what you were thinking about?”

One of the girls looked back down at her paper and up again, looked at her partner and then looked at me over the dark, thick rims of her glasses. “Well,” she began, “I wrote everything that I had to say already.”

The other girl’s confidence rose with this remark. “Yeah,” she added, “I read mine and read it, but I don’t really have anything to add. It’s already perfect.”

The teachers and I had to hold back laughter. On one level they were endearing and such the classic middle schoolers, so committed to their writing that at least one of them was sure it was “perfect”; on the other hand it was clear that they were not yet able to engage with the process of revision. The girls had neither the tools nor the drive to seek out ways to experiment with their work to find what was possible.

You might find students in your own room disengaging because they have not yet internalized the writing process and the habits of mind that go along with it (see Figure 1.1). For some students, it might be that on days for collecting ideas they begin to drift, or perhaps they work on one story idea for so long that they nearly complete a “draft” on the very first day. Or for others, when it is time to revise they stare quietly at their page, not creating a bother, but doing little writing.

Ways of Adjusting Your Teaching

Make Their Efforts Measurable: Create Quantitative Goals

If your writers disengage along points of the writing process, perhaps not getting started or not making the most of their time, consider making their efforts measurable to them. For these writers, try starting them off with quantitative goals rather than purely qualitative ones. As William Zinsser describes in the classic book, *On Writing Well*, “You learn to write by writing. It’s a truism, but what makes it a truism is that it’s true. The only way to learn to write is to force yourself to produce a certain number of words on a regular basis.” If our disengaged writers are sitting staring at blank pages, their writing will never improve. Additionally, it will be hard for you to make teaching decisions from very little writing.

You can provide your writers with opportunities to set measurable goals in a few different ways. One way is to help them visually see how much they have written across a given

	Writing Habits of Mind	In a Narrative Unit of Study (Personal, Genre Fiction, etc.)	In an Essay Unit of Study (Personal, Literary, etc.)
Collecting	Gather way more ideas than you will actually use, so later you can find the ones with the most potential. Allow one idea to lead you to the next.	Gather lots of stories, plots, or characters rather than starting with one story idea and writing out the whole piece.	Gather lots of ideas and write a lot about each one rather than starting with a thesis statement set.
Rehearsing	Try out your ideas, narrowing them down to one. Imagine possible structures, possible starts and ends, and possible details to include.	Try various options for developing characters, then planning out how the story will go. Give each option several attempts before committing to one.	Try various ways of saying the thesis and supports you might use to prove it. Develop a tool to help you gather possible examples.
Drafting	Use all you have discovered and tried out to write one full draft quickly.	Organize or rewrite all of the parts in a possible order. Get all of the words down quickly, knowing you will come back to revise later.	Organize or rewrite all of the parts in a possible order. Get all of the words down quickly, knowing you will come back to revise later.
Revising	Make large, brave changes, not just “fixing what is wrong.” Rework the structure, details, and so on to better connect your audience with your central meaning.	Start with meaning and go back to align all parts with that: using strategies such as storytelling the parts that matter more, summarizing other parts, slowing down action at moments of tension, and so forth.	Start with meaning and go back to align all parts of your essay with that: using strategies such as angling examples, reordering paragraphs, composing strong leads and endings, and so on.
Editing	Make sure the words on the page match what you are trying to say so your reader understands your meaning.	Edit for clarity, including checking paragraphs, and so on.	Edit for clarity, including checking paragraphs, and so on.
Publishing/ Celebrating	Allow your writing to be seen by others, to feel that your life and ideas are valuable and worth sharing.	Put your story out for others to read and comment on; collect stories together as a class book and put it in the public library; read it to a sibling.	Type an essay and mail it to someone who should read it; post it in a public place.

FIG. 1.1 *Supporting Our Students' Independence Means Helping Them Develop Writing Habits of Mind in Every Unit of Study*

period of time. For example I might say to a class or to an individual: “Can you point to the last word you wrote on your page? Now, run your finger over to the red line at the margin. Can you place a dot there? Good. Now, can you look down the page and set a goal for yourself of how far you think you can write in five minutes and place an X in that margin? See, look at my notebook. I have a dot here and an X down here because I think I can write half a page or more in the next five minutes. OK, ready? I’ll let you know when five minutes has passed.”

Like with anything, you will probably want to push some of your more cautious students a little: “Sara, I know you can write farther than that. Why not put the X down here?”

I then make it a point to wait a little longer than five minutes (but still claim the time has been short!). I want my students, especially my disengaged ones, to feel a sense of success from this first goal-setting experience. After eight minutes or so, I gather the entire class and *lie* about the time a little: “OK, stop for a moment. That has been five minutes. How many of you reached your goal?” Usually hands go up, I catch some smiles, and then I put them back to work: “Set a new goal. Let’s go for five more minutes. Now remember, you don’t have to wait on me to set goals like this. I think many of you found this exercise really helpful. If you ever find yourself feeling like you are losing steam, you can always set a goal in your own mind or on your paper and keep an eye on the time.”

You might plan to follow up in writing conferences with a few students, helping them more consistently set these kinds of goals on their own. Additionally, having partners compare goals and how they met them is always an effective

motivational tool with middle schoolers. Ultimately, you are helping your students find strategies that they can use again and again, beyond just today's class period.

Another example of setting quantitative goals is to help students plan a number of different ideas. For instance, during the collecting stage of the writing process, you want your writers to collect many, many story ideas—short blips of thinking, several sentences long—but then move on to the next and the next. This way they will not get stuck on just one idea and then “be done” with their entire draft—or worse: commit to a story idea that in the end does not really lead them to much better writing (like the endless summer amusement park trips we all have to read through at the start of each school year). For these writers, I often end a collecting lesson by having them set a quantitative goal: “So writers, today you are going to collect many story ideas, not just one. Set a goal for yourself: decide how many story ideas you think you can collect during this period. I know that most students your age can usually collect something like six, seven, or eight. Would you write on the top of your page the word goal and next to it the number of entries you hope to collect?”

Of course you need to walk around a bit and nudge some who need nudging: “Really, Jessica, only two? I know you can collect more than that. Add a few more to that goal.”

This number then becomes a helpful visual and measurable reminder for both the student and for you. I often glance at the goals as I walk around the room or ask about them during conferences. Sometimes I ask students to look back over several days of goals, to help them see if there are patterns

emerging or if they are growing beyond their initial abilities. Any chance to compliment is an important one.

You might also suggest that partners reflect together on their goals at the end of the period: “Writers, can you look at your writing from today and ask yourself, Did I meet my goal today? Then, can you think about what you did during this period and in your notebook that either helped you meet it or got in the way? I would like you to talk with your partner about what you are noticing about yourself, and then I would like you to talk about what you could do differently tomorrow. Then jot one thing you will try tomorrow on the top of a new notebook page.”

I have actually learned a lot of new strategies from students doing this. For example, students in a school in Chicago taught me that when jotting down story ideas during collecting, they should start with the most important parts, instead of starting from the very beginning of the memory, so they do not have to write out so much for each idea.

To support your students in making their efforts measurable and visible for them, you can:

- ▶ Have them create goals for the amount of writing they will try to do in a short amount of time
- ▶ Suggest they create goals for the number of ideas they will try, like the number of different ideas they will collect and write about
- ▶ Have them reflect with you and with partners on their goals and what they have done to try to meet them

Reframe Revision: Make It an Act of Experimentation, Not Correction

A strange thing sometimes happens when it comes time to revise: our students morph from being creative, eccentric, vibrant human beings into dull, thoughtless photocopiers. Oftentimes even our strongest writers place their “rough draft” to their left, a clean sheet of paper to their right, and then go line by line, rewriting verbatim what they had written before—only “fixing” a few things here and there. Maybe adding a bunch of adjectives to the kind of jacket their friend was wearing: “*a large, blue and white, Yankees jacket.*” Or adding in a small bit of dialogue as you had taught them in the day’s lesson: *My mom was angry with me* turns into “*I am so angry with you,*” *my mom said.*

It is clear that there are some troubles with this behavior: their writing is clearly not getting much better, even if that is what they set out to do. Second, an enormous amount of class time is being wasted just copying what they had already written—an in-class version of mindless television rerun watching. There is no progress for the writer or the writing. Last, disengagement runs high, resulting in the often repeated, “but my writing is fine; I already changed everything that needed to be changed.”

Luckily, by adjusting your instruction, you can help your students become better at revising. Everything revolves around an overhaul of how you think about revision in your classroom. Instead of having your students make multiple drafts, consider having them create just one that contains all

the revisions. Instead of making revision about *correcting errors*, talk about revision as *running experiments*, more experiments than they will ever actually use in the end.

One break-through moment in my own teaching came from studying with the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project and learning ways to have my students stop making so many drafts. In the beginning I didn't know any better; it was what I had done when I was a student. The teacher would assign "draft one" to be due on a Wednesday, "draft two" on the following Tuesday, "draft three" on Friday, and the "final draft" due the next week after that. At first, I did the same kind of assignments for my students. However, a few issues resulted, all of which I realized were the same reactions I had when I was in school. As a classroom teacher, I would hand back each draft, pages marked up with my corrections. Then, a good percentage of my students would become photocopiers for an entire class period (or sometimes more if they were really trying to avoid writing) and simply make the adjustments that I had already thought through for them. A few days later, they would turn in that new "draft" for another go. Of course, this meant they did not learn much about looking at their own writing. What the Reading and Writing Project taught me to do instead was to have them use only one main draft that all of the revisions would be added to.

To set up this draft so it supports your students' future revisions, ask them to write on only one side of each page of draft paper. It also helps if they skip every other line, so shorter revisions can be added in between lines. Then, when

they go to revise, you can teach them to write between the lines, perhaps on the back of the page, or—most important—on small strips of draft paper (something like a fourth to a half of a page of regular lined paper). These strips can be stapled or taped right to the draft. I find it helpful to have students code these strips and to write the codes inside the body of their draft—like adding a star or a number “1” to the first strip they experimented with, then label the same place in the draft so they can be matched up later. What all of this means is that students now have the entire class time to work on writing without the wasted copying time.

Next, anywhere you go across the country, when it comes to middle schoolers it is all about how you say things; a terrific teacher I work with in a school in New York City calls it “having a great sales pitch.” Saying, “now I want you to revise” often translates to our disengaged writers as, “you have fought tooth and nail to try and avoid writing every day, but I forced you through it anyway; after so much agony you completed a draft that you don’t love but you don’t really hate either, it is now time for you to go back and figure out all the things that are totally wrong with it and change everything.” I think subtly, or sometimes not so subtly, we suggest that revision is about correcting: adding in dialogue because it “is missing”; changing the description of any action because it “is unclear”; making a stronger lead because it “isn’t a grabber.” Also, our minilessons and conferences often contain only these small changes because we are trying to keep them short. For our students to engage with revision we need to make it something bigger and more purposeful.

Talking with Your Students

When beginning a process of revision, I often talk to classes in this way:

(You might engage them first with a new way of thinking about revision and then teach them one tool to support this. You might find it helpful to play up their “being older and wiser” as a way to distinguish between how they thought about revision in the past and how they will think about it now.)

“Today we are going to begin the process of revision. In previous years, you may have thought about revision as changing little things to make your writing ‘better.’ Your teacher might have asked you to find places that did not have any examples of what the characters were thinking and so you went and changed those places. This year, though, now that you are becoming young adults and ready to think about writing in a whole new way, I want to suggest to you a new way of revising in which we won’t just ‘fix stuff.’ Instead we will do what writers in the world do: we will run experiments with our writing. We will try out one big change, then a totally different one, then another different other one, to see what new idea we have.”

(Sometimes it is helpful to give a life example for an abstract concept to make it feel more concrete.)

“Think about when you go shopping for clothes for the start of school. You stand in front of the dressing room mirror, with a pile of shirts and pants or shorts or dresses. You think to yourself, ‘Who do I want to be this year? What kind of me do I want to show other people?’ You maybe try on a shirt you know your mom will approve of because it’s like the ones you usually wear. Then you try on a different one that you picked up that has a huge lion across the shoulder and rips on the arms—it looks so tough, but you wonder if

it's over the top. You then think, maybe you will try something without the rips, but you like the big graphic—you don't normally wear things like that. And so on it goes. Each outfit you try on is an experiment; you learn from some, you put back others, but each one is helping you learn more about yourself and how you want to be seen. This is the same way we are going to approach revision this year, just like standing in that dressing room on August 29th, experimenting with our new look."

(Describe a tool your students can use to support this kind of experimentation, then model how you would use it in your own writing.)

"One way we are going to experiment is by using small sheets of paper. Instead of just picking up one and saying, 'I am now going to add dialogue, write, write, write, OK done,' we are going to pick up a few at a time and treat each as a new experiment. Let me show you how I can do this with my own piece. Let's use a strategy we already know from the last unit of study. This time, however, I am going to try out several versions, a bunch of experiments all in one place of my draft. OK, so first . . ."

Creating an image of revision that is more about experimenting freely and less about correcting helps our writers take more risks than they may have otherwise. The feeling of "experiment" suggests that you are just trying out a few things to see what happens, but you are not bound to anything. To support this, in your conferences you will probably want to coach students to try more than one experiment in any given place. For example, when I see them finish one experiment, I quickly grab a second sheet of paper and say, "OK, now what are you going to do for a second experiment? How are you going to write that same section again, only differently?" From

here you can imagine a litany of strategies, like rewriting the same scene showing the character's emotions through inner thinking, then trying another where it is symbolized through setting; changing the character's motivation in the scene to see how it plays out differently; making a secondary character more prominent or even varying who is in a particular scene.

To reframe the revision process in your room, invite students to:

- ▶ Use only one draft that all revisions are written in, on, and attached to
- ▶ Draft in a way that allows them to more easily add in revisions later, such as skipping lines and writing on only one side of the page
- ▶ Think of revisions as experiments, running several in the same place in different ways, possibly using multiple strips of paper

Connect Them with Texts They Love: Help Them Apprentice Themselves to Books They Admire

For any of us, being able to visualize the end result makes the journey to it so much more purposeful and motivating. Seeing master chef Jacques Pépin lift the cover off a beautiful bouillabaisse makes you want to commit to chopping all of the ingredients. Seeing that outfit on the mannequin inspires you to try it on. Meeting with a friend who has recently lost weight helps you see yourself going to the gym a bit more. Having a full vision of where you are headed helps all of us engage with the tasks leading up to it.

For our disengaged writers it is no different. If you can provide them with opportunities—especially engaging ones—to see where they will end up, you are helping them to take on the harder parts. While teaching using “mentor texts” is commonplace in many vibrant writing classrooms (Ray 1999), I know many of us often think of these as texts *we choose* for students to use. For our middle school writers these teacher-chosen books are always helpful, but they can still appear as “being in the writers’ club,” a club in which our disengaged writers often do not place themselves. Consider not only using texts you select but tapping into the power of the books and magazines students have whole-heartedly selected for themselves.

We are lucky that young adult reading has been having such a resurgence in recent years. The number of engaging novels with appealing topics continues to grow. Worldwide book phenomena like *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* are a prime part of our students’ social lives. Look no further than the aisles of your nearest bookstore or, if you are lucky, the young adult section of your public library if they happen to have a good one, and you will most likely see teens sitting around reading, asking for authors by name, running to get the next title of a hot series. Their engagement with text is high, so connecting it to their own writing lives is a natural fit.

Sure, if we develop our own demonstration writing to be more varied, more personal, and more engaging we will grab many more of our writers (see Chapter 2 for more on this). But sometimes, for our most disengaged students, our writing is not enough at first. Helping our students look at their

current, best-loved reading (or if they are not as in love with books as we would hope them to be, we can pull from what is “hot” and “now” among their peers) as examples to apprentice themselves to has major traction in our writing workshop. If Stephenie Meyer writes like that, maybe I can, too.

One first, simple step to take in making this method a larger part of your practice is to hold conferences during the editing process. If a student is having trouble, say, punctuating dialogue, you could repeat to them the same rules that they have probably been hearing for years *or* you could simply grab a book. I often have a quick conference in this way. Once I know the issue—such as dialogue punctuation, as in this case—I usually ask the student to grab the book they are reading now. I will say something like:

Talking with Your Students

(Set up the writer to have an inquiry with you by laying out the focus and giving some tips on what to look for.)

“Can you turn to where you are in your book now? I want to see if we can find a section that you have read recently that has a bunch of dialogue in it. When we find it, can we look together to see how this author punctuates what someone says and lets us know who is saying it? Let’s look together at the marks that are used, the order the parts are in, what is capitalized, and anything else you notice.”

[Student looks and finds a place.]

“OK, you found a spot. This will help us a lot because there are a few characters speaking here. Let’s look together. What do you notice?”

(After naming the parts, leave the book open and invite the writer to try punctuating his or her piece in the same way. Make

the most of this connection to a book the student is reading by talking up how she is like the author. Be sure to stay with the student a bit, while she tries it out.)

“You noticed that Jacqueline Woodson in the book *Hush* uses quotes around what is being said, and sometimes there is a comma, sometimes a period, sometimes a question mark. And you noticed that sometimes she writes the name of who is speaking and sometimes she stops that after a while. Can you do something for me? Can you keep your book open to this page and go back to your draft. Let’s see if you can write your dialogue in the same way Jacqueline Woodson does in this book. Before you start, tell me what you are going to try . . .”

It is a great motivation for many of our students to imagine themselves writing like the authors they love, and the book becomes a constant model for them, meaning you do not have to always be by their side. You could take this same idea and expand it beyond just looking for punctuation. In a conference with a strong seventh-grade writer in a school I consult with in Queens, New York, the teacher and I were having trouble thinking of what to teach next. The class was in the revision process during a Fantasy writing unit and the student’s piece was clearly one of the most well crafted and well devised. We read her description of a girl descending the staircase at a university where things were not always what they seemed, and we looked at each other and mouthed, “Wow!” We, like the writer, thought there was not much more to do. We could have simply decided to leave the conference at that point. Instead we thought to talk with her a bit about the *Twilight* series, which clearly she was emulating.

I told her about a point in her draft that was not as clear to me. “You might have explained it somewhere else, but in the part you read, I am not so sure how I, as the reader, am supposed to feel about those people she sees walking down in the courtyard.” The girl explained that she had described it earlier and showed me the part, which simply summarized that they were a “human-demon mix.” I then asked her to tell me about what she liked about *Twilight*. Her face lit up.

“Well,” she said, “I love how you can feel what Bella is feeling, how her thoughts are really clear, and you feel nervous when she feels nervous. She seems a lot like me, sometimes. I feel like I really know her.”

We both knew we had found something important to work on. “Do you think you might be able to do the same thing with your draft?”

“I mean, yeah, I could try to show more of the girl’s feelings, what she is thinking. Yeah!” She went to work.

When you pull in books, even nonfiction, that students are already in love with, the potential for what to think about in a conference is endless. You might have students consider the way a book is organized, like the alternating timelines of Angela Johnson’s *The First Part Last*; how you learn about characters, like the way a character’s actions evolve across the Rick Riordan series, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*; how ideas are grouped together by sections in a video game magazine; or even how the personality of the writer often comes through in those articles. Adding “talk about books” to your writing conference to-do list can bring your students from a feeling of writing as being only for the classroom to an understanding of how writing touches their lives.

To help students apprentice themselves to books they admire, you might:

- ▶ Treat the interaction with their book like an inquiry, setting up the lenses to look through and then allowing them to describe what they see
- ▶ Look to their books for both small, section-specific ideas, as well as larger whole-piece organization
- ▶ Stay with them for a bit during the conference as they try out what they just discovered, so you can coach them and refer back to the text if they need support



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