

# Micro Mentor Texts

Using Short Passages from Great Books to Teach  
Writer's Craft

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I write to hold my life in my hands  
and to declare it a treasure.  
~Lucy Calkins

Never hesitate to imitate another writer. Imitation is part of the creative process for anyone learning an art or a craft. Bach and Picasso didn't spring full-blown as Bach or Picasso; they needed models. This is especially true of writing.

~ William Zinsser

Exercise the writing muscle every day, even if it is only a letter, notes, a title list, a character sketch, a journal entry. Writers are like dancers, like athletes. Without that exercise, the muscles seize up.

~Jane Yolen

If you tell your students what to say and how to say it, you may never hear them, only the pale echoes of what they imagine you want them to be.

~Donald Murray

## 3841 Bordeaux

from *Encyclopedia of an Ordinary Life*

by Amy Krouse Rosenthal

3841 Bordeaux was my address for a very long time. Technically, I lived there eleven years--from the age of three to the age of fourteen--but it felt like a hundred and eleven years. For those were the years when a year was an eternity of days. Time was somewhere between stretched-out and nonexistent. Life wasn't forward-moving then; life just was. It was as big and beautiful and motionless as my mahogany bedroom dresser. 3841 felt as forever to me then as the finiteness of life feels to me now. One could count on things. Always: curled up worms on the sidewalk after it rained. Always: the comforting weekend sound of the Cubs game or the Bears game on TV; the rise and fall of the announcer's voice; the muffled roar of the crowd; not understanding any of it; steady, likable background noise. Always: my dad's bottom drawer of neatly folded white undershirts; being able to take them to sleep in, so soft. Always: holidays with the uncles at the card table playing Hearts. Always: reading the cereal box while we ate breakfast, Beth and I. Always: being in my room, hearing the mechanical chinking of the garage door opening and knowing my parents were home. Always: my dad whistling and dressed nicely, even on Sundays, a sweater and pressed slacks. Always: my mom shaving in the tub, one leg hovering in the air, razor gracefully raking from ankle up to knee. Always: getting into bed and feeling the cold underside of the pillow against my forearm. Always: the late-night lullaby of ice knocking against my parents' water glasses as they came upstairs. There were a lot of always's. Even today the number 3841 sounds more like infinity to me than the word infinity itself.

### **Try This (as quickly and as specifically as you can for 4 minutes):**

List an address where you have some special memories. Borrow Rosenthal's line "One could count on things. Always. . ." "Think specifically about the sights, sounds, smells, and the ordinary things that you could count on at this address. Who is there? What are they doing? What are the happenings that make it special? What are the things you could count on at this address? Always.

Or, write about anything that comes to mind as you read "3841 Bordeaux."

**Try This (as quickly and as specifically as you can for 2 minutes): make your quick writing a little bit better writing. Reread what you've written as a reader—thinking about where you might add information or delete or reword something.**

### *The Paperboy* by Dav Pilkey

His dog, too, knows this route by heart.  
He knows which trees are for sniffing.  
He knows which birdbaths are for  
drinking, which squirrels are for  
chasing, and which cats are for  
growling at.

### *Dogzilla* by Dav Pilkey

Dogzilla wandered through the city  
streets, doing those things that come  
naturally to dogs.  
Dogzilla chased cars—right off the  
freeway!  
Dogzilla chewed furniture—and the  
furniture store as well.  
And Dogzilla dug up bones—at the  
Museum of Natural History.

## The Power of Three: patterns in sentence structure

Gwen has made fixin's for the soul: roast beef, candied yas, turnip greens.

~Andrea Davis Pinkney, *Martin Rising*

Struggling now  
to make sense  
of sudden lightning.

*Daddy,*  
snatched,  
plucked,  
stolen--in a blink!--  
by the hand of a man  
filled with hate.

~Andrea Davis Pinkney, *Martin Rising*

Well, listen good. Because here it is.  
Steady. Slow.  
A Story told with steps. With tired feet.  
With tired *bones*.

~Andrea Davis Pinkney, *Boycott Blues*

Muma and I talk easily about most things:  
How best to stack kindling.  
When sugarcane is ready to harvest.  
Ways to peel potatoes.

But there is one thing Muma will not allow me  
to address with her--school.

~Andrea Davis Pinkney, *The Red Pencil*



First, I introduce how details help us see and feel the setting of this novel...

<b>King and the Dragonflies by Kacen Callender</b>	<b>Details I Notice</b>
<p>I like to look for my brother in the afternoon by the bayou, on the long and hot and sweaty walk back from school, down the hard dirt road that weaves between the thorny bushes with their big fluffy leaves, and through the trees with their moss and vines, cicadas making their noise and birds whistling their tunes. Those trees always seem to be watching. Like they've got a secret to tell me, if only I'd stop for a second and wait and listen.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• "...the long and hot and sweaty walk..." could have been punctuated as "long, hot, and sweaty," but the repeating conjunction (and) makes the walk <i>feel longer</i> and drawn out. The punctuation makes me trudge through this sentence.</li><li>• Callender's description is a 58-word sentence. It tires me to read it! I'm sure that was intentional.</li><li>• "The road weaves" is personification: as if the road is a living thing. This literary device is repeated when the author says the trees "seem to be watching, like they have a secret to tell me." The world is alive around our character; almost like the setting is a character as well.</li><li>• The sensory details include both sight and sound. Notice the impact of sound on your understanding. You might not recognize the sound of cicadas if you are from the north, but all readers likely know the sound of birds.</li></ul>

Then use another passage to show how the author reveals and develops characters...

<b>King and the Dragonflies by Kacen Callender</b>
<p>My dad drops me off at school on his way to the construction site across town, like he does every morning, and before I can jump out of the truck, he puts a hand on my shoulder and does that thing he always does these days, staring so hard at my face I think he might be trying to memorize the number of holes in my skin. Maybe in that quick second, he remembered the way he'd drop my brother off at school, too.</p> <p>"Have a good day," he says, squeezing my shoulder a little.</p> <p>"Thank you, sir."</p> <p>He hesitates, "I love you."</p> <p>Now, my dad never says those words. I've never heard them come out of his mouth, not once. Never to my mom. Never to my brother. Never to me.</p>

Connecting craft lessons to mentor texts within the same novel—a bridge for book clubs and whole class texts.

## ***Maybe A Fox* by Kathi Appelt and Alison McGhee**

“Knock-knock,” came Sylvie’s voice again. “Come on, Jules, let me in.”

“There’s no lock,” Jules called. “Duh.”

There had never been a lock on their door. Even though she was upset, Jules still had to admire that Sylvie hadn’t just barged right in the way she, Jules, might have done. The doorknob turned and there was Sylvie, tall and skinny in her pajamas. She got straight to the point.

“Why are you mad?”

“I’m not,” Jules lied.

Sylvie just pointed at the rocks laid out on Jules’s bed, a sure sign that Jules was trying to calm herself down.

“Come on. Tell me. I’m your one and only sister.”

“Stop.”

“What? I am, aren’t I? Unless you’ve got a secret other sister somewhere?”

Sylvie sat down on Jules’s bed, careful not to disturb the rocks. Then she sidled her pointer finger bit by bit, like a snake, through the rumpled blankets toward Jules. She had been doing that ever since they were tiny, and it always made Jules laugh. Jules looked away so she wouldn’t start to soften.

Sylvie abandoned the finger-snake and instead picked up the one piece of obsidian in Jules’s collection. She hefted the small polished oval in her hand.

“I remember when Mom gave you this,” she said. “It was your fourth birthday. You were already crazy about rocks.” She rolled her eyes in a what-a-weird-little-kid-you-were kind of way. “Seriously, what four-year-old kid is a rock fiend?”

That was it! Jules snatched the obsidian from Sylvie’s hand. Once again, Sylvie had invoked Mom. Obsidian was caused by volcanoes, an eruption of steam and gas so furious that it melted the earth itself into this hard, shiny object. Right then, Jules felt hard and shiny.

“You and Dad,” she said. “You’re like a secret club.”

“What are you talking about?”

“When the two of you get going about Mom. How do you think it makes me feel?”

Sylvie looked puzzled. Jules kept going. “It’s like you remember everything about her!” Jules rubbed her thumb along the smooth surface of the obsidian. “But me? I hardly remember anything. All I see when I try to picture her is her hair, which is exactly like . . . like . . .”

She stopped talking and carefully placed the obsidian back on her bed, back into the vertical category of igneous rocks.

“Mine,” Sylvie finished the sentence. “The same color as mine. Is that what you were going to say?”

Jules nodded. Yes. That was what she was going to say.

What she wasn’t going to say: that no matter how hard she tried, her memories of their mom grew smaller and smaller, each one folding in on itself, so that not even her 10x magnifier could see them.”

## Understanding How Dialogue & Point of View Reveal Character

*What happens in this passage? (what the text says)*

*Why would Joshua Ferris (author) write dialogue in this way? (analyzing author's craft)*

Say I would come in from outside and go straight to the sink to wash my hands. It didn't matter which sink, Mrs. Convoy would find me. She'd sniff at me like a bloodhound and then she'd say, "What exactly have you been doing?" I'd tell her, and she'd say, "Why do you feel the need to lie to me?" I'd tell her, and she'd say, "Scrutiny doesn't kill people. Smoking kills people. What kind of example do you think you're setting for your patients by sneaking off to smoke cigarettes?" I'd tell her, she'd say, "They do not need a reminder of 'the futility of it all' from their dental professional. When did you take up smoking again?" I'd tell her, she'd say, "Oh, for heaven's sake. Then why did you tell everyone you quit?" I'd tell her, she'd say, "I do not see how the occasional show of concern is 'utterly strangulating.' I would like to see you live up to your potential, that is all. Don't you wish you had more self-control?" I'd tell her, she'd say, "Of course I will not join you. What are you doing? Do not light that cigarette!" I'd put the cigarettes away with an offhand remark, she'd say, "How am I a trial? I am not the one on trial here. The trial is between you and your addictions. Do you want to ruin your lungs and die a young man?" I'd tell her, she'd say, "You are not already in hell. Shall I tell you what hell will be like?" I'd answer, she'd say, "Yes, as a matter of fact, any conversation can turn into a discussion on the salvation of the soul. It's a pity more don't. What are you doing at that window?" I'd tell her, she'd say, "We are on the ground floor. You would hardly manage to sprain an ankle."

~Joshua Ferris, *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour*



Craft move #1: sensory details

"A low rumbling sound had broken the silence around them. It grew steadily louder as they looked up and down the street for some sign of a headlights; it

ner

swelled to a roar as they both looked up at the sky — and a huge motorcycle fell out of the air and landed on the road in front of them." (14)

"Nothing like this man had been seen on Pine Drive. He was tall, thin, very old, judging by the size of his hair and beard, which were both long enough to

see

thrust into his belt." (10)

taste

smell

# Harry Potter

repetition

"...he slept on, not knowing he was special, not knowing he was famous, not knowing he would be woken in a few hours' time by Mrs. Dursley's scream as she opened the front door to put out the milk bottles, not that he would spend the next few weeks being prodded and pinched ..." (17)

feel



"A voice that sounded like as if it came from a deep barrel said, 'Hello, Maja.'" (71)

"The air filled with the clink of silverware and

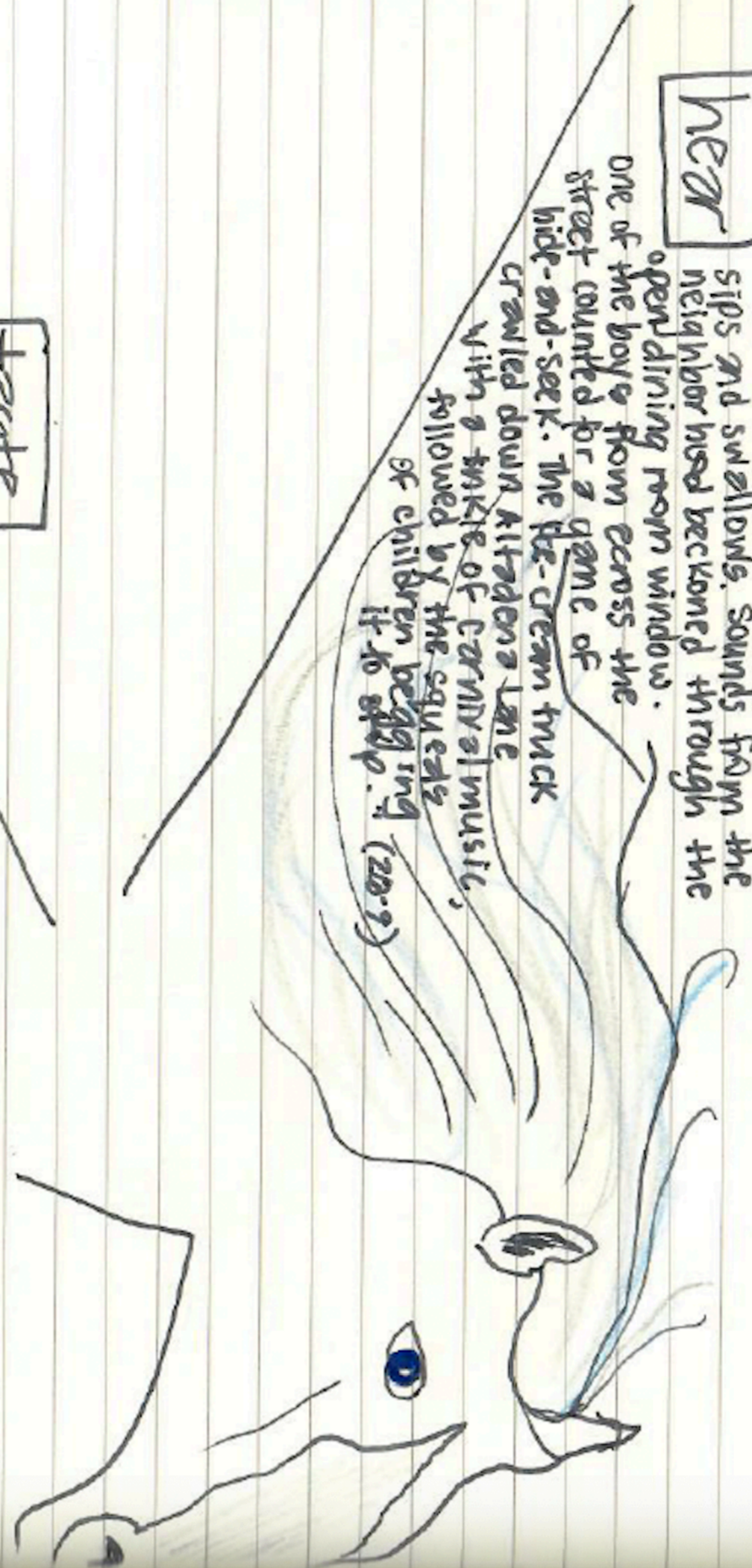
"The hall clock chimed six." (19)

**hear**

Grandmother's sips and swallows, sounds from the neighbor hood beckoned through the open dining room window. One of the boys from across the street counted for a game of hide-and-seek. The ice-cream truck crawled down Altadena Lane with a thump of carnival music, followed by the squeals of children begging it to stop. (28-9)

**see**

"The young woman in the photo could have been Maja in a few years. They had the same delicate and lean frame, russet-red hair, and unforgettable purplish eyes." (6)



**test**

**smell**

"He collected stamps, was allergic to cats, and loved to travel by train." (45)

3

# Paint the Wind

PAM MUÑOZ RYAN

"Maja sat sandwiched in the truck cab between Moose and Tig with her box of horses on her lap." (101)

**feel**



## Caprice by Coe Booth

"I'm not restless," I say. It's just hard sitting still, bored. Especially since Mom is on the couch and she and Lana are talking, completely ignoring me. They're best friends like me and Nicole, and they have a lot to catch up on, too.

Sorry I didn't say goodbye

Five seconds later she texts back.

where were you after the party you vanished

I was with terra. how's kimberly? having fun in toronto?

yeah. my little brother wants to marry her! he's 7!!!

haha.

will i ever see you again you coming back next summer

It takes me a minute to decide if I should do this, but I decide to tell her about Dr. Suzanne's offer. Half a second later I get a

😊 yay!!!



# Three Dead in Crash

Harrison Gill

Early this morning Wilderness, along with Adventure and Independence, were all pronounced dead at Memorial Hospital. The causes of death varied but all stemmed from the head on accident on route 16 in Albany. The truck, headed north, was carrying industrialization, tourism, overpopulation, and an increasing concern for safety. Although the crash was the cause of death doctors say that all three would have survived if they hadn't already been weakened for years.

Adventure had been fighting well-marked trails, scenic vistas, auto roads, and huts for years. More recently it had to deal with scourge of GPS. Doctors say that while none of these things could have killed it individually, the combination when mixed with too many people was deadly.

Wilderness was terminally ill at the time of the crash. Forest service roads had been attacking it for years. While it was still strong in the Sandwich area, Pemigewassit was sick with huts. Land fracturing also contributed to death.

Independence was sought out by many men who, ironically, only sickened it. Cell phones, guided tours, helicopter rescues, and fools were all responsible for the death of independence. The Internet didn't help either.

Many brave locals attempted to save the three from their various illnesses. Attempted cures included removing blazes from trails, kicking cairns, picking up the trash, and chopping bolts. Sadly these may have even worked if it weren't for the crash.

All three will live on in the memories of the locals: the men and women who were here in the early days and befriended the three. Adventure is survived by its brothers Exploration and Risk who divide their time between the jungles of the tropical islands and the Polar Regions.

## Select sentences and passages to study from writing in the world:

I have broken my wrists, fingers, tibia, a fibula, chipped a handful of teeth, cracked a vertebra and snapped a collarbone. I have concussed myself in Tallahassee, Fla., and Portland, Ore. I've skittered across the sooty hoods of New York cabs and bombed down many of San Francisco's steepest avenues.

For many years I was a professional skateboarder. I first stepped on a skateboard at 11. The nomenclature—switch-stance frontside tailside, kickflip to nose manual—was the language of my first friendships, with wild, strange boys who were as ill-suited for school and team sports as I was. They were from broken homes. Poor homes. Group homes. We were like little cement mixers, keeping ourselves in constant motion, our skateboard's movement the only thing preventing us from hardening into blocks of pure rage.

~Michael Christie, "All Parents are Cowards," *New York Times*

Certainly there are more interesting, more original, and more accurate ways to answer the question how are you? How about: I'm hungry for a waffle; I'm envious of my best friend; I'm annoyed by everything that's broken in my house; I'm itchy.

Yet busy stands as the easiest way of summarizing all that you do and all that you are. I am busy is the short way of saying—suggesting—my time is filled, my phone does not stop ringing, and you (therefore) should think well of me.

~Amy Krause Rosenthal, *Encyclopedia of an Ordinary Life*

Someone asks, "How do you evaluate multigenre papers?"

"Thanks for coming today," I say. "I'm afraid we're out of time."

Brief laughter. I've just suggested what many teachers wish they could do: avoid evaluation. Regardless of subject area, many of us grapple with evaluation: We want to be rigorous, yet fair; we want to set high standards, yet be true to our beliefs that learning is a matter of growth and development; we want to hold students accountable yet be sensitive to legitimate needs; we want to alert students to error, yet reward what's done well."

~Tom Romano, *Fearless Writing*



Some kids have dads who raise them to be golfers. Others, quarterbacks. Still others to play tennis or soccer or baseball. I was raised to cage fight. Ever since I was three, my dad schooled me to brawl. Taught me to grapple, box, ground-and-pound, strike while standing up and submit an opponent while lying down. From Sambo to Brazilian jiu-jitsu, Greco-Roman wrestling to Aikido, joint locks to pin holds to pressure-point manipulation, I'm an assassin in the art of hurt. My father wants me to do more than just defeat my opponent, he wants me to destroy them.

"It's how champions are made," he tells me. "And one day, you will be world champion."

"Yes, sir."

How do I feel about all that? Fact is, I don't really give much thought to those kinds of questions. Feelings are luxuries when there's a growl in your family's stomach.

~Alan Sitomer, *Caged Warrior*

Mum's not a four-wall kind of woman. As long as I can remember, she's always had a straw hat and a sheen of sweat. She's hazel eyes and sun spots. She's greens and browns and oranges. She's a pair of pruning shears in hand. She's soil and pumpkins. She'd rather be picking pears or fertilizing olive trees than stuck in this room, with its pink reclining chair. More than anything, she's my dad's soul mate, though she won't go home when I ask her—even when I beg her.

~A.J. Betts, *Zac and Mia*

#### AN INCOMPLETE LIST:

No more diving into pools of chlorinated water lit green from below. No more ball games played out under floodlights. No more porch lights with moths fluttering on summer nights. No more trains running under the surface of cities on the dazzling power of the electric third rail. No more cities...

No more screens shining in the half-light as people raise their phones above the crowd to take photographs of concert stages.

No more flight. No more towns glimpsed from the sky through airplane windows, points of glimmering light; no more looking down from thirty thousand feet and imagining the lives lit up by those lights at that moment. No more airplanes, no more requests to put your tray table in its upright and locked position—but no, this wasn't true, there were still airplanes here and there. They stood dormant on runways and in hangars. They collected snow on their wings.

~Emily St. John Mandel, *Station Eleven*

## Writing Process Competencies

Roy Peter Clark, Poynter Institute for Journalists

"Boredom is a disease of epidemic proportions- Why are our schools not places of joy?"  
- John Goodland, *A Place Called School*

I understand why writing curricula are often developed around genres, but what would it look like -- just wondering -- if the curriculum were built upon a foundation of competencies that were essential WHATEVER GENRE happens to be assigned or chosen?

What would those competencies be? Also, perhaps, defined as outcomes:

1. The ability to see the world as a storehouse of story or essay ideas. The capacity to take ownership of assignments to transform them into compelling ideas.
2. The ability to act as hunter and gatherer: of information, details, scenes, evidence, images, the stuff that will eventually fill the form.
3. The ability to narrow the topic and find within the available evidence a focus, a central point, a nut, a theme.
4. The ability to discover the appropriate genre, form, platform, medium in which to select, organize, develop, and deliver the material to the desired audience.
5. The ability to overcome obstacles such as procrastination or writer's block for the purposes of developing an initial draft, designed to fulfill the mission or purpose of the project or assignment.
6. The ability to revise the work, not just the draft, but all the steps in the process.

I realize that this is "old magic," the stuff we learned from the likes of Don Murray and Don Graves. As a professional writer, I realize I am describing not a curriculum but a set of behaviors, literate behaviors. Those behaviors, I was once taught by Shirley Brice Heath, can be boiled down to reading, writing, and talking about reading and writing. Aren't those the things that students should be practicing at home and in the classroom? Thanks for tolerating these reflections. -- Roy Peter Clark