



## *Before Papers Come Paragraphs*

### Introductory Unit

#### Lesson 4, Part 3: Good vs. Bad Writing—What's the Difference?

#### The Denim *Beret* Writing Program

Supplies: writing notebook, pen or pencil; lesson 4, part 3 worksheet; *The Giving Tree*, by Shel Silverstein (may be borrowed)

Goal: to begin thinking critically about writing

Suggested time allowance: 4 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: Personal Response to Literature

If you are studying literature in school, you may already be familiar with this exercise. Teachers often ask students to write personal responses to literature so that they learn to slow down and think about what they are reading. Personal response also helps prepare students for a deeper analysis of the literature later in their studies.

Good literature is rich in meaning and in connections to real life. It can move, anger, inform, and comfort us, and it can help us see the world in a way we otherwise wouldn't. This exercise requires you to respond to a book or poem you either have read or are reading now. You may ponder an event in the literature, rant about a character you dislike, discuss something in the book that you can relate to in your own life, or come up with your own idea about what to discuss. The main thing is that you react to the literature in some way.

### Introduction

Thus far we have only considered examples of excellent writing and the qualities that set them apart. But what about examples of poor writing? In this final part of lesson 4 we will

consider the other side of the “good” vs. “bad” question by comparing two similar storybooks in relation to “the six traits of excellent writing.” As we do, however, remember that everyone experiences art differently; therefore, just because someone criticizes or praises a literary work doesn't mean that you can't have a different opinion. My goal here is to help you begin reading literature with a critical eye, which means evaluating both the strengths and weaknesses of a literary work. Learning to look deeper as you read will not only make you a better reader, it will also make you a better writer.

For the sake of a fair comparison, I have chosen to examine books that have strong similarities. They are both picture books, and they are both about the loving relationship between a boy and a tree. The first is *The Giving Tree*, by Shel Silverstein, and it will be our example of “good” writing. For the second book I will not disclose the title and author, because I consider it an example of “bad” writing. Out of respect for the author, I will only say that it was originally published in France and is unfamiliar to most American children. This means, of course, that you will be unable to read it; however, I will describe the book well enough for you to understand how it is different from Silverstein's beloved classic. Before I compare them, please prepare by reading *The Giving Tree*.

**STOP. Please read *The Giving Tree*, by Shel Silverstein, before continuing with the lesson.**

Now that you have read *The Giving Tree*, let me make a few introductory comments about each book before we continue with the lesson. Note that I place the labels for the books, “good” and “bad,” in quotes, because these words are really a poor way to describe something as subjective as art. They are used here for the sake of simplicity.

“GOOD” LITERATURE EXAMPLE: *THE GIVING TREE*, BY SHEL SILVERSTEIN

You would be hard-pressed to find a well-read American child or adult today who has never heard of Shel Silverstein. He is to children's literature what Walt Disney is to movies. It is hard for me to imagine childhood without his funny, warm, sometimes touching poetry. His work is not only delightful but timeless, too, for children today love his work as much as they did when it was new--and that was when I was a child. If you have never read anything by Shel Silverstein, it is never too late. Grab a copy of his most famous book of poetry, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, and be ready to add a new favorite to your list. I'll bet you'll find at least one familiar poem in the book, too.

Although Silverstein is known primarily as a poet, he did write *The Giving Tree*, a picture book that is nearly as well-known as *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. And like his poetry, it is still found

regularly on bookstore shelves today, long after its publication in 1964. It is not without controversy, to be sure. As with most literature, it can be interpreted in several ways, and not all those ways are positive. In this lesson, however, we will view it from the perspective of the thousands of readers who have helped keep it in print for more than 40 years.

"BAD" LITERATURE EXAMPLE: similar story, same genre—nicknamed "The Boy and His Tree"

The fact that I have chosen this book as our example of "bad" writing doesn't mean it is not enjoyable; in fact, the reason I read it in the first place is that my mother liked it and wanted to share it with my children. They seemed to enjoy the story, too. Neither my mother nor my children understand why I think it is terrible.

I will never forget reading "The Boy and His Tree" for the first time and feeling dumbfounded. *This* was actually published? To be fair, the book was originally published in French, and my mother's copy was a translation. Sometimes vital elements of a foreign-language original are lost in translation. Even allowing for that, though, I still think that the storytelling is remarkably poor in comparison to most picture books.

Before I continue, here is a short summary of the story:

The main character is a child I'll call "the Boy." The reader is not told how old he is, but he is old enough to climb trees and play outside unsupervised. Like the boy in *The Giving Tree*, he has a special love for a certain tree, although unlike *The Giving Tree*, the tree does not interact with the boy. The Boy spends a lot of his time playing in and around the tree, and he considers it a dear friend. When its leaves begin to fall off, the Boy fears it is sick, and he works desperately to save it. Throughout the winter he tries to save the tree, but alas, the tree doesn't recover, and the Boy mourns—until one day, when leaves begin to sprout again from his branches. The Boy realizes the tree has come back to him. Although he doesn't understand what happened to cause the tree to fall so ill, he is overjoyed that his friend is alive again and that he can once again play in its green branches.

## SESSION 2

### Lesson: Critiquing with the Six Traits

Now we'll evaluate the stories in depth, using the six qualities of audience, purpose, tone, beauty, truth, and voice as our criteria. First, however, I want to address and sweep away the

parts that we might judge as “bad” or “good” but that really don’t get to the heart of the matter:

- ✓ illustrations—All good storybooks have pictures, and both of these have many. Which book has better illustrations than the other is a topic for an art lesson; however, it is obvious that “The Boy and His Tree” has more complex and detailed illustrations.
- ✓ visual organization—Both are formatted with large print and lots of white space, which makes them easier to read.
- ✓ grammar and mechanics—Both books feature standard English grammar and mechanics.
- ✓ structure—Both books have a clear beginning, middle, and end, and both storylines are easy to follow.
- ✓ vocabulary—Both books use appropriate language for children. *The Giving Tree* uses language more beautifully, however.

So far, when it comes to the basic elements, both books measure up to professional standards. What more can a reader ask? Let’s look a little deeper now. Again, we will study these stories by using the six traits of excellent writing. This is not the only way to analyze these stories, but they will suit our purposes for this lesson.

#### ✓ BEAUTY

Sure, beauty may be in the eye of the beholder, but I think I can give a good argument for my assertion that *The Giving Tree* wins hands-down in this area. Silverstein’s talent for writing delightful poetry spills over into the prose he uses for this picture book. The story doesn’t rhyme, but it has a poetic rhythm. Silverstein also makes use of several patterns, all of which are often found in poetry. The simplest pattern he uses is called an “echo” (“I want...” and “Come, boy...”), and then he adds the slightly more complex pattern called a “refrain” (i.e. “...and the tree was happy.”).

Expanding further, he incorporates a recurring pattern within the storyline: the boy spends time with the tree and then leaves for a while before returning in a new life phase. Underlying these patterns are two additional patterns: the tree’s steadfast faithfulness to the boy and its increasingly self-sacrificial gifts to him. All these poetic elements lift the story out of the ordinary prose we find in most storybooks and place it somewhere between prose and poetry. And poetry (like its sister, music) has a direct line to the heart.

The story itself is also beautiful in a poignant way. It isn’t meant to be merely entertaining; instead, it is an illustration of selfless love and giving. Silverstein manages to convey this through a

storyline and use of language that are so simple that even young children can understand; yet, the story is profound enough to touch the hearts of adults. Indeed, it is perhaps *because* the story is so simple that its message can shine as brightly as it does.

What about “The Boy and His Tree”? This story, too, is about friendship and self-giving, for the Boy loves his tree very much. He does everything he can to save his tree, and we can surely admire him for that. Here the similarity to *The Giving Tree* ends, though.

First of all, the author’s writing isn’t distinctive like Silverstein’s is. Though we would not want the author to write just like him, since he is entitled to his own style, his writing *has* no distinguishable style. It conveys the story with clarity and simplicity and even with emotion—but nothing more. Great writers go beyond that.

The second major difference regarding “beauty” is that there is nothing particularly meaningful about “The Boy and His Tree.” Whereas *The Giving Tree* has the important theme of agape love at its core, “The Boy and His Tree” is just about a little boy who doesn’t understand the seasonal cycle of trees.

#### ✓ TRUTH

Did you know that in the best literature, even fiction is true? In a way, anyway. Whereas non-fiction conveys facts or real-life experiences, fiction is a powerful means of conveying truths about humanity and exploring big ideas about the world. Freed from the constraints of facts, the fiction writer can make full use of his imagination to express truths (or what the author believes to be truths) in powerful ways that might not be possible through non-fiction. This is partly why people value stories so much. More than a form of entertainment, they also open windows into our hearts, souls, and minds in ways that non-fiction often can’t. Such is the nature of art.

Another way writers convey truths in fiction is by ensuring that the story’s details are believable. It doesn’t matter whether it is our world or a fantasy world; all the details of the story need to be believable for *the world the author is creating*. For instance, if we were reading the *Chronicles of Narnia*, we would begin “believing” in an imaginary world of talking animals, fauns, and magic, because C.S. Lewis brings Narnia to life so vividly. This phenomenon is called “the suspension of disbelief.”

The kinds of truths I have discussed above are important in *The Giving Tree* and “The Boy and His Tree,” too. There are a couple of reasons that *The Giving Tree* is strong in the area of “truth”: first, it expresses big ideas that resonate in the human heart, and second, every detail in the story fits the world Silverstein has created. The reason that “The Boy and His Tree” fails in this area is that it conveys *neither* kind of truth. There are two reasons for this failure.

First of all, "The Boy and His Tree" looks at first like it is exploring the big idea of love, as we watch the Boy desperately try to save his tree friend from dying. In the end, though, the only real big idea in this story is that the Boy learns about the seasonal growth cycle of trees the hard way. But even then he doesn't even realize that's what happened to his tree, because at the end we read, "He understood none of it. And he didn't try to understand." What the reader is left with, then, is nothing more than a story about the unnaturally intense affection of a little boy for a non-communicative tree—and that's it. Any information about the seasonal growth cycle of trees may be lost on young readers because it is lost on the Boy; thus, the final effect of the story (on me, anyway) is that the whole thing is strange.

The second way this story is untruthful is that the setting is clearly realistic, but the details don't fit. Parts of the story are realistic enough. The Boy loves the tree and is distressed to find it sick and dying (or so he thinks); he does everything he can to save it; and he discovers in the spring that everything is all right. But other things happen that leave me scratching my head. The boy is old enough to climb large trees but is just noticing for the first time that leaves change color and fall off in the autumn? The annual cycle of growth and dormancy of plants is basic information that even preschoolers learn. Also, why are there no adults keeping an eye on the Boy? Why is he allowed to spend hours alone outside in the middle of winter, climbing trees in the ice and snow? (Especially his kind of tree, since they can be very tall. He could break his neck!) How is he getting all the materials to help his tree without being noticed...and then questioned...and then helped by a parent or older sibling? In short, the believability of the story is ruined by the questions it raises.

Often, when my husband and I watch a movie at home, I will complain about some unbelievable detail. Why didn't the character just (blank)? How could (blank) happen? How can it make sense that (blank) happened if (blank) happened earlier? If he can't adequately explain it, my husband will give me a look of exasperation and say, "It's just a movie!" True, it is just a movie, and "The Boy and His Tree" is just a picture book. Even so, it is the careful attention to such details that immerses readers in the world of the story and separates the stellar writers from the average ones.

#### ✓ VOICE

Remember, "voice" is the writer's personal manner of speaking, a natural quality that belongs to him (or her) alone, almost like a fingerprint. Whether the writer speaks in a formal or informal style, his voice spans them both. Voices can be similar, and they can be dull and

forgettable, but everyone has a particular voice, or manner of speaking. The most memorable writers are often the ones with distinctive voices.

A person's voice comes naturally; it can't be consciously chosen or created, at least not easily. This means that writers without a naturally distinctive voice must work hard to nurture their voice to make it as compelling as possible. This may seem like an unfair disadvantage, but this is one reason we are attracted to certain authors and consider others unappealing. We not only like their stories, we also like the way they tell them. More than once I have started a book only to stop early on because I couldn't get into it. More than once the reason has been not the storyline, but the author's voice.

The authors of *The Giving Tree* and "The Boy and His Tree" have different voices, of course, because their authors are different people. And, of course, they should sound different. Still, Silverstein's voice is much more distinctive; it is unique and memorable. There are reasons his books are still in print after more than 40 years, and I believe his voice is one of them. Only one person could write with the voice of Shel Silverstein, and that's the man himself. But "The Boy and His Tree" does not bear such distinction. The author may be speaking in his natural voice, but it isn't memorable the way Silverstein's is. The French author has the generic voice of "everyman." Voice, therefore, is one way we can separate ordinary writers from true artists.

## SESSION 3

### ✓ AUDIENCE

The authors of these picture books seem to have had identical audiences in mind when they wrote their stories: primary-grade children. Silverstein's story is understandable to even younger children, but the intended audience is the same. It appears that both authors hit the mark in appealing to this age group, too.

Of the two authors, Silverstein is by far the more successful, at least in America. I doubt that he ever imagined how deeply his story would touch people of all ages or how timeless it was. But the French author apparently enjoyed some success, as well. Published in France in 1979 (15 years after *The Giving Tree*), "The Boy and His Tree" was translated into both Spanish and English. This may indicate something about its success. Books that don't sell well in their original languages do not usually get translated into other languages. Who today, though, has heard of it in America? I am guessing that very few have, especially our youngest readers, for it now appears to be out of print. How does it still fare in its native France? Not so well. My research

indicates that it is out of print there, too. It is possible that the publisher went out of business, but it's more likely that it met the same fate as most out-of-print books do--it no longer sold well enough to make the publisher a profit.

#### ✓ PURPOSE

Without asking the authors directly, we can only guess why they wrote their stories. Knowing that picture books almost always entertain the reader in some way, we can assume that "entertainment" is one purpose, but that is probably not the only purpose. Both stories contain too strong a message for them to have been written just for fun, as many other books are. As I noted before, *The Giving Tree* has the theme of self-sacrificial love as its focal point (that's my interpretation, anyway), and "The Boy and His Tree" is mainly about the yearly growth cycle of trees. In addition to providing entertainment, then, the purpose of *The Giving Tree* also seems to be to inspire readers to love more truly and to become more self-giving and faithful, even when the other person doesn't do the same for us (Did you notice that the boy does nothing but take from the tree and never even says "thank you"?).

"The Boy and His Tree," in addition to entertaining young children, was apparently written with the purpose of helping young children understand how trees change and grow throughout the seasons. Even though the Boy shows a lot of love for the tree, the reader doesn't come away with any message or new ideas about love, because the Boy's love for the tree is really just the hook on which the story hangs. In other words, it's more of an engine that drives the plot than a core theme.

Which book was most effective in achieving its purpose? Here it is difficult to judge, because the answer to that really depends upon each reader. A story that speaks strongly to me may be meaningless, offensive, or silly to you. In the case of these two books, I can only judge by their popularity. As I noted earlier, *The Giving Tree* was published in 1964, and since then it has generated both high acclaim and controversy. It is still being published, purchased, reviewed, and discussed today. In contrast, as I mentioned above, "The Boy and His Tree" appears to be out of print. I can only surmise that whether or not it appealed to its target audience, it wasn't particularly effective at achieving its purpose.

#### ✓ TONE

This aspect of writing has to do with the manner in which something is said, whether it is joking, sarcastic, angry, sorrowful, formal, and so on. It is similar to mood and style. *The Giving Tree* has a gentle, open, and friendly tone that makes me think of the way a skilled storyteller

speaks to children. “The Boy and His Tree” has a similar tone, but additional tones of melodrama, sentimentality, and sorrow (what I call “sappy”) creep in as the story progresses—an aspect, as I said earlier, that readers tend not to like. Even so, both books speak in tones appropriate for their audiences and storylines; therefore, determining which book’s tone is “better” is largely a matter of personal taste. I personally don’t like a sappy tone, but another reader might feel differently. In fact, another reader—perhaps even you—might not interpret the tone as sappy at all.

## Conclusion

Later in *The Denim Beret Writing Program*, after you have studied “the six traits of excellent writing” more deeply, you will analyze how acclaimed essays exemplify the traits. Close analysis of literature, as we have done in this lesson, is valuable for its own sake, but it also important for your growth as a writer. Although we may not be able to do such analysis in this course, I encourage you to pay close attention to the literature you read for other school subjects or for personal entertainment. Read with a critical eye when you can, perhaps using the “six traits of excellent writing” as your guideposts. Note how authors present their ideas effectively, and if you think they miss the mark, consider the reasons why. By studying the writing of others, you will not only become a more discerning reader, you will also learn better how to spot strengths and weaknesses in your own writing.

## SESSION 4

### Exercises

Complete the worksheet for lesson 4, part 3.