



Before Papers Come Paragraphs

Introductory Unit

Lesson 4, Part 2: Good vs. Bad Writing—What's the Difference?

The Denim *Beret* Writing Program

Supplies: writing notebook, pen or pencil; lesson 4, part 2 worksheet

Goal: to begin thinking critically about writing

Suggested time allowance: 3 sessions

Resource credits: *Bedtime for Frances*, by Russell Hoban; *Speak*, by Laurie Halse Anderson; *Material World: A Global Family Portrait*, by Peter Menzel

SESSION 1

Warm-up: Big Questions

Choose a situation or a question about which you have always wondered and think through it on the page. For instance, I have always wondered why people choose to live where it's cold all year, such as on high mountains or in the Arctic. What do they like about it? Why don't they move to a warmer climate? If I chose this topic, I would ponder possible answers to my question and perhaps come up with some ways I could find out factual answers. This is a great exercise for curious minds!

Introduction

Now that you have considered the kinds of qualities you should strive for in your own writing and have mapped out some goals, we are now going to consider this topic a different way—through specific examples of excellent writing. To do this, we will return to our discussion of the “six traits of excellent writing.”

Note that the following examples (as well as most examples I'll present in future lessons) are selected from modern literature, not the classics that you might expect. This is not because I value modern literature more. The classics are essential reading and can aid your growth as a writer; however, modern literature better reflects how we speak and write today.

Lesson, part 1: The “Good” Examples

Example 1: *Bedtime for Frances*, by Russell Hoban

If you have never read a story about the sweet little badger named Frances, you've missed one of most celebrated characters in children's literature. The Frances books are considered “modern classics,” meaning that they have been beloved by children for several decades and have found a permanent place in the world of children's literature. For many of us who grew up with Frances, it is hard to imagine a library or bookstore without her. But why?

Let's look for a moment at *Bedtime for Frances*. In this story Frances doesn't want to go to bed, so she stalls in all sorts of ways. She remembers that she hasn't brushed her teeth, she imagines her robe is a tiger, she complains that spiders will crawl from a crack in the ceiling, and so on. Finally, her father convinces her that she had better get to sleep—or else!

Who can help smiling at Frances and enjoying her efforts to delay bedtime? Little kids can sympathize with Frances, because they know what it's like to be afraid of the dark and stall at bedtime. Older children can relate because it wasn't long ago when they feared bedtime themselves. Even adults enjoy reading about Frances! They were once children, too, after all. I suspect it is the rare reader who cannot connect with Frances somehow. She belongs to everybody.

But so what? Is that all it takes to hook readers of all ages on one little story—choose a universal subject and make up an appealing character to go with it? If only it was that simple! If it was, then every book about appealing characters and common childhood themes (and there are many) would become “modern classics”—and that simply doesn't happen. Most books do not stay in print as long as the Frances books have; therefore, there is something special about them.

There are other qualities that make *Bedtime for Frances* enjoyable, of course. For instance, the vocabulary and sentences are easy for young children to follow, yet not babyish, and the mood is lighthearted. Also, the plot has a clear structure, the action is interesting, and the illustrations are charming.

Still, so far, these aspects of *Bedtime for Frances* can be found in lots of other books that are not so enduring. What sets this one apart? In my opinion, it's mainly the way Frances worms her way into her readers' hearts. Instead of leaving us out in the cold, letting us gaze upon the scene as through a window, Frances invites us in to share her anxious night. With her sweet little songs and through the simple but lovely narration (which has no melodrama, sassiness, or sappiness), she becomes real to us. We can't help but sympathize with her as if she was a friend because we understand. We've been there. Being a badger, she even looks like all of us in a certain

sense. There is no race, hair color, or eye color to set her apart from her readers. And with her cuddly, round body and soft fur, she has a teddy-bear appeal that is appealing to even the smallest child.

These aspects of the Frances books are, I suspect, the main reason they live on more than 50 years after publication. *Bedtime for Frances* isn't full of adventure and excitement, maybe, but it is just the right kind of fun for bedtime. And because it is well-told, delightful, and charming in a way that connects with most readers, Frances has earned herself a permanent place on our shelves.

Example 2: *Speak*, by Laurie Halse Anderson

Speak is a much newer work of literature than *Bedtime for Frances*. It is also hailed as a modern classic. I am not a fan of intense, young adult dramas like *Speak*, but I agree with the critics in this case. I have no doubt that *Speak* will always have a place on teen bookshelves.

Like *Bedtime for Frances*, it deals with a serious subject; however, it is otherwise the opposite of *Bedtime* in nearly every way. As a young adult novel, *Speak* goes much deeper than simple childhood anxieties and is far more serious than *Frances*. Instead of riding on gentle charm and light humor, *Speak* delivers rock-heavy realism. The story centers on Melinda, a 13-year-old girl who was the victim of a violent act before the novel begins and who is now left to suffer the traumatic aftermath.

There is nothing happy or fun about *Speak*. It is not even exciting. Despite that, the novel is a powerful piece of writing that has been both censored and taught in schools, passed around from teen to teen, and discussed in difficult therapy situations. Not only does *Speak* “speak” to many teens and adults who can relate to Melinda’s experiences, it also connects with people who cannot relate but who want to deepen their understanding of the issues around which the novel revolves. *Speak* offers a way to do so that is thought-provoking and gut-wrenching—but safe.

But are these the only reasons *Speak* was a National Book Award finalist, the only reasons it will probably still be read 50 years from now? Not at all. Lots of novels for teens address serious, sometimes dark, subjects; yet, few of them earn the kind of acclaim that *Speak* has.

A key reason *Speak* is so widely celebrated is because the writing itself is so vivid, beautiful, moving, and true. Without damaging the realism of the story, Anderson writes in prose that sounds much like free-verse poetry. This style serves as a kind of balm and direct line to the heart in much the same way that music does; thus, it enables readers to face Melinda’s suffering squarely and enter into it with her in a way they otherwise might not. In other words, it is the author’s skill with language that infuses *Speak* with the power that will keep it in print for many

years to come. It will be remembered for Melinda's heartbreaking story, as well as for the masterful way in which her story is told.

NOTE: BECAUSE IT CONTAINS SOME DISTURBING SCENES AND CHARACTERS, SPEAK IS NOT FOR EVERYONE. IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN READING IT, PLEASE ASK YOUR PARENT FIRST.

Example 3: *Material World: A Global Family Portrait*, by Peter Menzel

So far, we have just looked at examples of fiction, but what about non-fiction? It is a far larger part of the literary world, so it deserves a look as well. We will study a book that has my undying admiration, an adult book called *Material World: A Global Family Portrait*, by Peter Menzel.

Through full-color photographs, statistic charts, and essays, *Material World* is a study of how people live today in 30 countries. For each country, Menzel chose a family that represented the country's average income and lifestyle. Then he arranged all the family's possessions in front of its house, and he photographed the family with them. In this way readers can better understand the average lifestyle and economic standing of people around the world. The accompanying essays and statistics provide an even bigger window into the life of each family, not only deepening the comparisons but giving readers a way to briefly step into the shoes of fellow human beings who live vastly different lives.

I love many books, but seldom have I been as impressed with a book as I am with *Material World*. It is a brilliant example of non-fiction writing. Why? There are lots of books on other cultures and lives of people around the world. There are lots of books with beautiful photographs and interesting essays.

On the other hand, we seldom find books that are *simultaneously* beautiful, content-rich, informative, fascinating, and moving. *Material World* has all these qualities. It provides us with information, connects us to far-away people and different ways of life, awakens our compassion for those less fortunate than ourselves, nurtures sincere gratitude for our blessings, and deepens our general understanding of the world. It manages to do all of this through a careful balance of facts and true stories using a variety of media--photos, charts, essays, maps--and with clear, interesting, vivid prose. Non-fiction just doesn't get much better than *Material World*.

SESSION 2

Lesson, part 2—What It All Boils Down To

We have considered several different examples of excellent literature, but now let's consider some of the qualities they have in common. That will help you identify ways you can improve your own writing. Of course, readers might disagree on what makes a particular work of literature "good" or "bad"; still, the best literature shares at least six traits. As I mentioned in part 1, I call these the "six traits of excellent writing." Three of them are "art" traits, and three are "craft" traits. I encourage you to read this section carefully, because the six traits will become increasingly important in *The Denim Beret Writing Program*.

CRAFT QUALITIES

1) Audience: When we think of "audience," we usually think of a group of people sitting in a single room watching a performance. In writing the term means the same thing, except that the audience is "watching" through the act of reading. The difference is that readers are almost never in view of the writer; therefore, it is easy for the writer to forget about them altogether.

Although writers may obtain feedback from a friend or editor, they compose their thoughts in solitude, polish them in solitude, and send them into the world without ever knowing exactly how many people will sit down and read their hard work. Those who perform on a stage have the advantage of seeing their audiences, making the importance of good communication with that audience much more immediate. A writer's audience, however invisible, is no less real; therefore, all writers need to keep their potential audiences in mind at every stage of the writing process. In the examples above—*Bedtime for Frances*, *Speak*, and *Material World*—the authors did this well, choosing their words and arranging their content so that their work connected with their intended audiences from beginning to end.

2) Purpose: Unless you are in an especially lazy mood, everything you do has a purpose behind it. You eat because you are hungry, you watch a movie because you want to be entertained, and you fight with your sister because you want your own way. It is no different with writing. Why are you writing that research paper on Abraham Lincoln? Why are you lying in your bed jotting down your hopes and dreams in your journal? What made you enter the short story contest in your favorite magazine? In no case are you writing just because you have nothing else to do. You have a reason, or you would not bother.

Every book, story, poem, and article you read has an author behind it, and every author had a reason for spending weeks and perhaps even years writing it. Maybe it was partly to get a paycheck, just as you might seek good grades, but that author also wanted to do to or for their readers—to affect them in some way. Otherwise, he (or she) could earn money more easily in other ways. Maybe he wrote because he loved to tell stories and wanted to entertain children. Maybe it was because he knew something about an important topic he thought others should know, too. Or maybe it was because he was incensed about an injustice and wanted to rally others to his side. There are myriad possible reasons.

In the three examples above, the authors wrote with clear purposes. We don't know the personal motivations that might have driven them to write, but we can at least see that Russell Hoban sought to comfort children about the frights of bedtime; that Laurie Halse Anderson wanted to give victims of physical violence a voice; and that Peter Menzel hoped to foster a better understanding of our fellow human beings across the globe. None of them wrote just to pass the time or earn a paycheck. Each of them sought to accomplish something to or for their readers.

3) Tone: Usually when we speak to someone, we do it in a way that helps us communicate effectively. If you are angry, you will not smile and giggle and talk about the weather. You will instead choose both accurate words and a tone of voice that conveys your emotions. If you are trying to persuade someone, you will not speak in an uncertain manner. You will instead speak boldly to show that what you are saying is worth your listener's serious consideration.

These manners of speaking are examples of what is called “tone,” and they can be almost as important as what you say. For instance, when I tell my children to do something they don't want to do, I have noticed that they sometimes ignore me if I don't speak in a firm tone of voice. They don't believe I mean it otherwise.

Tone is important in writing, too, and it can come through on the page just as powerfully as it can in oral speech. The words you choose, your sentence constructions, and other elements all work together to convey your tone--your attitude about your subject. We know that the author of *Bedtime for Frances* is seeking to treat a serious subject with a lighthearted tone by the way he infuses Frances' stalling with subtle humor. Even Father's calm responses to Frances's concerns about the “tiger” in her bedroom show that Hoban does not mean to reprimand children who stall at bedtime but instead reassure them that they are safe in the dark. If the author wanted to scold children, the story would have taken a completely different tone that would not entertain children but instead shame them. It probably goes without saying that such

a tone would have sent the book out of print in a flash, too! The tone in which a writer's thoughts is conveyed, then, is a key element of good writing.

ARTISTIC QUALITIES

1) Beauty: All three books are beautiful in their own way. *Bedtime for Frances* is beautiful in its charm and gently poetic language. *Speak* is also beautiful in its use of language, which is even more poetic, and I also think that the way the author leads us through Melinda's healing process has an element of beauty. *Material World* is beautiful in its visual design and in its multi-angled approach to its subject.

It is important to note that "beauty" is perhaps the most debatable of the six qualities we'll consider, and that goes for any art form. What is beautiful to one person may be ugly or unimpressive to another. Beauty does not have to be experienced only through the lens of subjective opinion, however; it can also be experienced through objective criticism. In other words, when we study a work of art, whether it be a painting or movie or book, we can step away from our emotions and see beauty in the work with our reason. I don't consider Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* painting especially beautiful. I much prefer a glorious sunset. Still, I can see that the *Mona Lisa* has the trait of "beauty" all the same. How? By stepping outside of myself to view it the way its fans do and by applying what I have learned about the principles of art--composition, line, color, mood, and so on.

You can see the beauty in a work of literature in the same way. Even if you hate a story or poem you have read, you can still step back from that emotion to recognize its inherent beauty. Not only that, by learning the principles of good writing and by learning ways to study literature critically, you can even come to see beauty in the most mundane news articles. A well-written newspaper article, for instance, is not going to have the lyrical beauty of a poem, but it is still beautiful in its own way. If the journalist has written with clear sentence construction, an unbiased voice, an honest and well-chosen presentation of facts, and so on, we can recognize that the reporter's article is a beautiful example of journalism.

2) Truth: This trait is often connected to "beauty"; they go hand in hand like peanut butter and jelly, and in literature they especially do. In fact, a famous poet named John Keats wrote in his "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "Beauty is truth, truth beauty- - that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." Truth, then, is a kind of beauty and is woven throughout the great classics of the world. Indeed, it is one reason classics *are* classics.

In non-fiction “truth” means unvarnished facts and quotations, but in fiction and poetry it means more than this. We know from enchanting fairy tales and silly nonsense poems that sometimes literature doesn’t have to get any facts right. What “truth” means in this sense is that the literature resonates in readers’ hearts as authentic, accurate, and/or honest. Aesop’s fable “The Tortoise and the Hare” doesn’t leave us resentful that Aesop told a ridiculous whopper about talking animals running a race. We know perfectly well that he is not conveying faulty information because he is speaking as a storyteller, not a journalist. Yet the story is still truthful because of the timeless moral lesson it teaches: “Slow and steady wins the race.” And because this lesson is true for all people in all places and times, the world continues to pass down Aesop’s “nonsense” countless centuries later.

This kind of truth is part of what sets great literature apart from average literature. When an author conveys truth in a way that digs deep into the hearts and minds of readers, the tale or poem takes on a power that average literature does not. This is one reason that *Bedtime for Frances*, *Speak*, and *Material World* stand apart from many of their counterparts.

3) Voice: This is an elusive, almost mysterious quality that is strong in all good literature. It is hard to explain, hard to identify, and impossible to teach. At best, a teacher can only nurture this quality in a student’s writing, and I will work with you on it in level 3. A distinctive voice, however, is essential for good writers to develop, and in our examples above the authors have done so. There are two meanings to “voice,” as they pertain to literature, but we will just look at one for now. I like the way the website “Fictionwriting.about.com” defines it:

Voice is the author’s style, the quality that makes his or her writing unique, and which conveys the author’s attitude, personality, and character

We all speak in a voice of our own without realizing it. If someone wrote down an exact conversation between several people you know well, I’d bet that you could identify each speaker just by the speech patterns and vocabulary. The same is true in literature. The best authors have distinct voices, a style of writing that is particular to them. For example, Ernest Hemingway, well-known for works such as *The Old Man and the Sea*, is readily identified by his simple, spare sentences. You will not find many adjectives, adverbs, or extra information in Hemingway’s work; rather, he tends to pare his writing down to essentials. C.S. Lewis, the author of the *Chronicles of Narnia*, has a different voice, but it is just as recognizable. He speaks in the conversational voice of a grandfather relaxing in an easy chair, telling a bedtime story to children gathered at his feet. He goes to great lengths to paint vivid pictures in his readers’ imaginations, and he can ramble a bit. Sometimes he even breaks the conventions of storytelling in the third person by switching to first-person and speaking directly to his readers.

One reason “voice” is tricky for student writers to develop is that many students are so intimidated by the writing process that they freeze inside, fearful of saying anything that might spark criticism. They try so hard to do what their teachers want that they sound wooden and stiff—not like themselves at all. If you can relate to this, I encourage you to fight that fear and seek ways to be yourself on the page while still working within the boundaries you are given.

Conclusion

The six qualities of audience, purpose, tone, beauty, truth, and voice may not be the only qualities common to all good writing, but they are essential ones. As you develop your writing skills, try to keep them in focus. Continually strive to improve on them in your own work, and watch for literature that exemplifies them. Reading and studying masterful writing is the best way to improve your own.

But wait! Know that the opposite is also true. Spending a lot of time reading junky literature can prevent you from improving your own writing. This is because what you put into your mind stays there and eventually reveals itself somehow. If you don't believe me, consider this. When I was about 12 or so, I liked several books of a 19th-century series for girls. Of course, this meant it used an archaic form of English—very different from my own speech as a 1980's pre-teen. Because I read these books so much, I was soon embarrassing myself by incorporating their language patterns into my daily speech. Not only that, to my consternation I still sometimes catch myself speaking that way today decades later. The mind is an incredibly impressionable and powerful part of you, and sometimes it can be influenced in less amusing ways. Strive to fill it with the good stuff!

SESSION 3

Exercises

Complete the lesson 4, part 2, worksheet.