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Primary Post Response

What a Writer Needs is an excellent resource and one that I can certainly refer to again and again in my teaching practice. Fletcher's style is very readable and I could connect to many of the stories he shared. My recent posts about working with students with dysgraphia resonated for me as I read about Fletcher's own struggles with handwriting. It made me think about students that I have taught in the past to whom I suggested that they just needed to try harder at being neat. It helped me imagine how frustrating that must be for those that truly struggle and for whom it is not simply a matter of effort.

I was surprised by the way Fletcher organized the book, but it certainly made sense. If you take the order the chapters are presented as a sort of hierarchy of importance in teaching elements of writing, it is not the typical order one might expect. For example, the chapter on "Beginnings" is not where he begins. Instead, he chose "The Art of Specificity" as the starting point of his discussion. Another unusual aspect is that he did not separate his discussion of writing into genres or even "fiction" and "non-fiction," but treated the elements of the craft as equally important regardless of the type of writing students are doing. A sense of voice is as important in a persuasive letter as it is in a personal narrative. The importance of the subject the writer is as vital for the student writing a short story as it is for the student writing a research paper. Good writing crosses all boundaries.

One of the passages that particularly struck me was Fletcher's discussion of a mentor's role. I think there is a special connotation to the word "mentor" that is interesting. A mentor is a teacher, but is also defined as a "wise and trusted counselor." Fletcher had several mentors who helped him develop as a writer. He mentions Robert Cohen's comment that he should take the "texture" and "energy" that is a part of his poetry and infuse that into his prose. Fletcher states, "This advice literally changed me as a writer." This section made me think about my teaching and how I can find ways to mentor students in the way Fletcher describes. He mentions that a mentor can reach into the chaos that might be a student's work and find the places that work and can be used as examples of emerging skills.

I also found great insights about the power of the writing process to encourage thinking. He states on pg. 21, "Many writers actually discover what they have to say in the process of writing it." I find this true for myself in many ways. Sometimes, I begin a piece of writing with one thought in mind and as I write, other thoughts develop and I realize my line of thinking is different than what I thought when I began. This is interesting in connection to Fletcher's ideas about prewriting. He describes a classroom where a particularly forceful teacher argued that students needed to outline so they had a "map" and knew where they were going in their writing. The question he posed was, "Would you ever get on a bus if you didn't know where it was going?" In my teaching, I have found that prewriting definitely helps students organize their thoughts as they move forward in a paper, BUT I have had the student who when made to outline one thing, ended up writing about something else. As he or she wrote, something better just developed. Was it a waste of time to make them prewrite? I don't think so, but I do think Fletcher has a point that we should be careful not to let the planning stages of writing create a box that students feel they must stay within. Sometimes a better piece of writing is outside the original plan and we need to give our student writers the freedom to follow the writing and thinking where it takes them.

Fletcher's chapter on vocabulary or "A Love of Words" was also interesting. He describes an experience where he was writing a sentence and couldn't put his finger on the right word. I have had

that experience many times and smiled when I read that part. I remember saying different words and thinking, "No...no..." until the word I was looking for pops into my head and I recognize it immediately as the word for which I had been waiting. This chapter made me wonder if I do enough to encourage this sort of thinking in my students. I always feel more surprised than I should when a student asks to use a thesaurus to look up a word. I know that I am doing something right in our vocabulary work because frequently I'll have a student run up with his or her independent reading book and say, "Look at this, I found a vocab word!" and it will be something that we had studied in our class study novel. I would love to think of more ways to encourage word games, word hunts and other fun ways to celebrate interesting words. In chapter 13 on "A Significant Subject," Fletcher describes learning what a "solander" is. I immediately went to the Internet to confirm the definition, because I too had never heard that word, but definitely was familiar with those objects. In fact, being a crafty person, I have made purses out of old book covers which is an extension of this idea. I loved knowing that there was a word for something I had seen many times.

I enjoy the Harry Potter series and one of my favorite discussion topics with students is J.K. Rowling's use of words to give us information about characters and objects in her books. This week, I explained to a student how I knew that Professor Lupin was a werewolf before it was revealed in the book just by unstanding the word play in the name "Remus Lupin." The chapter of "A Love of Words" certainly reminded me of the importance of encouraging word play and exploration with my students.

The final element I enjoyed about the book was the numerous examples of student work Fletcher included. It was helpful to see examples of how the particular elements of the writer's craft could be seen in students of all ages. Even students that were so young to still need to write with invented spelling, could work with the same ideas in mind that we teach older students. It was also interesting to me that some pieces that might have not stuck out to me at first had hidden gems to share. In many ways, Fletcher is emulating the role of a mentor to us his readers. He is able to look past the weak parts of the student writing, and highlight areas where students are showing skill. I definitely found this very helpful.

Attached to this post is the beginning of a chapter I plan to develop for my Genre Exploration Project. I have been interested in writing a middle grades novel for a long time and this is the beginning of a story I started some time ago.