

Cultivating Student Writers in the Elementary Library

Elementary school librarians work tirelessly with one common drive to keep us going: foster a love of reading in our students. But since reading and writing are intrinsically tied together, it seems natural that supporting students as writers would be part of our role as well, even if it's not as obvious. We curate our collection. We book talk titles. We work to connect students with books of all formats and genres. And when we do all this, we are leading our students to become not just readers, but also writers.

Discussing Reading, Discussing Writing

The conversations we have with our students about their reading also equip them to be better writers. Discussing literary genres with students can start a conversation that gives students vocabulary they need to describe the types of books they enjoy. When promoting books, I often speak about themes that connect very different types of stories together. When we share books we all love, especially ones that many students have read, such as our state award nominees, we talk about character development, dialogue, and story pacing. Building awareness around these structures helps students access them when they write, too, whether they're writing stories for fun with their friends or completing an assignment for class.

However, it's not just the conversations around fiction that set a foundation for students' writing skills. Explicit instruction around types of nonfiction provides students with models for their own expository writing—an arena they will participate in more and more as they move through their education and careers.

Analyzing Structure by Discussing Nonfiction Categories

When we speak about nonfiction, Melissa Stewart's nonfiction family tree gives us a way to describe the structure around how those books are written. Traditional nonfiction reads differently than expository literature. Active nonfiction, which Stewart describes as ones that "teach skills that readers can use to engage in an activity" (*School Library Journal* 2018), has identifiable traits that can be followed when students create their own "how to" writings at elementary grades. Putting these titles in front of students in the moment, giving them exposure over time, and discussing these formats of nonfiction provides examples for them to draw from.

In "[Understanding Categories of Nonfiction for Young People](#)," Stewart and her co-author Mary Ann Cappiello describe a series of questions that writers can ask themselves to determine what category of nonfiction would best help them express the "mission" of their project. Offering students these guiding questions, alongside mentor texts, can give them a greater sense of ownership and direction in their writing.

Writing as Exploration and Play

Reading the book *Acts of Teaching: How to Teach Writing: A Text, A Reader, A Narrative* by Joyce Armstrong Carroll and Edward E. Wilson has pushed my thinking about the role that elementary librarians play in developing students as writers and has made me more aware of how the types of literature students are reading in the library provide them with internalized models to draw from as they write and revise. I was left with the following ideas for expanding my teaching:

- I should align my introduction and revisiting of genres and nonfiction formats more closely with related writings that take place in the classroom. This is a great opportunity to collaborate with teachers.
- I, as a librarian, should not just be reading for enjoyment but also writing for enjoyment. Going through a similar process of drawing from my own understanding of literature may give me insights into how students can benefit from literature in the library when writing.
- I should do more playwriting with my students, drawing from picture books or early readers and performing the results in the library.

By thinking of ourselves as having an impact on student writing, we have another lens through which to view our teaching. When promoting literature, book talking titles, or examining story structure, seeing how students are impacted as both readers and writers can provide a different perspective and a new level of depth that both students and teachers will benefit from.

Works Cited

Cappiello, Mary Ann, and Melissa Stewart. "Understanding Categories of Nonfiction for Young People." *School Library Connection*, March 2018. <https://schoollibraryconnection.com/Home/Display/2140894>.

Carroll, Joyce Armstrong and Edward E. Wilson. *Acts of Teaching: How to Teach Writing: A Text, A Reader, A Narrative*. Libraries Unlimited, 2018.

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About the Editor

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