

Book Review / Recension d'ouvrages

Foster, G. & Marasco, T. (2007). *EXEMPLARS: Your best resource to improve student writing*. Markham, ON: Pembroke Publishers Limited. 160 pages.

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EXEMPLARS: Your Best Resource to Improve Student Writing, written for students in grades four to nine by co-authors Graham Foster and Toni L. Marasco, has as its goal, "setting standards, engaging students, and improving student writing" (Marlowe, 2007). Foster, a former teacher and private consultant, writer, and workshop leader, focuses on practical ways to teach language arts. A dedicated classroom and special education teacher, supervisor, principal, and language arts consultant, Marasco has written and edited many articles, books, and other publications on a wide range of education issues. In this book, they provide more than fifty mini-lessons demonstrating a concrete method of describing writing standards and expectations using samples of students' writing.

Lessons are focused on the six key traits of efficacious writing:

1. Content or ideas that are relevant, appropriate, and detailed
2. Organization emphasizing planning as critical for coherence and logical flow
3. Sentence variety illustrating various beginnings of sentences, types of sentences, and sentence length to add interest to any student writing
4. Word choice demonstrating precise, colourful, and evocative descriptions for the intended purpose and audience
5. Voice has an honest, caring, unique, and authentic tone
6. Conventions reflecting the mechanics of writing: grammar, spelling, sentence completeness, and subject-verb agreement

The use of exemplars as a teaching tool helps students to learn the targeted skill. After completing the exercise, students are challenged to review and revise one of their own compositions to which they apply their new learning.

Lessons can be used in a versatile manner with a choice open to the teacher's discretion based on student need. Possible topics for further study, with referring pages, are suggested at the end of some lessons dependent on the teacher's assessment. Collections of student writings in a portfolio with pre- and post-examinations are advised. Rubrics, as prepared in the book, are employed by self, a peer partner, and teachers, as an authentic way for students to critique and improve their own written work. There are a minimum of two exemplars for each lesson, with

some presenting a preferred option and an inferior option, while others illustrate two acceptable responses. Concluding most trait sections is a Playful Exemplar Activity, of high student interest, which summarizes the criterion taught. Several graphic organizers and mnemonic strategies are detailed to help students in planning and organizing their writing. I used the *Pre-writing for Exposition* visual organizer when planning this essay. For narrative writing, the RAFTS strategy is employed and taught (Role, Audience, Format, Topic, Strong Verb). Venn Diagrams are recommended for comparison and contrast writing in subjects such as Social Studies and Science. Many of the exemplars have double uses. While I've had this book, I have skipped back and forth, using the mini-lessons where I have seen the need. Lessons I have taught to date have produced greater student attention to the specific topics addressed.

All students benefit from teachers using exemplars to set standards in writing. It is an approach that appeals to visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners using students' real work to increase and guide learning. Changes made to compositions should be clearly marked with sticky notes. When students inappropriately apply a lesson's criterion, a teachable moment arises. Teachers are then instructed how to collect and use students' work for the benefit of future classes, while keeping privacy issues in mind.

As a current Canadian publication (2007), the exemplars are interesting and address topics that grab students' interest and address a variety of easy to challenging writing activities. In the bottom right-hand corner, next to the page number, is a handy notation of the lesson's topic, making it easy to keep exemplars organized. The typestyle is appropriate and fairly large, easy to read, and all exemplars are ready to be photocopied or easily reproduced on an overhead.

There is very little I can suggest as improvements to this superb teaching tool. An improvement would be perforations to tear out pages making photocopying much easier. An online electronic copy for purchase would also solve the reproduction problem. Pages photocopied from a bent-open book are often crooked and reduce the desired effect of neat presentation. This issue is solved in the book, *6+1 Traits of Writing*, but omitted in this book.

In conclusion, teaching writing never needs to be difficult or shunned again. If a cluttered desk is a sign of a busy mind, then a well-stickered book is a sign of an invaluable and essential writer's resource. The best part is that this treasure costs the regular teacher a very reasonable price of only \$24.95!

References

- Foster, G., & Marasco, T. (2007). *Exemplars: Your best resource to improve student writing*. Markham, ON: Pembroke Publishers.
- Marlowe, N. (2007). *Introduction to Exemplars: Your best resource to student writing*. Markham, ON: Pembroke Publishers.