

INTRODUCTION

A couple of years ago, I was sitting around with some friends. Some of them were writers; some of them weren't. One of us had a newspaper out.

“Let’s play a game,” I said. “I read the headline, and you guess how the lead is going to go. Extra points if you manage to guess how the whole article will go.”

The headlines looked something like this:

- Refugees Struggle to Find Safety
- Teachers Stressed, Overworked, and Underpaid
- Can *Anyone* Afford Their Dream Home?
- Hero Canine Saves Toddler
- Stocks Disappoint

My friends were intrigued, so I started. I scrolled through all of the sections: sports, features, news, and opinion. And each headline I read aloud led to sure-footed predictions as to how the article would likely unfold.

Here’s what I found interesting and what has served as the spark of this book: the friends who were writers for a living—in particular, the ones who wrote nonfiction—were significantly better at the game. Just based on the headlines, they were able to guess if the lead paragraph was more likely an anecdote, a description, a statement of fact, even a question. My nonwriter friends, on the other hand, had about the same odds as playing the slots. Sure, they guessed right some of the time, but most of the time they did not.

This got me to thinking about other places in my life where writers had a direct advantage over nonwriters when it came to reading. I could point to many times in my life when I was able to make a prediction, develop an inference, or make a deep interpretation more easily, quickly, and precisely than other people. And it’s not because I’m some sort of clairvoyant. It’s because I am a writer of many genres, which means I have experience with crafting texts: knowing how they are made from the inside.

Many years ago, Katie Ray taught me that we can—and should—show kids how to read like writers. In her seminal book, *Wondrous Words* (1999), she teaches us to let children know that writers read differently. This is because as writers we learn how to write from modeling our work off other writers. When writers read a beautiful sentence, we don't just ooh and ah. We also study it. How many commas? What parts of speech? How does it fit with the sentences around it? Writers do this so that we can apply the style and technique to our own writing and elevate it. Since that book's publication, several other books have come out that have developed and furthered Ray's ideas, including *Writers Are Readers* by Lester Laminack and Reba Wadsworth. This book, along with the other two books in this *Writers Read Better* series, posits that there is another part of this equation, another spring to be tapped. *When writers of all ages write a lot, they become better readers because they have the inside scoop on the work writers do.*

For instance, students who are immersed in a writing workshop might spend weeks writing one piece in a particular genre. This work could make them uniquely equipped to read examples of those texts with ease and deep understanding.

As another example, I have no doubt that Malcolm Gladwell, author of such renowned informational books as *The Tipping Point* (2000) and *Blink* (2005), is a highly attuned and skilled reader of informational texts. In fact, he is likely a stronger reader of this type of work than a writer who specializes in another genre. It is easy to imagine Gladwell sitting in his reading chair poring over a book, anticipating before he turns a page how this next section will go or synthesizing the author's message with ease because he recognizes some of the author's moves as ones he has made himself.

Of course, theories such as this are worthless if they do not apply to real kids. So not too long after my experiment in newspaper prediction, I tried it with a class of third-grade students who were smack dab in the middle of a unit on nonfiction reading. I sat next to a student who told me about her nonfiction book. Mainly, she focused on the cool facts she was learning and pointed out the ickiest pictures. While I was pleased with her engagement, I wondered about other work she could be doing as a reader.

I said, "Hey, can you tell me a bit about the structure of the book you're reading?"

She looked at me with one eyebrow raised. "What?"

"You know, the structure of your book. How it's organized and how the various parts fit together."

She blinked at me.

I looked around the classroom for charts that might refer to the task of considering structure as readers. I didn't spot any reading charts right away, but I did see some writing charts—charts that reminded me that this was a girl who was nearing the end of her unit on writing informational books. All at once, I had an idea.

“Can you grab your writing folder?”

She shrugged her shoulders and pulled it out of her desk.

I said, “Take out your informational book—the one you've been writing.”

When she did, I said, “Can you tell me a bit about the structure of *your* book? For instance, could you turn to the table of contents and walk me through how you decided to structure your writing?”

She smiled, delighted for the opportunity to share her hard work and expertise. She took me through her decisions, pointing out where she talked about parts of her topic, where she wrote in sequence, and even the part where she experimented with a little question-and-answer structure.

I continued by asking, “Now, can you set the book you wrote next to the book you're reading? And can you tell me about the book you're reading? Tell me about the ways your author structured his piece that are similar to the choices you made and places where the decisions were different.”

This time there was no silence. As if by magic, the child who had just waggled an eyebrow at me shared several details about the structural choices the author made.

This series is designed to capitalize on that magic. But just like the famous magicians Penn & Teller have made a career of demystifying magic, showing the audience how the tricks *really* work, so too will this book demystify the connection between reading and writing. Specifically, I will show you clear and explicit ways to build off the reciprocity between reading and writing. I will teach you how to take the work that your students do in their writing and repurpose it in order to offer them a lever of understanding into challenging reading tasks.

No matter how you teach, whatever your curriculum is, or how much time you have, you will find something in this book that will not only help bring more energy and connectivity to your literacy instruction but also maximize your time and your students' ability to transfer literacy skills.

In “How to Use This Book,” which begins on page xx, I go into the nitty-gritty details about the long-term academic and field research this book is built upon. I give specific explanations for why the book is organized the way it is and tips for how to best utilize it while staying true to your own literacy instruction needs and goals.

When first crafting this series, I relied on my own experience as a classroom teacher and as a consultant for the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, who has had the honor of working with thousands of teachers. I also considered the fact that all teachers have a unique set of circumstances and students whom they will teach. Ultimately, I wanted to highlight the powerful role of excellent writing instruction in developing students as writers as well as readers—and to make this book as user-friendly, accessible, and flexible as it could possibly be.