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4 Craft Strategies to Notice in *The Leaving Morning* (and why)

by Julie Patterson, writer-in-residence

Writing workshop teachers use exemplary texts ("touchstone texts") in the curriculum. We read these texts over and over with students, invite students to share what they notice about the craft of these texts, point out new craft strategies that students are ready to comprehend, and invite students to try using these or similar strategies in their own writing.



The best touchstone texts are sophisticated enough to work across multiple grade and comprehension levels. One of the first -- and still one of the most frequent -- touchstone texts that I used was *The Leaving Morning* by Angela Johnson. Here are just a few of the brilliant craft strategies my students and I have discovered in it:

Repetition

It's easy to spot repetition in *The Leaving Morning*, most notably the title phrase itself, but the fun part of noticing this with students is hearing their hypotheses as to why author Angela Johnson chose to repeat this phrase. "She wanted to show it wasn't just any old day," said one third grader.

A fifth grade student read even deeper. "Because that's how it feels to move. You can't stop thinking about it. Leaving just keeps bouncing around in your head all the time."

Readers will also notice other repeated lines and phrases. The key to using repetition effectively in your own writing, however, is in thinking about exactly why those words and phrases were chosen by the author. What is the author trying to convey in those words? Why are they important enough to repeat? When students can form smart hypotheses about why the author of the touchstone text used repetition, they can make the next move to using repetition *with intention* in their own work.

Word Choice

One of my favorite conversations with middle and upper grade students often stems from our conversation about repetition. As Angela Johnson describes the leaving morning, she repeats slight variations of the phrase *I left cold lips on the window*. The first time this phrase appears, it is written "We pressed our faces against the hall window and left cold lips on the pane." I ask students what a window pane is, and often they don't know. Why did Angela Johnson use a word that her audience might not know the meaning of? Why didn't she just say *glass* or *window*? Because the perfect word here is pane. It's no accident that it sounds like pain. This sentence appears in the opening lines of the story, and this one word, pane, is pivotal in setting the tone and mood. As readers, we know right away that the leaving in this story is going to be painful, sad.

Onomatopoeia or Sound Effects

Students who want to show off how smart they are like to use the term *onomatopoeia* in this conversation, because they know that's a vocabulary word they are supposed to know in language arts. I, on the other hand, prefer to talk about *sound effects* or *sound words*, because honestly I can't spell onomatopoeia to write it on a noticing chart. (And seriously, I have the highest degree attainable in creative writing and have never used the word onomatopoeia even once outside of an elementary school language arts class.) Like in the other conversations described, what is important to me is that students can articulate *why* Angela Johnson put the sound of the street sweeper at the beginning of the story, "Sssshhhshsh..." What does that sound effect add to the story or reveal about it?

When I asked one fourth grade class, I heard, "It's like the shhh sound, so we know it will be a quiet story."

"-Or a sad story. It's like the author is crying and someone is comforting her."

"Maybe she's going somewhere where they don't have street sweepers, so that's what she'll remember about the old place years from now."

I don't know about you, but I'd sure rather hear writers talk like that about literature than be able to recall the word onomatopoeia.

Unnamed Main Character

This is my favorite craft strategy in *The Leaving Morning*, because I didn't honestly notice it until a classroom of fifth graders brought it to my attention. Maybe because I am a memoirist myself, I assumed the "I" character in the story was Angela Johnson, but one astute group of students pointed out that she could have slipped her name into the text somewhere but chose not to. "That's strange, isn't it?" I said. "I wonder why she wouldn't have put a name in there to make it clear whether this is fiction or non-fiction."

A wise student answered, "It doesn't matter if it's true or not. She doesn't want you to know who the main character is, because lots of kids have had to move before, and she wants you to imagine yourself in the story. She wants you to feel like it's about you."

I was speechless. I love it when the students teach me.

My goal in all of the conversations about craft strategies is to help students see that what an author puts on the page is a *choice*, a *decision*. Even when we write non-fiction, we choose which facts to present and which ones to leave out as a way of shaping the story the way we want it. We lead the readers where we want them to go.