

Mentor Text Classification & Use

from Corbett Harrison, webmaster of the [Always Write](http://AlwaysWrite.com) resource site for writing teachers!

What is a mentor text? A mentor text is a published work (picture book, novel excerpt, poem, non-fiction article, editorial, song, etc.) whose original **idea**, whose **structure**, or whose written **craft** techniques can be discussed during a writing lesson or during writer's workshop as a means to inspire students to write their own original ideas, to borrow an interesting structure, or to impersonate craft techniques used by real authors.

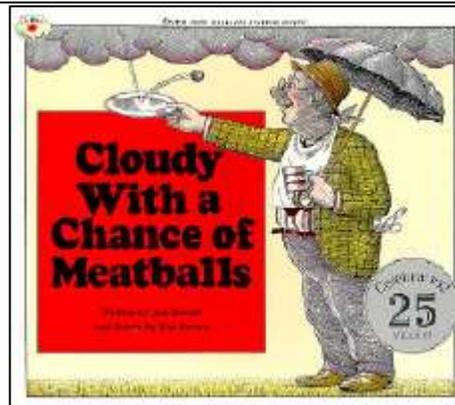
There are mentor texts that work perfectly for skill-based mini-lessons (like [this lesson](#) that uses Caves by Stephen Kramer), and there are mentor texts that can help students set up a semester's worth of writing topic banks (like [this lesson](#) that uses Written Anything Good Lately by Susan Allen and Jane Lindamen), and there are mentor texts that can be instrumental in helping you set up year-long routines (like [this lesson](#) that uses The Boy Who Loved Words by Roni Schotter, which I use to establish my vocabulary workshop expectations). In the hands of skilled writing teachers, mentor texts can and should be used during multiple steps of the writing process.

On these two pages, I share my favorite discoveries I've made about using mentor texts well since I began implementing them into my classroom's writing instruction back in 2005. Visit [Always Write](http://AlwaysWrite.com) for more ideas.

How I Classify/Categorize my Mentor Text Library

An Idea Mentor Text

If a published work presents a unique idea that can be impersonated quite closely, or if it can launch a more original idea from your writers, you are probably using it as an IDEA mentor text.



[Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs](#)

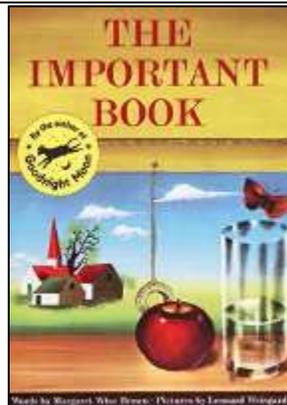
by Judi and Ron Barrett

Less original idea: Create a new day in ChewAndSwallow where different foods rain down than in the book.

More original idea: Create a new land where—instead of food—it rains the three types of rock every day.

A Structure Mentor Text

If a published work presents a recognizable format or pattern that can be borrowed by students when writing about unique or similar topics, you are probably using it as a STRUCTURE mentor text.



[The Important Book](#)

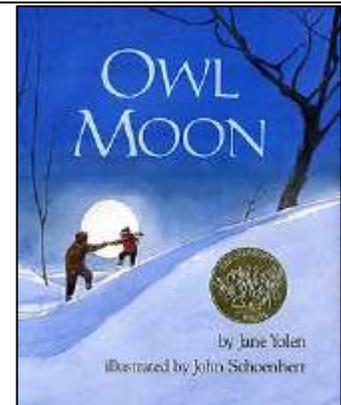
by Margaret Wise Brown

Less original idea: Rewrite the book's passage about rain so it's personalized to you but uses the same structure.

More original idea: Use the passages' format to write a paragraph about the Civil War or geometric shapes.

A Craft Mentor Text

If you showcase a specific skill or a writing trick used by an author in a published work, and then ask your students to try to incorporate that same skill in their own drafts, you are probably using it as a CRAFT text.



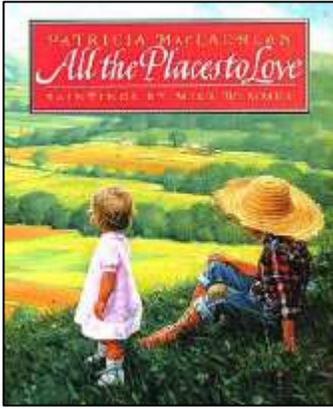
[Owl Moon](#)

by Jane Yolen

Craft/Skill used by author: Yolen uses a wonderful variety of short sentences and more complex sentences.

Revision/Drafting challenge: Try and use both long and short sentences to create a cadence or rhythm w/ words.

A Great Mentor Text might Provide all three Types of Support



[All the Places to Love](#)
by Patricia MacLachlan

Synopsis: Eli—a young boy growing up on his family’s farm—shares his family members’ thoughts on what makes the place they live so special, and he recounts time spent with each family member in their favorite places on the farm. When his sister—Sylvia—is born, it is clear that the narrator takes very seriously his responsibility to pass on these messages about the importance of place to his younger sibling.

An excerpt:
“On the day I was born my grandmother wrapped me in a blanket made from the wool of her sheep. She held me up to the window so that what I heard first was the wind. What I saw first were all the places to love: the valley, the river falling down over rocks, the hilltop where the blueberries grew.”

As an Idea Text:

- Write about the place that you love more than anywhere using poetic details.
- Write about special advice you would give a younger sibling or mentee.

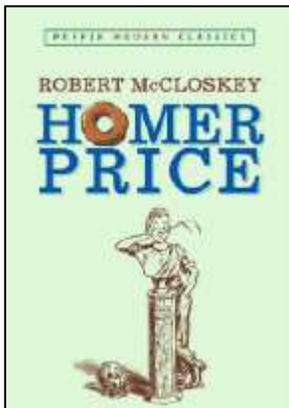
As a Structure Text:

- Write about a topic/place where you ask three other people’s opinion about something that is their favorite. They might be relatives but maybe not.

As a Craft/Style Text:

- Write/revise your draft so that you use prepositional phrases skillfully like Yolen.
- Revise your draft so that you use a “series of three items” description as Yolen does.

Using Excerpts from Two Mentor Texts at Different Steps of the Writing Process



[Homer Price](#)
by Robert McCloskey

Idea Mentor Text Prompt: Inspired by the automatic donut-making machine in Homer Price, students will brainstorm, draw, and then describe with details and transitions automatic machines they wish were invented right now.

Craft Mentor Text Task: Inspired by the strong verbs and the flowing sentence structure of the mechanical man described in The Invention of Hugo Cabret, students will revise their machine rough drafts to sound more sophisticated—like Selznik’s writing does.

Online lesson: [Transitioning through a Machine](#)



[The Invention of Hugo Cabret](#)
by Brian Selznik

The excerpt from Homer Price I use:

“Homer got down from the chair and pushed a button on the machine marked, ‘Start.’ Rings of batter started dropping into the hot fat. After a ring of batter was cooked on one side an automatic gadget turned it over and the other side would cook. Then another automatic gadget gave the doughnut a little push and it rolled neatly down a little chute, all ready to eat (page 56 in my copy).”

Excerpt from The Invention of Hugo Cabret I use:

“A cascade of perfect movements, with hundreds of brilliantly calibrated actions, coursed through the mechanical man. The key tightened a spring connected to a series of gears that extended down into the base of the figure. There, the last gear turned a series of brass disks with precisely cut edges. Two little hammer-like contraptions came down and trailed along the edges of the notched disks, rising and falling as the disks steadily turned (pg. 240 in my copy).”