

Conference 2019 – Ruth Culham

Saskatchewan School Library Association

THE MEDIUM – SPRING 2019

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This year, the SSLA hosted two days of professional learning on April 11 in Saskatoon and April 12 in Regina featuring professional book author and writing specialist, Ruth Culham. Ruth is well known for her work with the writing traits – *6+1 Traits of Writing*, *Traits Writing: The Complete Program*, and *Trait Crates* – as well as using mentor texts to teaching writing. For our days together, Ruth focused on strategies and practice from her very popular *The Writing Thief: Using Mentor Texts to Teach the Craft of Writing* and her newest work, *Teaching Writing Well: How to Assess Writing, Invigorate Instruction, and Rethink Revision*.

When conference goers arrived in the morning, they sat at tables filled with paper, sticky notes, file folders, paper plates and Play Doh...yes, Play Doh. Right away our interest was piqued. What would we be doing? What do all these materials have to do with writing? As it turns out, a lot! Ruth – I cannot call her Dr. Culham because she invites you to feel comfortable, as though she is chatting with you over coffee – presents using a lot of hands-on activity and practice of what she describes. This was very helpful to internalize material and help teachers feel confident to take ideas back to their schools and classrooms to try with students and share with colleagues.

The morning and part of the afternoon were spent on concepts and strategies from *Teach Writing Well*. Ruth describes this book as a culmination of the work and research she has done over the years and a refreshed look at some of the ideas of writing based on new research and best practice. Writing assessment scores, arguably in Canada as well as the United States, are low. Ruth asked us to question that while teachers are working harder than ever to teach writing and teacher librarians are working so hard to support it, why are we not having the successes we would like to see? She then presented on major ideas in writing instruction and assessment as well as how to organize a year of teaching writing. For the remainder of the afternoon, she drew upon material from *The Writing Thief* and modeled the use of mentor texts for teaching writing traits and modes.

Some Key Ideas from the Day

Below are a few “nuggets” I took away from the day which sum up some of Ruth Culham’s main ideas as well as some potential activities or structures you may want to research a little further in her book and on her website, www.culhamwriting.com.

- 1) 4W’s – The Key to Writing Instruction
 - Writing Process

- Writing Traits
- Writing Modes
- Writing Workshop

2) Writing Process (Don't worry – I wouldn't leave you hanging about the Play Doh!)

- Prewrite (Purpose – discover what you want to say)
- Draft (Get it down)
- Share/Feedback (Find out what worked and what needs work)
- Revise (Rework the text to make it clear)
- Edit (Make it readable)
- Finish/Polish (Polish the final appearance)
- **ACTIVITY:** To learn revision - On plates, make a Play Doh picture/sculpture. Add something to your sculpture with another colour. Then take something away. Then change something. Once done, visit other sculptures with sticky notes and give positive feedback to several. **Walk students through steps of process to discuss how revisions are not only changes but also additions or deletions, etc. to improve on their work. (Can take a photo after initial sculpture and again at the end to note the revisions and compare.)

3) Writing Traits + Writing Process (How the two are connected)

- Prewrite (Ideas, Organization, Voice)
- Draft (Word Choice [to a point], Sentence Fluency)
- Share/Feedback (Feedback on one or more traits – “Squeeze it once and let it go”)
- Revise (Ideas, Organization, Voice, Word Choice, Sentence Fluency)
- Edit (Conventions – Spelling, capitalization, punctuation, grammar, paragraphing)
- Finish/Polish (Presentation)

4) Writing Modes and More

- Mode – purpose for writing (Narrative, Expository/Informative, Persuasive/Opinion-Argument)
- TRAITS are HOW you write; MODES are WHAT you write



WRITER'S WORKSHOP

5) Assessing Writing

- **ACTIVITY:** Using Ruth's *scoring guides* (available on her website), we used some exemplars to score student writing together and discuss our reasoning. This activity, perhaps using exemplars from your school or division or the provincially developed exemplars, would be a valuable activity to do as a staff or PLC group.
- Ruth suggests when giving feedback, do not use the word “but” as this can come across as negative. Also, avoid using “I” as the audience. We should not make feedback about them pleasing us.

6) Writing Wallets

- A writing wallet is a place to keep practice pieces students are currently working on – not worksheets.
- Start with a simple file folder that is kept in the classroom.
- Includes 2 pieces of the students' own work that is used 1-2 times per week for specific skills practice after a mini-lesson on key qualities of traits and conventions.
- Every 4 weeks or so, they will finalize a piece – then clear out the folder and move on.
- Pieces can come from: quick writes; responses to literature; journals and writing notebooks; short answers to essays; bellwork responses; short pieces or “raw” writing for any reason...

7) Organizing Your Mentor Texts

Many are very versed in mentor texts, but *The Writing Thief* is a great resource for using mentor texts for writing.

- Ruth uses coloured labels on the spines of books she has in her library/collection which she has found especially useful for teaching a particular trait. She has one colour assigned to each trait. That way, they are easily found and identifiable on the shelves when needed. Teacher librarians – this could be a very helpful way to assist us and our teachers in building our collection of mentor texts and having them handily organized!
 - **Key Qualities** are now identified for each of the traits. Ruth suggests writing the key quality and why you chose the book for that trait on the inside cover of the book.

Our conference day with Ruth Culham was so filled with ideas and learning, that I could go on and on! These are just a very few of the topics we discussed and practiced strategies around. If you attended the conference, you know what I mean! If you were not able to join us this time, you can always pursue some of Ruth's resources on your own. Thank you, Ruth Culham, and thank you to the SSLA for a great day of learning for Saskatchewan teacher librarians and teachers.