3-6-2014

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Recommended Citation
Patterson, Julie. "Beginnings: 3 Examples (And Why They Work)." Indiana Partnership for Young Writers, 2014. Available from: http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/iypw_articles/7

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Beginnings: 3 Examples (and why they work)

by Julie Patterson, writer-in-residence

After my post about “Beginnings: Abrilado and Ends” a few weeks ago, a teacher friend reached out to me.

“When I tell students I want them to work on ‘the beginning,’ I don’t mean all that rising action you hear me mention,” she said. “I am talking about much simpler stuff. I just want them to write as if they’re writing that draws readers in. I am talking about a hook.”

I wouldn’t call crafting a compelling opening a simple thing, either. By any means, but that, I appreciate her point. Maybe, you too want to focus on teaching students to write great opening lines. So how do we do that?

I probably won’t surprise you to hear me say that in order to write compelling beginnings, one must first look closely at the beginnings of some excellent touchstone texts. Since my last posts on beginnings, middles, and ends, have focused on narrative writing, I’ve chosen three short realistic fiction stories: “The Marble Champ” by Gary Soto, “Eleven” by Sandra Cisneros and “Slower than the Rest” by Cynthia Rylant.

“The Marble Champ” begins with a description of Lupo, the main character:

Lupo Medrano, a shy girl who spoke in whispers, was the school’s spelling bee champion, winner of the reading contest at the public library three summers in a row. In blue ink she’d written three gold-starred certificates from the library, the blue ribbon...the world widened in a big way for Lupo. She had a framed photo of Lupo and the mayor. Soto opens with a description of Lupo, because the story is only remarkable for who Lupo is, the main character:

But notice how I talked about these openings. It isn’t skills—than simply memorizing a list of strategies and knowledge—applicable to a wide range of communication matter what the genre is. This is deeper and more useful applied when deciding how to begin a piece of writing, no way, than applying those theories to your own works-in-texts, creating theories as to fiction unit, too, studying the opening lines of touchstone texts, creating theories as to what makes them work.

And remember that you can revisit this lesson in a non-teacher-declared way. It is much more intentional than that.魅力

When you teach “beginnings” in your classroom, don’t let students believe that writers choose a strategy from a list of options—openings are a reflection of their work, and the only one that matters is the one the writer chooses, and the turtle changed Laci’s life.

So there we have three ways to start a story: (1) with a description of an important character; (2) with a reflection that reveals significant theme(s) in the story, and (3) in the middle of the action—Wonder why?

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