

Title:

How To Read When You're Writing

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856

Summary:

Many writers say it: "I don't read when I'm writing". They think it will contaminate their voice, that whatever style they're reading will somehow seep into their work and it really won't be theirs. That's only a problem if you're writing a 21st-century urban romance and last night's reading of *Pride and Prejudice* has you making your characters sound like they're in an English drawing room and not a Miami nightclub!

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Keywords:

Article Body:

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In fact, if you're not reading while you're working on your book, you're missing out on the many ways you can learn from authors past and present who have dealt with the very same issues you're struggling with. I once heard that if a writer is stuck or has writer's block, it's because he or she hasn't done their homework, and for a writer homework is reading. But how do you know what to read and how to make use of it? Here are 4 easy tips to getting the most out of your reading.

Identify the Strategies/Techniques You're Using in Your Book

Take out your book's outline (or notes or whatever pages you have written so far) and highlight the writer's tools you are using. Now you may not see them as tools. For instance, your character is sitting in a car and she's having a memory of a car accident that happened when she was little and you tell the

story of the accident. That's a flashback. Maybe you used internal dialogue, maybe you're telling your novel in the 2nd person voice or your whole book is historical fiction so getting the setting right is crucial. Once you've identified your main tools, ask yourself, "What tool do I want help with the most?" Then...

Find Books in Which the Author Has Used a Similar Technique

Sometimes the right book will come to you automatically. Writing in the 2nd person voice? Then Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* comes to mind. It's a great example of a strategy that's very tricky to pull off. I would definitely want to read it if I wanted to be as effective as he was with his novel. Great examples of historical fiction include *The Known World* by Edward P. Jones and anything by Toni Morrison. When I was learning how to use flashbacks effectively in my novel I re-read Pat Conroy's *The Prince of Tides* and *The Mourner's Bench* by Susan Dodd. Ideally as a writer you are reading extensively and the books that come to mind for you will be ones you have already enjoyed and know well. If you need a few ideas you can try referring to a compilation such as *Book Lust* by Nancy Pearl where you can find books listed and discussed by their characteristics.

What's the Best Way for You to Learn From What You're Reading?

Ask yourself this question to help you develop a way to work with what you're learning from the book you're reading. It may be a matter of taking a few notes on the types of words the author uses or the kinds of details he or she uses to create an effective scene setter. Or it could be more complicated. When I was learning about flashbacks, I was trying to figure out how long you could keep the reader in the past without losing the tension in the present day storyline. So I took *The Prince of Tides* and did a rough outline of it, counting out how many chapters and how many pages Mr. Conroy devoted to his past and present day story lines. I also noted what the reader learned or what was revealed in each chapter so I could get a sense of how he paced the book. That's just what made sense to me--to create a visual that could help me grasp the whole book. What would help you best understand what a writer has done? This is important because it will help you with the last tip...

No Beating Yourself Up!

Reading is NOT helpful if you spend your time marveling at how good an author is and how you "could never do that." Focusing on reading critically and understanding the craft will keep you in the mindset of being a writer trying to learn from another writer. You'll soon see that reading the book of a great

author is kind of like examining a designer gown. If you look closely you'll see the gown has seams just like any other dress--it's just that the stitches are smaller and the workmanship impeccable so the seams aren't as evident. As you read you too will see the workmanship behind the art and allow yourself the opportunity to improve your workmanship likewise. And while it's still possible you "could never do that", I can tell you for certain you will "never do that" if you don't practice and keep writing!

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