



Writing Essentials – Lesson 2

Elaboration Strategies Using Mentor Text

The Thinking Behind the Lesson

Every week, Craig Wilson writes a column for **USA Today** called, *The Final Word*. Week after week, Wilson tackles every topic from Mother’s Day to litter in a slice-of-life essay of sorts. I can hardly wait for Wednesday mornings to arrive to read what he has to say. Wilson incorporates exact vocabulary, piercing insight on life’s happenings and humor to develop his column. Above all, he infuses a fair share of **elaboration**. When we ask students to “**tell us more**” and “**give us greater detail**,” we’re really asking them to provide us with the kind of elaboration Craig Wilson has mastered.

By elaboration, we mean, give us a description, some examples, a definition of an unknown term or an anecdote, to name a few. (A more detailed list of elaboration strategies is on Elaboration Strategies) Our students just hear, “tell me more.” More often than not, we expect students to know what we mean by “tell me more” and assign them the task of “telling me more” without teaching them specifically what we mean. In this lesson, you will teach your students the specifics of writing great elaboration by studying how a professional writer deals with this challenge. You’ll use a piece of mentor text as a springboard. **Mentor text is a piece of writing written by a professional writer.** Sometimes mentor text is referred to as a “good model of writing.” I like to bring in mentor text for kids to study, examining the specific moves a trained writer makes.

I came across an article written by Wilson on cell phone bullies and thought you might enjoy reading this **mentor text** with your students. Bringing in something written by a published author continues to be one of our more powerful instructional methods. This is a lesson in reading and analyzing the work of a pro. It is true that not all good readers write however, all good writers read.

You’ll want to read the Wilson article with your students then lead them in a discussion about what makes this article a well-written piece. That’s when you’ll cite the various elaboration strategies. If this is the first time your students have worked with elaboration strategies, proceed slowly. Point out two easy ones—descriptions and examples. It will be challenge enough for students to dissect the article and articulate even those two.

Teaching Points

- Good writers study the moves of professional writers, analyzing the specific techniques we can replicate in our own writing. Today, we’re studying the writing of Craig Wilson, *Cell Phone Bullies Set the Tone at Airports*.
- One move Wilson makes is the use of **elaboration**. Elaboration can include descriptions, examples, definitions and anecdotes to name a few.

Lesson: Elaboration strategies using mentor text

Preparation

Suggested time: 60 minutes

Resources and Materials

- See MS Cyberbullying Teacher Manual, Lesson 2, page 22 for a suggestion as to where to insert this writing extension into the lesson.
- Lesson 2 SA 1 Elaboration Strategies
- Lesson 2 TR 1 Annotated Elaboration Strategies
- Lesson 2 TR2 **USA Today** article, *The Final Word*, by Craig Wilson

Lesson Plan

Establish the day's teaching goal. Good writers study the work of professional writers. A well-written piece by a pro is called "mentor text."

- Begin by reading Wilson's article with your students. Show obvious enjoyment as you read aloud. Your enthusiasm will help hook students.
- Together, **list** the qualities and techniques you notice about this piece that make it a well-written example. Use an overhead as you create your list. Kids will notice the humor, descriptions and so forth. Point out the things you, yourself, notice. I love how Wilson starts this piece with a mini story about being in Vegas at 6 AM. It pulls me right in and I feel like I'm right there with him, listening to some jerk railing on his cell phone. Make the connection that Wilson has used a "move" professional writers use all the time-he got our attention with a personal anecdote.
- Give students copies of **Elaboration Strategies** and explain that the strategies outline a detailed list of ways professional writers add more elaboration to their work and that Wilson is one who delivers superior performance in this area. Real writers like Wilson make moves; they tell us stories (personal anecdotes), they give us a description, they state facts and statistics and they define unknown terms that help them make their point clear. Read the elaboration strategies with your class, giving them a "kid friendly" definition of the various terms as you go along.
- Ask students to find **personal anecdote** on their elaboration strategies sheet. Next guide students and model copying part of the personal anecdote from Wilson's introduction under personal anecdote.

Coaching Tip: *Elaboration Strategies(SA1) has the examples and explanations; Annotated Elaboration Strategies (TR1) has various examples of elaboration cited from the article. While it's not necessary to teach all of these strategies in one lesson, having them all in front of you can be of benefit. Annotated Elaboration Strategies will help you to learn the strategies along with your students.*

Walk students through reading the article a second time.

- This time, tell your students you want them to learn about these various forms of elaboration. Being able to recognize elaboration in a professional piece is a step toward learning how to do the same kind of thing in our own writing. Have students keep Wilson's article and the list of Elaboration Strategies side by side. As you read the article again, point out various examples of elaboration. You'll be doing all the talking to begin with, so don't be surprised if you hear yourself having a conversation by yourself up in front of the class.

"Oh, look at this! In this paragraph Wilson writes, *He was gone-maybe angry gods swept him away, or the security guards shuffled him out, or maybe his own two feet were embarrassed for him and carried him off.* That's an example."

- Go step-by-step through the article citing various examples of elaboration. Each time you find one, have your students add it to their list of Elaboration Strategies. When you have identified two or three examples as a group, ask students to finish the article looking for additional examples and copying them onto their Elaboration Strategies sheet.

Coaching Tip: *Once students have learned some of the elaboration strategies they can use them in a variety of ways to improve the quality of their own pieces. It's a simple concept that transfers across the curriculum and spans grade levels. We don't expect writers to use all of the elaboration strategies in every paragraph they write, but rather a sprinkling of them-sometimes combining a fact followed by the definition of an unknown term or an anecdote with three examples. Having the list can help adolescent writers increase their ability to deliver information writing more effectively and with individual style. Providing classroom time to study the choices of a professional writer can make a distinctive impact with lasting endurance. Follow up by using another piece of mentor text at a different time, repeating the practice.*

Share and Discuss

Review the Elaboration Strategies listed and discuss student findings. Answer any questions that arise as a result of this exercise.