
LESSON 17: ANALYZING LIKE A WRITER: Close Reading and Imitation

Supplies: writing notebook; writing utensil; four index cards (3x5 or larger); *The Seagull Reader: Essays*, p. 283 (“Letter to President Pierce”)

Goal: to gain additional strategies for learning how to write well; to learn the note card method for research papers

Suggested time: 4 sessions

Resources:

SESSION 1

Quote of the Day: “Read! Read! Read! And then read some more. When you find something that thrills you, take it apart paragraph by paragraph, line by line, word by word, to see what made it so wonderful. Then use those tricks the next time you write.”

--W.P. Kinsella, novelist and short story author (known best for *Shoeless Joe*)

Warm-up

In your notebook, warm up for your lesson by spending 10-15 minutes writing a journal entry on one of these three options:

1) Free-write: Remember the one rule—let your mind and hand relax, and just write without stopping to think until your time is up. Nonsense is okay. Self-censoring is not.

2) Choose a subject/topic of interest to you and write about it. Don't worry about making it a "complete" essay or even a neat and logical one. Just stay on the topic and explore.

3) Respond to this prompt: Write about a summer memory.

Introduction

In a writing course, teachers (like me!) often focus on what students need to do better if they want to become excellent writers. We pick and pull at student essays, critiquing them until students mold them into the best shape they can and polish them off with flawless proofreading and publishing. The students barely have a moment to enjoy the fruits of their hard labor—yep, I got an A!--before the teacher is at it again, picking and pulling at them to write yet another essay that is even better than the one before. In this way, of course, students develop their skills and sense of artistry. There is no more certain way to become a good writer than to write and revise *ad nauseum* and submit to yet more critical feedback that sometimes feels more like kicks to the gut than kindly help. (Remember when I told you about the editor who told me I had too much Disney in my writing? Yeah, big kick there.)

At least, that's the conventional wisdom. What teachers often forget, including myself at times, is that there is another important path to excellent writing. It can't replace the act of writing and receiving critical feedback, of course. Nope, that is a permanent part of every writer's growth; I don't care who you are. But learning how to write well doesn't always have to emphasize the negative—what you could do better, which is unfortunately always more glaring than what you did beautifully. (Wait until I start scoring your rubrics on your essays in unit 5, and you'll see what I mean. Nobody escapes! Writing is not for the faint-of-heart, let me tell you.) Along with the sweat-soaked method of writing instruction, we teachers must also remember that it's important for students to spend time with the happier method of basking in the beauty

and excellence of great literature. It's also important for them to study the art of writing, in other words, by considering and imitating what other writers do so well. By doing so, they can learn how to improve their own writing.

This lesson is not about why you should take a literature course or why you should read a lot, however. I have already touched on the answers to those questions, but in case you've forgotten, let's review before taking this subject any further. We study literature in school primarily because it is part of a liberal arts education, which is a broad kind of education that prepares you for the rigors of higher education (college, trade school, etc.). All of the arts have an important role to play in the human experience, in our cultural knowledge, and in the formation of both our minds and hearts, so a good liberal education includes them. We need to read a lot of good literature for several reasons:

- 1) because it helps us expand our understanding and vision of life;
- 2) expands and develops our minds;
- 3) enables us to become part of the "Great Conversation" of the ages, in which we can both receive and contribute ideas.

To specifically help us become good writers, though, studying great literature can help us understand exactly how a writer communicated his ideas or tale so well. Sure, we can also read terrible literature and examine its failings. This is a good idea on occasion and usually quite entertaining; however, you will get much more value out of reading the good stuff. In this kind of study, *what* the writer said isn't as important as *the way* he or she said it. By studying the masters and what they did right, we can apply what we learn to our own writing.

We can approach this kind of writing analysis in at least two ways: close reading and analytical imitation. In this lesson I will explain each of them and talk about how you, a busy and overworked student who may be more interested in other subjects, can use them in ways that are meaningful to you.

Lesson, part 1: Close Reading

In high school and college literature classes, literary analysis is usually a key part of a teacher's curriculum. Much of the class's purpose is to introduce students to important works and to teach them how to read and discuss them deeply. Writers seeking to improve their own writing read with similar depth but with more attention on the author's craft. Whereas literary analysis asks questions like this...

- What are the major and minor themes in this work?
- What are the key conflicts in the plot?
- How does the protagonist change over the course of the story?
- What is the author's thesis and how does he develop it?
- How does the author use symbolism in the text to convey her view of humanity?

...close reading for writing instruction looks more like this:

- How does author use the build suspense to make the climax so shocking?
- Why did the author use this unusual word instead of a more common word in this sentence?
- Why did the author use the sonnet form for this poem, and how did it enhance the ideas he wanted to convey?
- How did using an inverted sentence structure in the last sentence enable the writer to make the ending of the biography more powerful?
- How did the author use language to make this scene move more quickly than the previous one?
- Why did the author reveal the solution to the mystery at the beginning of the story, and was it more effective than placing it at the end?

Of course, many of these questions will be useful in both literature classes and writing classes, but notice that the questions that will be most useful to a writer focus on the author's craft and artistic choices.

You can practice close reading in two ways in order to improve your writing skills: by participating in a critique group and by reading like a writer. The latter is more essential, in my opinion; however, both will push you towards excellence in your own writing. They just approach it from different directions.

CRITIQUE GROUPS: Many, many serious writers (both published and unpublished) belong to critique groups. I am a member of one myself. Through a critique group, writers can receive support from other writers and also give support in return. Everyone in a critique group is in the same boat. Members may be at different levels in terms of skill, talent, and artistry, but all of them are working towards excellence and, ultimately, publication. Even published authors often belong to critique groups!

Critique groups can have different formats and procedures, but in my experience every member typically brings a selection of his or her writing to read to the rest of the group. During each reading, the other members listen intently, often following along on a copy provided by the reader. They may jot down questions and comments or circle problematic sentences, but the most important thing is that they consider the selection carefully as they listen. After the reading, the writer sits quietly and allows the other members to take turns sharing their responses on the selection. When done right, the other members will offer compliments on the selection's strengths, as well as thoughts on how the selection could be improved. It is important that both compliments and criticisms be specific, so that the writer can understand how to improve the selection. Feedback like "Great job!" or "Needs work" isn't helpful.

The benefit of listening to other members read their work is nearly as great as receiving feedback yourself. By listening to the way other writers express themselves and by examining their work critically, each writer can learn from the strengths and weaknesses of their peers. For example, if a writer has been told that his writing is too sappy to take seriously, he may not be able to see why sappiness is a problem until he

sees it in the writing of someone else. Or perhaps a writer has been struggling with trying to explain something in a clear and methodical way, until she notices how another member of the group effectively handles a similar issue.

But how can you benefit from critique groups as a student? If you are not interested in writing professionally, it probably isn't worthwhile to join a critique group like I described above. You can, however, adapt the idea to a study-group format. If you have classmates who want to write the best essays and papers they can for any classes they take, you might form a study group that meets regularly. A part of the time you spend in the group might be dedicated to "peer editing," which is the more common term for this activity in school. During this time you would share some of your writing, either aloud or just on paper/digital copies, and both give and receive feedback. By doing so, you will gain a great deal of insight about how to develop your own writing skills. Even better, it will help you get better grades!

READING LIKE A WRITER: Examining the works of great writers calls on all your powers of observation, because you can't analyze great writing until you notice great writing. If you continually practice *seeing* the world around you and engaging in active reading, you will be in a good position to notice the techniques and artistry of the authors you read.

I would be willing to bet that you have read a lot of fiction and non-fiction literature by now—novels, short stories, informational texts, biographies, plays, poems, articles, essays, and more. Even if you have not put much effort into active reading, you have probably had plenty of thoughts and insights about most of what you've read and know why you liked or disliked it. If I asked you to tell me about your favorite book, for example, you could probably explain why it was your favorite. You may not know all the right literary terms and I might have to push your thinking deeper than "It's really exciting" or "It was so beautiful," but you have your reasons.

Close reading is all about actively noticing an author’s craft and artistic choices. It is similar to giving feedback in critique groups in that you are examining the literature closely; however, with close reading you may examine the literature by yourself, and you are not looking for strengths and weaknesses. Instead you are starting from the premise that the writing is high-quality, and your goal is to understand why so that you can learn from it.

Some writers take this goal so seriously that they not only do the obvious activities to reach it—such as annotate, take notes, practice an author’s technique, ask questions and seeking answers, and so on. They also do things like take special classes and cut books apart in order to better examine them. (And I mean literally, as in with scissors!) Close reading like this—scrutinizing each word, sentence, paragraph, chapter, and overall structure—is almost like taking a master class from the author himself. Can you start from the premise that it is trash and study it to determine why the writing is so bad? Of course! As I mentioned earlier, this can be instructive, too, as well as a lot of fun. Studying the masters is a much surer route to your goals, though.

As with critique groups, it may not be practical for you to “read like a writer” at the intense level of some ambitious writers. You can, however, establish the habit of trying to notice how an author achieves certain things in a literary work. If you find yourself enjoying a book or short piece, take your active reading to another level by not merely observing how good the writing is and making annotations, but also by paying attention to *why* it is good and including that in your annotations and notes—or at least in the file drawers in your head!

For example, my favorite novel is *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. I reread this book every few years. I can respond to it on an emotional level all I want, and I can make annotations to make sure that my thoughts and key plot points don’t get tangled up. But if I want to understand why Betty Smith’s writing intrigues me so much that I read this novel every few years, then I need to start paying attention to her technique. What

does she do to engage me that deeply? Why is the book far, far better in novel form than it ever could be in a movie? How does her writing fascinate me, even though she uses minute detail extensively (something that would normally bore me)? And how can I use her skill to improve my own work? Until I allow myself to go this deeply into her work, I can't fully learn all she has to teach me about writing.

SESSION 2

Lesson, part 2: Analytical Imitation

Everyone has heard of him—the famous early American, Benjamin Franklin. He is so famous, in fact, that he has become part of our cultural consciousness. Not only was a discount store chain and a stove named after him, his picture is even on our hundred-dollar bill! He is also the only person to sign *all three* of our country's founding documents. Ben has many other claims to fame, too. He started businesses, created a lending library, invented new products, served as a soldier, traveled abroad, and wooed women. As important as he is to our history, however, you may not know that he is also considered an American literary light known for his writing.

Not only did he help draft our country's founding documents, he also published one of the first monthly American magazines: *The General Magazine and Historical Chronicle for all the British Plantations in America* (first issue, 1741). Other publications included pamphlets and articles, a book called *Father Abraham's Sermons* (now called *The Way to Wealth*), and *Poor Richard's Almanack*, an annual trove of lore, entertainment, practical information, and wisdom that he published (but didn't write all the content for) from 1732-1758.

And all this from a man who hardly had any formal education! In fact, Benjamin Franklin was criticized for his poor writing at one point, so he actually *taught himself* to write. He did this in the only way available to those without a teacher or textbook—

through plentiful reading, lots of writing, attentiveness to feedback, and analytical imitation (which is my term, not his). Let's let him tell about his methods in his own words from the early pages of his autobiography:

END OF SAMPLE