



Mini Lessons (1-26)

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Lesson 1

Favorite Author

A great way to learn about writing is to read other talented and successful authors' works. The week prior to this lesson tell the kids (and the parents!) to bring in a book by their favorite author, or one they happen to be reading and enjoying right now. Bookmark an especially funny, exciting, descriptive, or even sad passage to share with the rest of the class. (Individual family standards will combine to shape the group's standards; outline at the beginning any title or style of book that won't be permitted.)

Depending on the size of the class this lesson may take longer than usual. Since you don't want to take time away from Author's Chair, if needed you can forego timed writing. Have each of the students briefly explain why they enjoy the author whose work they brought. Then they can read (non-readers can get help) their passage to the class.

Timed Writing

Have the students write in the style of one of the authors they just heard and enjoyed. It can be the same scene rewritten as they see fit, or it can be something wholly different in detail, but mimicking that author's voice and style.

Lesson 2

Caldecott and Newbery Award Winners

What are the Newbery and Caldecott awards? Books bearing these awards have historically been a sign to parents that the material within is of a high quality. Today, many homeschooling parents will object to the subject matter in the more modern winners. However, the list of winners from the 1920s to somewhere in the 1960s will consist mainly of books homeschooling families will find acceptable. Understanding what the criteria is for choosing winners, as well as being familiar with the names of the books on these lists, is still of value. (You also cannot depend upon the American Library Association for guidance on acceptable books for your children. ALA books for young adults include sexual innuendo and graphic profanity, along with drug and alcohol use and violence. Libraries and librarians are not bound by the Christian's moral code. Therefore, parents need be aware of what their children are reading.)

Newbery

The Newbery Medal was named for eighteenth-century British bookseller John Newbery. It's awarded annually by the Association for Library Service to Children to the ". . . author of the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children."

This website contains information about not just the current winner, but provides lists of winners and honors books from 1922 to the present.

Newbery Medal Home Page

<http://www.ala.org/ala/alsc/awardsscholarships/literaryawds/newberymedal/newberymedal.htm>

Caldecott

The Caldecott Medal ". . . shall be awarded to the artist of the most distinguished American Picture Book for Children published in the United States during the preceding year. The award shall go to the artist, who must be a citizen or resident of the United States, whether or not he be the author of the text. . ."

The Englishman, Randolph Caldecott, was an influential children's illustrator during the Victorian period. His illustrations for children were unique to their time in both their humor and their style. He suffered all his life from poor health and died at age 39, internationally famous.

The illustration on the Caldecott Medal, which was taken from Caldecott's illustrations for the poem "The Diverting History of John Gilpin," is a perfect example of his work. It depicts John Gilpin astride a runaway horse, accompanied by squawking geese, braying dogs, and startled onlookers.

Caldecott Medal Home Page

<http://www.ala.org/ala/alsc/awardsscholarships/literaryawds/caldecottmedal/caldecottmedal.htm>

Ideas for Discussion

1. Print out a list of winners. Highlight your favorites. (If you have some, bring them in to share – pointing out the award seals on the books.) Read through the names of the books with the class. Which books have they heard of or have they read?
2. What do your students think makes a book worthy of an award?
3. How should a Christian judge reading material? Does the Bible give us any direction?

Lesson 3

Webbing

Webbing is a technique that is most useful in writing reports, essays and other pieces of non-fiction, although it could also be used for fiction. To show budding authors how to web a project, you'll need a large sheet of paper for each child and a whiteboard for yourself. In the center of the web you'll want to put the central idea, or theme of the piece. Let's say you were writing a report on pollution. Write the word "Pollution" in the center of the whiteboard and draw a circle around it.

Next, we want to create our first subcategories. Draw a line from the middle circle and create a new circle at the end of it. Inside of the circle write a more specific topic that needs to be discussed in the report. How about "Effect on humans"? Repeat the same process for "Effect on the environment" and "Effect on animals."

More sub-categories will, in turn, branch off these new categories. Create some additional webs off the "humans" category with ideas like "health effects" and "quality of life," and branch off the "environment" category with specific topics like "plant life" and "water system."

You should have a pretty large web by now. This web will give you a general idea of subject matter you'll want to include in your report. It's not an outline, and it isn't in any particular order, but it's a great visual aid to help keep a writer's focus, and to prevent you from forgetting something important! It's also open ended; if another topic occurs to you, just add it in! For example, later you may decide that you need to tackle why there is pollution. Create a new bubble branching off from the central theme and go with it. That bubble can then have its own sub categories like "positive effects of pollution" which could branch further into "industrial employment opportunities" and "manufactured goods and quality of life."

The beauty of the web is it is unstructured and open ended, unlike an outline which is sequenced and more difficult to add new content. Once you've webbed out all the ideas you want to cover, then you can arrange them in your preferred order into an outline.

Timed Writing

For timed writing have the students web out their current writing project. It can be a report or an essay for another class, or it can be their current Writer's Workshop project. If it's a work of fiction have them web a character and let the sub-categories be conflicts or actions they want the character to do or experience, or students can use a plot summary for the center of the web and branch off with ideas they think will help enrich the story .

Lesson 4

Character Sketches

There are two particularly helpful techniques for writing character sketches that your young authors will find useful. The first is creating a dossier of the character. The character's dossier should be straightforward, like a police dossier. It should cover the basics: height, weight, hair color, and other physical descriptions. It should list occupation, known associates, and a residence history. There should be a section for personality traits: Is the character aggressive? How about talkative? Then add an "Additional Notes" section. This is where the author can throw in other key attributes like "runs like a duck" or "owns a submarine." Creating dossiers for all the main characters can help the author keep these actors clear in their mind. If your author is also artistic suggest they include a sketch of the character in the dossier as well.

While a dossier helps greatly with the outward appearance and activities of a character, a "character wheel" helps the author get inside a character's head. To create a character wheel, draw a circle in the middle of the board. Write a character's name in the middle of the circle. Take a character from a well-known work, or let the children volunteer one of their own characters. It helps if this character is from a work from Author's Chair so that the other students are familiar with him or her. Characters from ongoing works are best.

Draw a series of lines from this wheel like spokes. On the lines, have your character help you get inside his or her head by answering such questions as: What is my favorite thing to do on a Saturday? What are my favorite possessions, hobbies? Where would I like to visit? How would I get there? What do I want most? Dislike most? Hide in the back of my closet? What is my favorite animal, my favorite daydream, my favorite memory? Have the students help you fill in the short answers and descriptions to all these topics.

Timed Writing

For timed writing have the authors create dossiers and character wheels for one of their own characters.

Lesson 5

Plot

A plot is the problem to be solved in a story, what lead up to it, and how the problem was resolved.

The typical pattern of a plot:

Beginning: tells a little about the characters, setting, and background information readers need in order to understand the plot.

Middle: Two opposing sides struggle over something. There is a conflict or a problem to be solved.

Climax: The point of greatest tension. What happens next?!

Conclusion (Ending): The solution to the problem. Characters' reactions to the solution. A satisfying ending is both believable and positive.

For older students you may wish to continue the lesson with:

“All plots have a problem to be solved – also called a ‘conflict’.”

Major types of conflict:

Man against man – hero versus the neighborhood bully.

Man against society – hero wants to change a bad law or right an injustice.

Man against himself – hero struggles with keeping a secret that his friend is doing something dangerous, or betraying his friend by telling the secret.

Man against nature – hero tries to save his family during a tornado.

Plot a story quickly on the board by eliciting answers to these questions:

Who is the hero? (name and “occupation”)

What is the problem? (hero is lost in the woods and night is falling)

What is the climax? (we hear a “bear” growling nearby)

Conclusion? (he remembers his Boy Scout training and . . .)

Obviously you can only accept one or two answers for each question. Some

children shout Josh and others shout Amy – have two heroes. Pick the problem that seems likely and might be easy to work with. A monster in the closet? Sure. Be prepared: with older teens you may get some real-life tricky problems. Think this possibility through ahead of time. Try to keep it light and fun for the Mini-Lesson. The point is to learn the concept of “plot.”

Timed Writing

Students can work alone or in pairs in this exercise. Set the timer for seven minutes. Have them fill out a chart like this:

Hero (name & description):

Problem/Conflict:

Climax:

Conclusion:

If there is time (don't lose track of Author's Chair!), some may wish to share what they developed. Encourage them to use a simple chart like this when beginning any new story. This in-workshop writing assignment may spur their imaginations, and it may become the basis for a story they write at home.