



Reading to Empower Writers

by JEN VINCENT

When we read as a writer, we know that we are not alone, we know that every writer who has come before us is a mentor, and most importantly, we know that not only do we have stories to share, we feel empowered to write them.



LITERACY CHAMPION: JEN VINCENT

Jen Vincent is a writer, blogger, and educator who believes in the power of writing as an act of radical self love. She is a National Board Certified Teacher in Early/Middle Childhood Literacy and teaches 8th grade Language Arts and Social Studies in Mundelein, Illinois. Growing up, books and stories made her feel whole, helped her fit in, and gave her an escape but also propelled her into writing her own stories of being a first-generation, Latinx, mix. Jen shares her love of mentor texts at her blog [Teach Mentor Texts](#), hosts Weekly Check-Ins for Teachers Write, a virtual summer writing camp for educators, and co-hosts the Kidlit It's Monday! What Are You Reading? (#IMWAYR). She is an active member of NCTE and serves on the Build Your Stack committee. As the founder of Story Exploratory she provides opportunities for people to engage in identity work through guided writing exploration.

One to Know: Your Stories Matter, Too

People, places, and experiences shape us. They might shape us in different ways, but we cannot deny that we are impacted by people we interact with, places we visit or call home, and the moments that have become our lived experiences. Reading allows us an opportunity to reflect and make connections that we can write about. When we have conversations with young people about the connection between reading and writing in this way, we show them not only what it means to be a reader, but also, what it means to be a writer.

Everything we read allows us to reflect upon our own stories. Sometimes we read something that we can relate to and where we see ourselves. Sometimes we read a text that gives us insight into a lived experience that is different from our own. And sometimes we see ourselves in stories that on the surface might seem very different or use our imagination to step into a world the writer created. Dr. Rudine Sims-Bishop (1990) calls these texts “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors”.

As writers, a great place to start is writing personal stories, our own mirrors. It's not the only way but because we have lived them, we have firsthand experience to draw upon. We can use what we read to help us access these personal stories. Maybe we make a connection to a book and want to share a story that comes to mind. Or maybe while reading, we make a connection to a very different experience that we want to share. Whether reading a mirror book or a window book, readers can pay attention to what stories they have to share.

Telling stories and writing stories is empowering. It's a powerful way to say, "You matter."

What to Do

- Reflect on your own reading diet and talk about it with the young people in your life. Do you mostly read mirror books? Or mostly window books? Or mostly sliding glass door books? Or do you vary your reading diet? What opportunities to expand your reading life do you notice?
- Whether you are reading with children or discussing before, during, or after reading, model making connections. You might start like this, "When I read this part, it made me think about..."
- Ask readers what connections they have to the story. You might try, "Does that remind you of anything you have experienced?" or "Have you ever felt that way?" or "What does that make you think of in your life?" Practice active listening and follow up with questions to nudge them to expand if necessary.
- Now take time to write! Explain to young readers that they are writers too. Sometimes readers don't think it's possible for them to share their own stories just like the writers they read. Get them excited about being a writer. Whether you're typing into a device, writing in a notebook, or using markers on chart paper, write your connection as a story. Model how you go from talking about the memory to writing it. Explain that writers describe the setting, use dialogue, show action, and share what they were thinking in the moment. Go back to the text to study how the writer uses these techniques. Then invite them to try it too. Keep it simple, you're growing your writing stamina.
- Share your writing and celebrate! Writing is an act of radical self love and it's worth celebrating. Take turns sharing what you've written by reading aloud. Celebrate with high fives and share what stands out in what they wrote. Some writers might be ready for feedback but always ask first. At the beginning, celebration should be the focus.

More to Know and Do

- Take time to reflect on your own experiences as a writer. How do you feel about reading versus writing? Are there any biases you have developed that you need to be aware of when writing with young people? Sometimes adult writers don't feel confident in sharing their stories or their ideas or their grammar and spelling skills. Where did this come from? Do you have any experiences you need to process in order to feel more comfortable in writing with young people? Are there stories you feel comfortable sharing with young people? Honesty and vulnerability goes a long way in this work.

- The reality is that the publishing industry does not yet publish a variety of books that reflect and honor the lives of all young people. As readers, when we read more widely, we send a message that diverse stories matter. As writers, when we are empowered to write our own stories, we also send a message that diverse stories matter. We need more young people to know that their stories matter and to write and share them.
- Writing can and should be joyful. Too often we're told that writing is torture but we're humans and humans tell stories. Our goal is to show young people that the stories they tell naturally are worth writing down. Keep it simple, make it fun, focus on getting ideas onto paper. That's what writers do.

How to Reach Jen Vincent

- Check out [Teach Mentor Texts](#) for mentor texts ideas
- Follow [@storyexploratory](#) on Instagram
- Visit storyexploratory.com for workshops, coaching, and consulting
- Email storyexploratory@gmail.com to work with Jen