

Teaching Guide

About the Book

In *Word After Word After Word*, Ms. Mirabel, a visiting author, enchants a fourth-grade class as she teaches the students about writing and words. She speaks in hushed tones and laughs surprisingly. She wears feathers and pours dirt on the desk. Her lessons reach beyond words on paper. They gently and meaningfully change the way Lucy and her four friends handle the family dramas surfacing in their lives. This is an empowering story about the importance of discovering one's voice.

About the Author

Patricia MacLachlan is the bestselling author of many beloved books for young readers, including *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, winner of the Newbery Medal, and four other books in the Witting family saga. She is also the author of many timeless picture books, several of which she cowrote with her daughter, Emily. She lives with her husband and two border terriers in Williamsburg, Massachusetts.



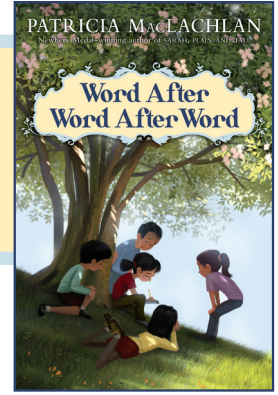
John MacLachlan

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think of yourself as a writer? Why or why not? If you do write, why do you write? If you don't write, what would make you start writing?
2. Ms. Mirabel says that writing is brave (page 114). What does she mean? Do you agree? Explain.
3. What do you think about Ms. Mirabel's explanation of how real and unreal are the same (pages 16, 94–98)?
4. Which poems and prose pieces in the story do you like? Why? Which ones do you *not* like? Why?
5. If Ms. Mirabel came to your class, what would you want to ask her? How do you imagine she might answer?
6. Do children know everything, as Lucy's mother says (page 63)? Explain.
7. May wonders why only mothers cry, and Evie says that fathers cry, too (page 123). Do only mothers cry? Explain. What does this story suggest about sadness and happiness?
8. How do Lucy, Evie, May, Henry, and Russell change by the end of the story? Do they all change in the same way? Explain.
9. In what way does this book change your thinking about words and writing? What do you think about the Joan Didion quotation at the beginning of the story?
10. Lucy says, "If this were a book, it wouldn't have an ending" (page 123). In what ways does this book continue on?

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Creative Writing Activities

1. **Be writers.** Ask your class to think about how the five main characters use their notebooks as writers. Then inspire your students to use writing notebooks for one week to jot down their thoughts about places, moments, characters, memories, stories, and poems. The following week, students should review their notebooks and choose something to expand or revise. As Ms. Mirabel does, hang up the writings in the classroom so that everyone can read and reread them.
2. **Where is your landscape?** Henry identifies the lilac bush as a landscape for him and his friends (page 75). Ask students to write about their landscapes. Welcome all kinds of writing—poetry, description, and stories.
3. **Be brave.** Just as Lucy is brave with her writing, encourage students to be brave in theirs. They could write about something that makes them vulnerable, such as fear or sadness. They could reveal something about themselves that is unknown to others. They could try out a new form of writing. Afterward, have students share and discuss their courageous words. How did it feel to take risks in writing? What did they learn? What helped them? Would they try it again?
4. **Write about words.** Ms. Mirabel instructs students to “go home and write me something about words” (page 100). As a class, discuss metaphors, similes, favorite words, and the power of words. Then give students Ms. Mirabel’s charge: Write something about words.

Extension Activities

1. **What you didn’t know.** Help students learn more about the grown-ups in their lives by guiding them through an interview process. Begin with a discussion about what Lucy and her friends learn about their parents. Then brainstorm a list of interesting questions children can use for their interviews. Questions might include: What did you and your friends like to do when you were my age? What places are important to you? How do you feel about writing? Wrap up the exercise by having students share with their peers something that they learned about the grown-up they interviewed.
2. **What whispers in your ear?** Ms. Mirabel tells the children that they don’t have to like everything she reads (page 30). Invite students to build on this critical reading and listening by creating a binder or bulletin board featuring examples of writing that students like and don’t like from books they read. Provide “Writing That Whispers in My Ear” and “Writing That Bothers My Ears” forms on which students can copy their selected passage, record where it was found, and explain why they did or didn’t like it.
3. **Visiting authors.** Enlist your students to act as visiting authors—just like Ms. Mirabel! In pairs or small groups, have students plan a lesson about writing and present their lesson to the class. After the presentations, lead a conversation about what students learned from one another.
4. **Picturing words.** Language is one way to communicate ideas and emotions; visual art is another. Provide students with art supplies that they can use to express their ideas and emotions about words, writing, and reading. Display the finished art and invite students’ comments, or as Ms. Mirabel says, “We will talk about what we like, and we will ask questions” (page 37).



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