THE Big BOOK OF Details

Foreword by Harvey "Smokey" Daniels

46 Moves for Teaching Writers to Elaborate

ROZLYN LINDER

HEINEMANN • PORTSMOUTH, NH

Heinemann
361 Hanover Street
Portsmouth, NH 03801–3912
www.heinemann.com

Offices and agents throughout the world

The author and publisher wish to thank those who have generously given permission to reprint borrowed material:

Page 4: Photograph of Judy Blume and Rozlyn Linder. Copyright ©2013 by Judy Blume. Reprinted with permission from William Morris Endeavor Entertainment, LLC. All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Linder, Rozlyn, author.
Title: The big book of details : 46 moves for teaching writers to elaborate / Rozlyn Linder.
Description: Portsmouth, NH : Heinemann, [2016] | Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2015042708 | ISBN 9780325077666
Subjects: LCSH: English language—Composition and exercises—Study and teaching. | Description (Rhetoric)—Study and teaching.
Classification: LCC LB1576 .L532 2016 | DDC 372.62/3—dc23
LC record available at http://lccn.loc.gov/2015042708

Editor: Tobey Antao
Production: Victoria Merecki
Cover and interior designs: Suzanne Heiser
Typesetter: Kim Arney
Manufacturing: Steve Bernier

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

20 19 18 17 16 VP 1 2 3 4 5

I dedicate this book to Judy Blume and
Beverly Cleary, my first writing teachers.

Contents

Foreword

Yikes, I cringe when I think of all the times I scrawled *add more detail* in the margin of some student's paper (usually not in red ink, I wasn't that mean, but still). OK, no excuses, but I was a victim of the benighted times, nobody told me any different, and I hadn't met Roz Linder yet.

This lively and practical book addresses a persistent problem in our profession. We still don't *show kids how to write*. More broadly, we don't demonstrate how literate people think. Sure, we're great at assigning, demanding, and commanding literacy activities of all kinds: "Read Chapter 7 for Friday." "Write an essay on this article." "Take a position on this controversy and support it with evidence from the text." But when it comes to the how-to part, where we ought to demonstrate how such mental work gets done, we too often abandon our students and let them *guess* how a skilled reader or writer might tackle the task. Sometimes we even withhold further "teaching" until assessment time, when we tally up the wrong answers on the comprehension quiz or drench kids' papers with red ink.

On the reading side, this gap has been slowly closing. We have learned from the ground-breaking research of David Pearson (percolating up since 1983, what a slow system!) how to show kids ways of making sense of text. We now recognize a handful of specific thinking strategies that proficient readers (like us) use to comprehend—moves that can be named, explained, and explicitly taught. So we open up our own heads and share those mental processes though powerful modeling lessons like think-alouds.

In writing, the *showing* piece has been slower to develop. It's rare for teachers to open up their own heads and demonstrate their own writing, let alone simultaneously explain what mental moves they are using along the way. And there's an extra challenge: we teachers may feel less confident about ourselves as model writers than we do as readers. As Jim Vopat says in *Writing Circles,* almost everyone in America, adult or child, marches among "the writing wounded" after the bruising kind of writing instruction typically offered in school.

Into this fraught and urgent situation steps Roz Linder, kid wise, whip smart, and brimming with ready-to-use ideas. Roz gently pushes us forward, handing out tools we can actually use and showing us clear-cut writing strategy lessons we can confidently and comfortably offer our students. Writing doesn't have to be a mysterious black box that only "good writers" are able to activate. On the

contrary, the mechanisms of skillful writing can be put on open display for all to see and test-drive.

It worked for me. As a person who's written a bunch of books (and modeled my own writing for kids of many ages), Roz's resource was an eye-opener. Smugly, I began *The Big Book of Details* thinking that I was hyperaware of my own mental moves as a writer. Did I get a lesson! As I kept reading, Roz named many strategies I do regularly use but never knew I did. What I mean is, I frequently employed these moves but did so automatically, below the level of awareness, without conscious intent. They just "came to me."

I could not have taught these moves to students, because I wasn't aware enough of what was happening in my head as I wrote. But here was Roz, pointing out, naming, and showing me how to share dozens of my own subconscious moves: "zoom in," "INGS up front," "pop culture references," "think and act," "invisible tags," and "adverb commas." Who knew?

What Roz offers us in writing instruction parallels what we have been doing with reading. Until David Pearson (and Steph Harvey, Ellin Keene, Debbie Miller, Cris Tovani, Kelly Gallagher, and Tanny McGregor) came along, even veteran teachers didn't consciously understand their own reading/thinking processes well. So it was hard for them to demonstrate their thinking explicitly. But now we're getting there. Roz is doing the same thing for writing; helping us better understand our own writing-as-thinking strategies, so we can *show them to kids*.

Roz Linder traffics in teaching ideas that are "sticky"—that grab you right away, that are memorable, usable, and reliable. This book is just about the stickiest teacher resource you'll ever dip into. Watch out! It won't let go of you.

—Harvey "Smokey" Daniels
Santa Fe, New Mexico

Acknowledgments

Many authors tend to thank their editors somewhere near the bottom of their acknowledgments. For me, it is the opposite. This book would not exist without the hard work of Tobey Antao. Thank you for being the best coauthor, editor, shoulder to cry on, problem fixer, cheerleader, encourager, and all-around awesome person. I love all of our conversations and value your talent and expertise. You are my best writing friend in the whole wide world!

There are so many people responsible for making this book a reality. None of this would exist without the wonderful work of all of the teachers and students who welcomed me into their classrooms. I am forever grateful to the students and staff at Mountain Park Elementary School in Roswell, Georgia. Stacy Perlman, thank you for letting me work with your dynamic staff and students. You guys are so talented, and you remind me of how much fun it is to be a teacher!

Most of the middle school work in this book comes from the hardworking students at East Coweta Middle School in Senoia, Georgia. Thank you, Dr. Jackson, for letting me work with your staff and students. Sarah Klein, your students were a delight to work with. They kept me on my toes and constantly laughing. They were a great group, with big personalities and tons of great ideas. Karhma Novak—wow—can I be like you when I grow up? Your class was amazing and made me want to go back to middle school. Finally, Karen Smith—thank you for letting me feel like a superstar with your creative, funny, and wonderfully talented sixth graders.

Last, but definitely not least, are the teachers at Lithia Springs Elementary in Lithia Springs, Georgia. Spending the year working with you guys was a blast. I have to say, you take the cake for personality, hard work, and a willingness to venture into unknown territory, even when at times it felt a bit uncomfortable. William Marchant and Pam Bates—wow! You both participated in every professional development session, right there with the classroom teachers. Your commitment and willingness to learn with your staff is amazing and should be the norm for all administrators. Eugene Glover, Tiffanie Cartie, Althea Carter, and Will Alexander—thank you for going the extra mile and letting me work additional sessions with your students. Anay Barajas—it was amazing watching you teach in English and Spanish. Mr. Carr, if I ever go back to elementary school, I want to be in your class. You are great at making writing come alive and seem fun (even if sometimes it wasn't).

Thank you to my Georgia State University crew. You guys helped keep me sane when I was close to the edge: Kelly Sowerbrower, Sarah Klein, and Nicole Dukes. I might thank each of you in every book that I write! Each of you is wonderfully fabulous and always helps me to remember what is most important in life.

I am grateful to all of the wonderful people who have influenced my thinking about writing and writing instruction. Dr. Sarah Robbins, thank you for opening doors for me to be a part of the National Writing Project and begin to network with other teachers about writing best practices. Dr. Nadia Behizadeh—I appreciate all of our conversations about writing assessment and instruction, and thank you for introducing me to a whole new body of literature on what writing is, how we assess it, and what really matters in authentic writing. I cannot have an acknowledgement section without mentioning Dr. Michelle Zoss. Over the past year of writing this book, I always felt like I was trying to juggle way too many things at the same time. Thank you for supporting me and letting me know that it was okay to simply put some of those things down and take a breath.

I love and appreciate my family for putting up with me as I shed some tears, screamed at the computer, and buried myself in student work and charts. Thank you for letting this book borrow Mommy for a few months. Chris, Sydney, and Brooke—I adore and love each of you. You all are my favorite authors, and I love everything that you guys write.

Finally, thank you to the team at Heinemann. You all are amazing! I stand in awe at the talent under that one roof. Thank you for showering me with love, and believing that I had something to say that could help teachers and students.

THE Power OF Details

As a teacher of writing and as a reader, you know that details are the lifeblood of texts, whether they be video, audio, print, essays, arguments, stories, or poems. You've felt the hairs on the back of your neck stand up as you watched Diane Keaton's unflinching glare in the closing seconds of *The Godfather*. Four sentences into *To Kill a Mockingbird,* you loved Jem and you trusted Scout's eye for presenting things just as she sees them. An author's selected details have the power to create believable worlds, bring readers to tears, or incite anger. Rich details are power.

Our students are no less aware of the details in their worlds. Think about the questions we field every day from students about the details of our school and staff members. "Why does the principal say *kinny garten* instead of *kindergarten*?" "Why are the walls on the left side painted with murals, but the walls on the right side are just plain white?" "Why does that teacher always wear skirts, never pants?" Kids get that details can lead them to new understandings.

But if we can all agree that details are important, why is it so difficult for students to craft meaningful details in their own writing?

Perhaps this story will sound familiar to you: I remember conferencing with one of my fifth-grade students who had written a paper arguing for better food choices in the school cafeteria. Shannon had written several paragraphs about the poor quality of the food and offered suggestions for the changes she sought. Her paper read like a list. She made a point, offered a brief explanation, and moved on to the next point. She did not elaborate much at all. My directive to her was to add more details to her paper. "You have to elaborate more. Your reader needs to know more about this," I told her. I even wrote asterisks next to all of the places that lacked adequate detail.

I felt good about our conference. I thought that I had given her pretty specific guidance to improve her essay. When we conferenced again later, she had indeed added many more sentences to her paper. It made it longer, but not any better. I repeated the process and we even crafted a few sentences together that she could add to her essay. This time, I was certain that I had really set her off in the right direction. When she finished, she had a lengthier paper, but it still wasn't any better. Her paper listed information. It was filled with facts and sentences, but the lack of meaningful elaboration left the paper lifeless and without voice. She needed tools to create and describe the events in an intentional way, not

just to add more words. Writing more is not the same as creating more powerful descriptions, images, and explanations.

I mistakenly thought that I had taught Shannon about details. In fact, I hadn't really taught her how to do anything. I named places that lacked details. I explained that her paragraphs needed more elaboration. I even pointed to where that elaboration should happen. I didn't teach her a skill that she could take and apply to any other type of writing, though. I, like many teachers, was not explicit about how to select details, why they could improve writing. I just stressed that good writing features rich details and elaboration. The concepts of *rich details* and *elaboration* means nothing to a fifth grader. It just says: write more! But, why are we adding more? Is it to meet some arbitrary length requirement? Is it because longer is better?

Here's what I needed to teach: Why add details? Why should you add more words and what type of words should you add? I lost a teaching moment by telling rather than teaching. To help our students use details effectively, we need to find out what our students want their writing to do, and then show them *explicit* moves, or strategies, to make that happen. Detailing the different writing moves that authors rely on changed the focus of my instruction. Imagine what my work with Shannon might have looked like if I had made her intentions the focus of our conference: Did she want to make the reader feel sad for the students who had to eat the current food selections? Did she want the readers to visualize the current food choices? Did she want to imply that something else was going on that impacted the food choices?

Here's what the power of writing with details *can* look like: When I taught tenth-grade English, I had a group of students who were reluctant writers. They took little pride in their work and produced the bare minimum for any writing assignment. By the time I taught them, I knew that I had to explicitly teach different types of details and how to craft them. I taught my students that details were the key to making the reader see what you wanted them to see.

We spent much of our time exploring types of details. We worked on not just how to craft them, but how and when to use different types of details and recognize them in text. My students began to enjoy writing more and recognized the power that they had each time they put pen to paper. They began to understand that they could create and define what they wanted to with the right details. I felt successful, but wondered if this instruction had been "sticky." Did students really internalize this? Would this carry over into their writing after they left my classroom?

I got confirmation that this message had indeed been sticky with my students in the most unexpected and unlikely manner. One morning, two students were arguing outside of our classroom before the bell rang. The argument was heated and looked like it could escalate into a fight. My entire class saw what happened between the two students. In an effort to investigate, the principal asked all of my students to write down what happened. He was very explicit that this was to be independent and that no students should share or talk to each other. These were supposed to be independent accounts.

Later that day, I was summoned to the principal's office. Filled with the same fear I would have had as a child, I headed to the office during my lunch break. On his desk were my students' statements about the confrontation in the hall. The principal read aloud from some of the papers. He wanted to know what was going on. These did not sound like the reluctant writing that usually reached his desk.

As I read over the papers, I couldn't help but smile. I recognized the moves that they were making. I could tell who wanted to create a sense of sympathy for one of the students. I could see who wanted to stretch out a particular part of the argument. I could see who wanted to appear distant and objective. The details were intentional. They read much more like prose than the normal lists of what happened in an incident. They were so intentionally crafted that my principal thought that they had been coached or guided. *He was accusing me of helping them write their statements!*

At first I was offended at the suggestion, but that offense quickly changed to pride. The rich details and intentional creation of different moods or points of view were fantastic. The next day I asked my students to share not what they had written, but what they did. Students explained that they had a point of view and that they knew what type of moves they had to make to communicate their versions of what happened. They recognized the power that they had and relied on their toolbox of moves to create what they wanted to on paper. A call to the principal's office never felt so good.

The Connection Between Powerful Details and the Standards-Based Classroom

We recognize that details are both powerful and omnipresent. They are also emphasized in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Many states have adopted these standards or developed very similar standards of their own. Although the standards can seem unwieldy, there is a common thread that is woven throughout the standards: details! There is a heavy reliance and reoccurring focus on details within the reading and writing standards that seems to go unspoken, but should be front and center. Teaching students to read details critically and to use details purposefully in their own writing lays the foundation for both the reading and writing standards. All of the work that the Common Core and similar state standards require in reading—close reading; making inferences; citing evidence; determining central ideas or themes; analyzing development across a text; analyzing word choices; assessing point of view, purpose, and style; evaluating texts; comparing texts—requires students to dive into the rich details of a text to make sense of the text as a whole. In writing, all three of the genres prescribed by the CCSS—arguments, informative/explanatory texts, and narratives—rely on well-used details. Students have been making arguments, explaining, and telling stories all of their lives. Where might their writing in these genres need work? Probably in creating meticulously developed details

and reasons to support their thinking. They have the content; they just need to know the moves to convince, to explain, and to draw readers in.

Learning from the Experts

My first writing teachers were Beverly Cleary and Judy Blume. As a young child, I read almost every title that both of these women released. I shared Beezus and Ramona's life experiences and learned all about mean girls from Blume's *Blubber,* decades before Lindsey Lohan popularized the term. The content of these books helped me to grow, but I was also in awe of the authors' ability to re-create the type of world that I knew and understood. Through these books, I taught myself how to punctuate dialogue and use dialogue tags (other than *said*). I learned that characters think in their heads a lot during a book and that one way authors show this is with italics. I learned how cool it is to read analogies that help you picture the world authors wanted to introduce. I learned that dependent clauses make sentences sound complex and rich. I loved how they packed character description right in the middle of a sentence, couched between commas (appositive phrases and descriptive clauses). I didn't know the name of any of those things, but I had models of them, courtesy of Mrs. Blume and Mrs. Cleary, to teach me. One day, I sat at our home computer, 1986 edition, and began to write. I was going to craft my own novel. I wrote for two days before I felt brave enough to share my writing with my mother. My mom, not a woman to mince words, read a few pages, then looked at me and said, "You can't just sit and copy from other books. You've got to make up your own." Puzzled, I explained to her that this was my story and that I wrote it. She went on to explain that she knew it was copied because of the dialogue and the names, the way I typed the dialogue, the type of dialogue tags I used, and the way that each line of dialogue was indented. "That's just like those books you read." I was crushed. I stuck my story in my desk and figured it wasn't any good.

Material suppressed due to rights restrictions.

Decades later I realized that my writing must have been pretty good. It was so good that my own mother was certain that it was copied. At nine, I had learned writing moves that were good enough to make a grown-up think that what I have written couldn't possibly have come from a nine year old. Retroactive score!

Despite being discouraged, I still kept reading, learning, and growing. Those rich lessons from those two

authors helped me to develop my own writing chops without a writing workshop or even a writing teacher. I was a student with rich literacy resources. Today, educators actively seek books that will help their students to learn to write. You may know these as mentor texts, touchstone texts, model texts, exemplar texts, literature models—the list is endless. As my experience as a child shows, finding a name for this practice doesn't matter as much as the power and learning that comes from it. What I got from those books was a clear example of how words can work together. My reading experiences provided lots of examples of the kind of moves that writers make.

As a teacher, I wanted my students to do the same thing. They should also read like writers. This way, they can discover different moves that writers make. My hopeful desire for this, unfortunately, ignores two types of students: the reluctant reader and the struggling reader. Reluctant readers (not always poor readers) have yet to develop a love and appreciation of the written word. These are students who don't have the desire to look at text critically and consume books as writers. Although I want to change this, I don't want this lack of interest in reading to serve as the roadblock to critical and varied writing moves. Struggling readers face different obstacles: they don't read well and may be focusing on below-level comprehension or decoding strategies. Their current reading ability shouldn't get transferred to their writing ability. So, although I want my students to read like writers and uncover moves, I don't want their reading to serve as the only or primary means to learn different ways to elaborate and add detail to their writing. If we wait until students find these moves on their own, reluctant and struggling readers will be at a disadvantage in writing as well as in reading. We should, as teachers, bring the moves to students to try on for size. Does this mean that students reading like writers is never on our agenda? Of course not! Just don't fall into the trap of assuming that each student will embrace this path to learn more about writing.

With this in mind, I decided that I had to bring the models to my writers. I would neatly categorize the moves that writers made, share them with my students, and encourage them to recognize these models when we read and wrote. My students and I don't re-create the wheel: we learn the moves that writers make and consider how we could adopt them as our own. This approach also helps the strong readers: they begin to read books not just as readers, but as writers, too. The strongest readers love to test-drive the moves I teach and to identify and share new moves that they notice in books.

Reading Like a Writing Teacher: Discovering Moves

"Reading like a writing teacher" is a term coined by Katie Wood Ray. In her book *What You Know by Heart: How to Develop Curriculum for Your Writing Workshop* (2002), Katie explains that teachers should be on the lookout for interesting sentences and paragraphs. She describes the world as being "full of writing that makes

us slam on our brakes when we're reading and think, *Ooo . . . look at that, I need to show that to my students. That's really good writing*" (90).

Reading like a writer is what I did as a child; reading like a writing teacher is what I do now. I cannot look at a website, commercial, article, novel, basal passage, or book jacket without eyeing a juicy sentence or detail that I feel I need to show my students. I joke with my husband that it is hard for me to read for pleasure because I have become consumed with looking at the moves that writers make: I don't want to miss anything that could be brought back into the classroom. Text is all around me with lessons and ideas that my students can integrate into their writing. Over the years, I started to catalog these different details. Sometimes, I would forget where they came from or mix up the titles. It started not to matter as much, though. Once I knew a move, I could easily search for it again. Writers use some of the same things—the same *moves*—over and over. If I couldn't find the move as I remembered it, I would sit and type up a paragraph to show the detail move I was thinking of. Then, I shared the found or created model with my students to give them access to that move so they could use it in their own writing. As my lists grew, I began organizing the moves by type. Just like I did with Judy Blume and Beverly Cleary, I started noticing some patterns that writers used.

For example, I noticed Judy Blume often relied on recounts of conversations, instead of the actual conversations, in her books. She didn't always use dialogue tags to tell readers what was said. Sometimes she just remembered the conversation for the read. In her classic, *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing,* Blume writes:

> *My father said he invited Mr. and Mrs. Yarby to stay with us. My mother wanted to know why they couldn't stay at a hotel like most people who come to New York. My father said that they could. But he didn't want them to. He thought they'd be more comfortable staying with us. My mother said that was about the silliest thing she'd ever heard. (2007, 8)*

This move became one of my details that talk. Writers didn't always have to replay a conversation with quotation marks at all.

In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll writes:

> *"What is the use of a book," thought Alice, "without pictures or conversations?"*
>
> *So she was considering, in her own mind (as well as she could, for the hot day made her feel very sleepy and stupid), whether the pleasure of making a daisy-chain would be worth the trouble of getting up and picking the daisies. (2015, 7)*

Carroll let the reader have a peek into the character's mind in two different ways. First, he offers what I call a *Thought Bubble*: he quotes the exact thinking of the character. Next, he switches tactics: he just explains what else the character is thinking. If he had shared Alice's thinking using direct quotations, this section would have been much clunkier, and the pace would have easily slowed.

In *The Giver*, Lois Lowry writes:

> *Instantly, obediently, Jonas dropped his bike on its side on the path behind his family's dwelling. (2014, 2)*

Lowry describes how Jonas drops the bike in a very specific way here. She offers the readers two adverbs before she names the character or the action. This move, used frequently by writers, helps to situate the action very specifically. The writer automatically knows the nature of the action before the rest of the sentence unfolds. This feels different than adding them after naming the subject or the verb in the sentence.

This is what I wanted for my students: to use details in their writing in a meaningful way that conveyed their ideas and their purpose. I knew that my students couldn't learn this from a bland assignment; they needed to learn from great writers. This obsession catapulted me into a summer of reading at the library. I sat in the children's section and pulled titles off the shelves. Once I had about twenty books, I found a quiet corner and read. When I saw a sentence or detail that appealed to me or stood out, I copied it down on a note card. Then, I moved to the nonfiction section of the library. My daily visits to the library resulted in an unwieldy stack of index cards. When I wasn't in the library, I was cutting out editorial columns and articles from any newspaper I could get my hands on, perusing first-year composition manuals, and stockpiling every magazine from *Time* to *Vogue*. I was building a collection of details.

To read like a writing teacher in a time of accountability also meant reading the types of essays that kids wrote for the standardized writing assessments with that same type of lens. Because most states post writing samples and exemplars from past writing tests online, it was easy for me to access tons of student writing samples. I started to browse different state websites and print out the papers that the states identified as exceeding the writing standard. I printed dozens of papers from fourth through eighth grade. I couldn't just limit my writers to the moves we found in books in our classroom: these essays offered direction and advice and were written in the same timed, highly rigid environment that my students would eventually need to perform well in. These students were, in fact, writers.

The Wall of Crazy: Naming the Moves

I wanted to notice what these writers did to elaborate and explain. I pulled out highlighters, and began underlining sentences that seemed particularly powerful. I spread the papers on my living room floor and walked around the carpet of paper I had created. There was a lot there. I couldn't possibly show my students each of these moves. We did have *every* other subject to cover as well! I decided to group the details into categories. I grabbed a pair of scissors and began cutting out the sentences that had been highlighted. My apartment was filled with shreds of

paper and cutouts. As I walked (and sometimes crawled) among the paper, I pulled out sentences that seemed to do the same thing; though the authors had written about something different, they relied on the same strategy.

I taped each sentence and note card onto the wall, creating different columns for each group. Slowly I added new categories and watched other categories grow longer. After days of work, I admired my wall of details and gave a name to each category. I had a column for moves that compared, moves that described, moves that showed action, and a wide variety of other moves. My wall may have looked crazy, but it reminded me of something that Barry Lane, author of *After the End* (1993), said at a conference I attended: we shouldn't give kids strict formulas that they have to follow; instead, we should show them all of the possibilities. My writers just needed to see the actual possibilities for their writing.

I decided to create minilessons around these different moves. Each lesson needed to be a sampling of a possibility that students could include in their writing. I decided that not only did I need to teach my students concrete, explicit moves, but they needed to talk about them, laugh about them, and have fun with them. They needed to feel that these moves were tools at their fingertips, and they needed to know how each tool worked and why they might choose to use it. I needed to make all of these writing possibilities available to my students.

In my classes, and in the classrooms of teachers whom I coach, I introduce a move by name. Then, I share examples of what that move looks like and give my students some fun ways to explore the move and give it a test-drive. As a class, we would look for these moves in real texts and begin to have intentional conversations about our craft. Our conversations were not just about the move itself, but how the move could help students do what they wanted in their writing. I wanted students not just to recognize details, but to see how different details could work for them. This made those seemingly abstract writing moves much more concrete. In *Comprehension Connections*, Tanny McGregor (2007) shares a conversation with Donna King, who describes reading comprehension as abstract. Donna says, "It's all so abstract to the kids. I always thought that kids learn best when it's concrete for them, at least at first" (xii). Donna nails it on the head, not just for reading, but writing as well. Writing is also extremely abstract. This list of explicit moves was tangible and explicit. This was concrete and real.

Teaching Details with Purpose

You don't have to build a wall of crazy like I did to discover the concrete moves for writing details: you are holding my collection in your hand. This book doesn't just represent the moves that I gleaned from those papers, news articles, books, and magazines, but it has been revised and revisited for more than a decade. I have added to the details, collected more examples of how writers use these moves, and deleted moves that seemed to confuse or fail kids over time. I have taught hundreds of teachers to use these moves successfully in grades K–8 and worked in

classrooms to do this with every grade level. I have been most excited to find that teachers with their own school-age children have used these strategies not only to teach their classes, but to help their own children craft essays for school, contests, and admissions into academic programs. It doesn't matter what program your school follows, you can benefit from these writing strategies because these do not replace curriculum, they augment it. This book is the writing wall from my living room, shrunk down and bound together. I hope you can take it, add to it, and make it your own. No scissors or tape required.

The writing lessons in this book are organized to quickly unpack the detail, explain when and why the strategy works well, share how I have taught it to my students in a way that emphasizes its effect on meaning in their writing, and offer ways to practice with your students and make these your own. Practice opportunities reinforce what the different detail moves do. The *Make It Your Own* ideas are methods to reinforce the different strategies in ways that are concrete but small and don't require writing a full essay or lengthy writing assignment. Once your students have practiced a strategy, they will be able to store it in their mental writing toolkits. This is where they pull from when they craft their own essays.

Throughout this book, I share excerpts of students' writing that use the different detail moves. These offer bite-size examples to help you conceptualize what each move might look like in different grade levels. These excerpts can even serve as examples to share with your students.

I'm proud of these lessons and the help that they've given students over the years. However, I want to be clear about what these lessons are *not*: they are not unit plans, curriculum, or a complete writing program. The resources and teaching ideas found here are not meant to be taught cover to cover, nor do they represent a particular scope and sequence for teaching details and elaboration. There are multiple ways to make the most of the teaching ideas and resources in this book. The three most common ways that I have noticed in schools are outlined below. Hopefully, one of these methods works for you and your writers.

1. Use this book to help you troubleshoot during writing conferences. When you conference with students and notice a weakness in a particular area, pull a detail lesson that you can use one-on-one with that student. For example, if that student keeps writing weak descriptions that continue to list or parrot your models, share some of the description moves in this book.
2. Treat this book as a go-to manual. When you plan your minilessons, pick and choose the moves that you want to teach your whole class. Read my teaching ideas, then plan the lesson to align with your writing program or curriculum. Integrate what you need, leave out what you don't. Check Chapter 7 for some example lesson clusters—groups of moves that address particular genres, writing traits, and situations.

3. If your school has adopted a commercial or scripted writing program, but students still don't fully develop their writing, pull the section you need from this toolkit and layer it on top. For example, most programs encourage students to elaborate their ideas and support their opinions. Rarely do these programs outline enough moves to actually do the elaboration and provide specific details; they just encourage students to add them. The minilessons here are designed to model explicit examples of different strategies. Pull specific moves from this book that make the instruction more concrete and provide a scaffold for students.

Of course, introducing a move once doesn't mean that students will automatically put a move to use in their own writing. See Chapter 7 for suggestions about how to help students not only remember the moves you teach but apply them when needed. If you've ever encountered a blank stare from a student when you've asked him or her to "include more detail" in a piece, you know that trying to help students can feel like an enormous task. It reminds me of a joke that one of my students, a delightful third grader named Kiyoko, once told me: "How do you eat an elephant?" she asked. I shrugged and told her that I didn't know. "One bite at a time!" She laughed and I did, too. Today Kiyoko is all grown up and probably doesn't remember this joke. I, on the other hand, kept that joke in mind. I have heard many variations of this saying over the past decade. Each time I hear it, I think about writing instruction. The ability to elaborate and craft rich details, whether students are writing over the course of weeks or in a timed setting, seems so big and wild, just like eating an elephant. To get really good at it, you have to just focus on one tiny part at a time. It is my hope that this book will help you to do just that.

Details THAT Dance

Showing Action and Sequencing Events

Ask anyone to tell you about their favorite novel and watch what happens. They will probably gush and tell you all of the memorable or important *events* that happened in the story. The heart of any story is the unfolding of events—the action.

Storytelling's commitment to action is why cliff-hangers and season finales on television are so engaging. Everyone wants to see what will happen. What will the stars of the show do? If I miss my favorite television show one week, I avoid social media or warn friends not to spoil the episode for me. I don't read text messages out of fear that someone will type one sentence that tells me what the characters *did*. The action is king.

Before readers ever meet Charlotte in E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web,* they read about Fern furiously trying to spare Wilbur's young life, by trying to wrestle the ax away from her father.

> *Tears ran down her cheeks and she took hold of the ax and tried to pull it out of her father's hand. (2012, 3)*

When readers talk about Louis Sachar's *Holes*, they most certainly tell of the Camp Green Lake boys digging giant holes, or Mr. Sir falling victim to the warden's poisonous nail polish.

> *Suddenly, Mr. Sir screamed and clutched his face with both hands. He let himself fall over, rolling off the hearth and on the rug. (2000, 89)*

Actions like these work collectively to build an engaging story, to draw us in, and to move characters from the paper into our hearts. When a reader finishes a memoir or reads the final chapter of a novel, the action stays with them.

Although the action is always front and center, good storytellers don't just string together series of subjects and verbs to propel the action forward. Skilled writers weave plots and scenes together in a wide variety of ways. Readers, often oblivious to this conscious, intentional development of action, simply enjoy being immersed in the story. As readers, we remember the action in the stories we enjoy. As writers,

students can make the action in their own memoirs, anecdotes, fictional stories, or accounts of events just as memorable by learning the behind-the-scenes moves of writing about action.

Details That Dance are the specific types of details that help writers to explain the action that takes place in a story. Many of the details focus on sentence structures and ways to organize and reveal action. *Details That Dance* are critical for writers who want the action to be front and center in their texts and want to invite readers along for the ride of unfolding their plots and storylines—they keep a story fresh and rich!

When Do Writers Make These Moves?

Authors use *Details That Dance* to show their characters' actions or to help move stories along from one event to the next. Typically, *Details That Dance* help to situate the way that characters or people move or take action. This could be as basic as one character waking up in the morning, or as complex as Cinderella running to beat the stroke of midnight, with pumpkins and mice transforming all around her. Questions that writers might ask themselves when thinking about this type of detail:

- How does this movement look, visually?
- What clues can I embed about this person or character as I show the action?
- Do I want this action to zoom by quickly or do I want it to be in slow motion?
- How do I want this action or movement to feel to readers?
- What senses do I want to rouse with this movement?
- Do I want to inform the reader of the action or just provide bread crumb clues?
- How can I connect one event to the next?

Modeling These Moves

The central requirement for effectively teaching any type of detail is to write with your students. As with each type of detail, always begin with your own writing so that students can have a peek into your own process. This helps to make the craft of writing more accessible and the skill more attainable for students.

To introduce *Details That Dance*, you will need to select two or three action movie trailers. Preview and select movies that are appropriate for your students. Use your knowledge of your class and the different personalities to choose something that will capture students' attention, while avoiding movies that your students are overly familiar with. You want them to watch what happens on the screen, not to reference the rest of the movie. For older students, I commonly show trailers for *Mission Impossible*, *Karate Kid*, or *Indiana Jones*. For younger students, I usually select trailers for older, classic, animated films.

I tell students that I need them to help me decide which movie I should watch tonight when I get home. Then, I show the class a set of movie trailers. I offer very little input as the trailers play, allowing students to react and respond to what they see. After each trailer has played, I invite students to tell me what they suggest for my movie night and why, asking them to name specific parts of the trailer that interested them. Students' responses typically reflect the action in the trailers.

After students have shared, I write the words *action verbs* in the center of a chart. I begin adding some of the different actions that students just shared (see Figure 3.1). I choose not to do this while they are sharing because I don't want to simply ask students to name actions—I want them to understand that most of the details they offered on their own were actions, even though I hadn't asked for actions specifically. I want students to see the power of action in their own perceptions of the trailers.

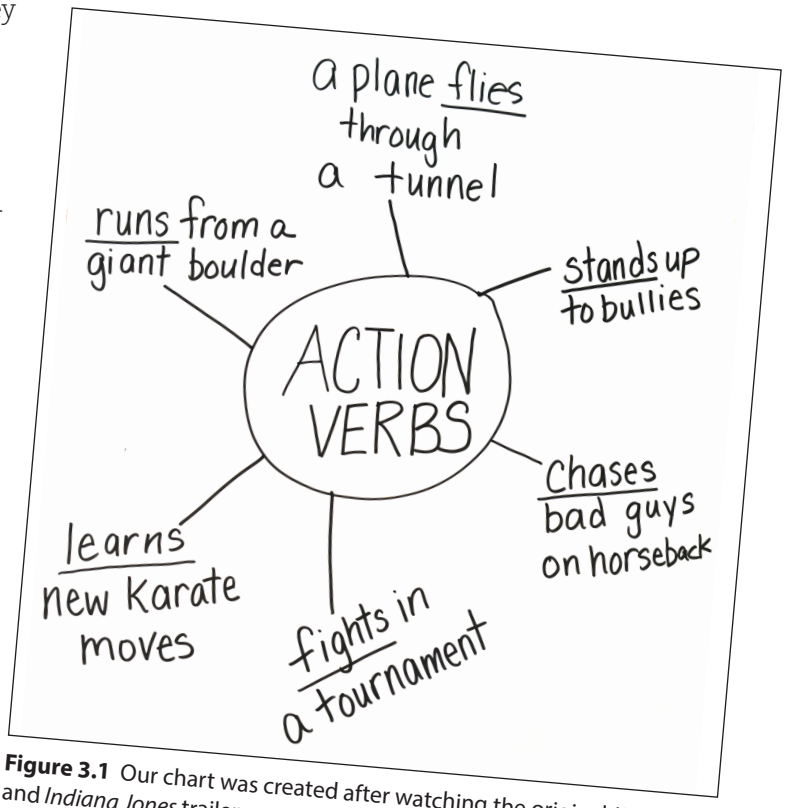

Figure 3.1 Our chart was created after watching the original *Karate Kid* and *Indiana Jones* trailers.

I explain that the action is the center of most stories, just like it is on our chart. At this point, the students are typically demanding to know which movie I plan to watch. I choose one and tell students that this whole activity has made me think about a new type of detail that we can use to make our storytelling come alive, too. Then, I explain that we should work on writing about our characters and the things that they do in a way that will keep our readers engaged. ***Guys, I think that we can be on the lookout for ways to organize how we share action in our own stories to make it interesting. Let's try it out! What if a character ran down the street? I could write:***

He ran down the street.

Does that show action? It does, but man is it boring. Why is he running? Does he feel good about this running? What does it look like when he runs? What is he trying to do? What if I tried something different, something more engaging like in our movie trailers? I write:

> Embarrassed, he ran down the dark street. *(EDs Up Front)*

What does that make you think? Does that make the action come a bit more alive? I continue to revise the original sentence in different ways. Common revisions are:

> He ran down the street, wondering if they were gaining on him. (*Act & Think*)
>
> He ran down the street hoping to catch up to the others. (*But, Why?*)

Finally, I tell students that we are going to study ways to share action in our stories. These types of details are called *Details That Dance*. As you'll notice in this book, I introduce new concepts first and then introduce the terminology or the name of the skill. I like to let students see the value in the upcoming lessons first and then, after they are hooked and interested, point out that this just happens to be what we will be learning. This makes engagement painless and results in students' buy-in early on.

Details That Dance: The Writing Moves

Each of the *Details That Dance* moves in this chapter is listed in the table that follows. When you read students' writing and notice different things that you would like for them to elaborate on or revise, this chart provides direction to help move students to consider different possibilities.

Details That Dance

If you see this in the student's writing . . .		Try this . . .
No context for events	⟩	*Act & Think* (page 65) *But, Why?* (page 68) *Time Marker* (page 71)
Lifeless writing/no voice	⟩	*Adverb Comma* (page 79) *INGs Up Front* (page 83) *EDs Up Front* (page 88) *Explain That Sound* (page 92)
Flat/one-dimensional characters	⟩	*Act & Think* (page 65) *INGs Up Front* (page 83) *EDs Up Front* (page 88)
Abundance of simple sentences	⟩	*Adverb Comma* (page 79) *INGs Up Front* (page 83) *EDs Up Front* (page 88)
Listing or naming actions	⟩	*Act & Think* (page 65) *INGs Up Front* (page 83) *Explain That Sound* (page 92)
No transitions between events	⟩	*Time Marker* (page 71) *Location Marker* (page 75)

This chart is a tool to help *students* think about different ways to use *Details That Dance* effectively in their writing. Based on student goals, this chart can direct students to some possibilities. This is not all inclusive and moves can be used to meet lots of different writing goals. This chart just offers a beginning set of possibilities.

Details That Dance

If you want to . . .	Try this . . .
Help readers understand when or why an action is happening	*Act & Think* *But, Why?* *Time Marker*
Add more of your personal voice and pizzazz to your writing	*Adverb Comma* *INGs Up Front* *EDs Up Front* *Explain That Sound*
Create realistic characters	*Act & Think* *INGs Up Front* *EDs Up Front*
Vary your type of sentences	*Adverb Comma* *INGs Up Front* *EDs Up Front*
Make the events come alive and stand out for your readers	*Act & Think* *INGs Up Front* *Explain That Sound*
Add transitions to sequence events	*Time Marker* *Location Marker*

Act & Think

This move shows a character moving through a scene while intentionally revealing his thoughts to the reader. This move is similar to both the *Details That Speak* move and the *Talking and Thinking* move. In both moves, writers share the thoughts of a character, but pair them with dialogue or action.

What Does This Move Look Like in Writing?

They met at the register. They walked past the man, cool, casual, not looking—("Don't look at him." Weasel had been firm about that)—though Mongoose mightily wanted to.

—*Jerry Spinelli, from* The Library Card

Yep, ***thought Flora,*** **that's me.** ***She bent her head and went back to reading about the amazing Incandesto.***

—*Kate DiCamillo, from* Flora and Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures

It happens to everyone, ***Tommy reminded himself as he kicked at a large brown stone.*** **At least in this century.**

—*Blue Balliett, from* Pieces and Players

Only ten million more to go, ***he thought, then placed the shovel back in the crack and jumped on it again.***

—*Louis Sachar, from* Holes

In this explicit type of thought revealing, the words *thinking* or *thought* are often present. It's also common for the ideas that are being thought to be isolated in quotations or italics. Each of these examples paints a picture of what the characters are doing, but also gives a peek into their personalities and attitudes toward their actions. Spinelli, for example, does this masterfully by creating a picture of Mongoose simply walking past a man. Yet, by revealing Mongoose's thinking, the reader is privy to possible intentions, prior conversations, and the character's own struggles not to look at the man.

When Writers Make This Move

Writers use this move to share the thoughts of a character without slowing down the action to speak directly to readers. The thoughts are embedded within the movement of the character. This move is also helpful when a character's actions don't show his or her true state of mind as well as for characters who are not likely to speak openly about their motives or who don't have another character to speak to. Narratives, memoirs, and accounts of events depend on this move to offer readers a more three-dimensional character.

How I Introduce This Move

1. I begin by pacing back and forth across the classroom.
2. After a few paces, I grab a marker and ask for volunteers to tell me what I was just doing. Then, I write one of their descriptions, such as:

   She walked back and forth.

3. I ask the students if this sentence is accurate and interesting. Immediately, most will agree that while it is accurate, it is not interesting.
4. I say to students, ***When an author wants to describe something that a character is doing that doesn't seem to be very exciting, the author can help us to see why the action is significant by pairing an action with the thoughts of the character(s). When you can see what a character is thinking, the action may become much more meaningful.*** Then, I revise my sentence to read:

   As she walked back and forth, she kept thinking to herself, *How bad could it be? She couldn't be in that much trouble.*

5. We talk about what we have learned about the character in this version, which pairs thinking and action. Students typically agree that this revision helps them to see *why* it matters to see a person pacing.
6. Then, I revise the sentence in a different way:

   She walked back and forth, thinking about how angry she was at him.

7. We discuss the differences between the two revisions. I point students to the idea that these sentences give clues about two very different types of thoughts and possible stories. Without the thoughts, the reader has nothing to go on, except for the actual movement.

8. I continue to revise the sentence, adding different thoughts and discussing the power of pairing action and thinking. Finally, I introduce the name of this writing move: *Act & Think*. We continue to talk about how this move can help build more well-rounded characters and make the actions more meaningful for the reader.

Guided Writing Practice Ideas

- Ask students to share a moment when they tried something for the first time. Encourage students to share their different events and how they felt. After a brief discussion, ask students to write about their moment, but to try out at least one *Act & Think* move in their accounts.
- Read an excerpt from a picture book where a character's emotions and feelings are obvious. Then, select a page and ask students to revise the text to include an *Act & Think* move to show the character's thinking. Great picture books for this include David Shannon's *A Bad Case of the Stripes* and Jacqueline Woodson's *The Other Side*. For more of a challenge, use a page from a novel. Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet* and Judy Blume's *Deenie* are great choices. Both main characters share their emotions quite openly and clearly, making it easy for students to consider what they may be thinking at different times in the novel.
- Write several directions on slips of paper: *jump*, *dance*, *slowly walk*, *cup your face*, and so on. Invite volunteers to pull a card and actually do what the card says. The rest of the class should only watch, not interact. Afterward, ask students to use the *Act & Think* move to make the actions come alive. Give them carte blanche to be creative and add thoughts that they think make sense. Share the sentences and point out how different they are.
- Show students a commercial or movie trailer that includes a lot of action. I usually go with the latest superhero or animated movie trailer that students are already familiar with. Then, ask students to tell what happened in the commercial or trailer, using the *Act & Think* move at least twice in their writing. Ask students to share their descriptions in small groups and discuss what this move helped them to accomplish. As a whole group, invite a volunteer from each group to share their writing with the class.