



Before College Comes Craft

Unit 1: Learn to Write Like a Writer

Lesson 2: Analyzing Like a Writer—Close Reading and Imitation

The Denim Beret
writing and literature
for teens

Supplies: writing notebook; reading notebook (or the reading section in your writing notebook); writing utensil; *The Seagull Reader: Essays*; lesson 2 worksheet

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

Suggested time: 6 sessions

Resources: *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, by Benjamin Franklin

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. Students have little chance to enjoy the fruits of their hard labor before the teacher is at it again, expecting them to write another essay that is even better. This is how students develop their skills and sense of artistry, of course. This is how every artist improves, no matter which art they pursue and no matter how much instructor feedback feels more like a kick to the gut than kindly help.

Such an approach can sometimes feel overly negative, and it can get discouraging. I remember that during my years as a ballet student, my teachers gave my class criticisms far more often than compliments. In fact, they yelled at us constantly! We were all used to it, because our school was serious, focused on training future ballerinas. Still, the occasional compliment meant a lot to us, and we enjoyed watching professional ballerinas because they were examples of what we aspired to. They had achieved excellence.

Sometimes, then, it's important to focus on the positive in both ourselves and in writers who have "made it." You will always get the "constructive" feedback (read: usually negative), and you will always get more of it than compliments. That is true for nearly every writer everywhere. (Wait until I start scoring your rubrics on your essays in unit 3, and you'll see what I mean. Nobody escapes!) But you must also spend time basking in the beauty and excellence of great literature. By studying and imitating what other writers do well, you can keep improving.

This lesson is not about why you should take a literature course or why you should read a lot, however. It is important to do so, of course, for several reasons. All 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 quality liberal education includes them. Reading great literature also allows us to become part of the "Great Conversation" of the ages, in which we can both receive ideas from the great thinkers who came before us and contribute ideas to that conversation.

To help us become good writers, though, studying great literature can help us understand exactly how a writer communicated his ideas or tale so well. When studied from a student writers perspective, then, *what* writers say isn't as important as *the way* they say it. By considering 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, can use them in meaningful ways.

Lesson, part 1: Close Reading

In literature classes, literary analysis typically plays a central role. This is because the main reason for literature classes is to introduce students to important works and to learn how to experience them in depth. Writers seeking to improve their own writing also read in depth but with more focus 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?

...writing students might ask questions 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 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?

Although literature students might ask the above questions, too, they are more focused on the author's craft than the story itself.

To analyze a literary work effectively, you will need to do "close reading," which means examining the literature in detail. You can practice close reading by participating in a critique group and by reading like a writer. The latter is more valuable for students; however, both will push you towards excellence in your own writing.

CRITIQUE GROUPS: Many writers—both published and unpublished--belong to critique groups, including myself. In a critique group writers can both give and receive support from other writers. Members may have different levels of skill and talent, but all of them are trying to become better writers.

Critique groups can have different procedures, but in my experience the members each bring a selection of writing to share with the group. As each member reads, the other members

listen intently, often following along on a copy and annotating it in pen. After the reading, the writer listens to the other members share their reactions—first what they liked about it and then what they think could be improved. It is important that both compliments and criticisms be specific. 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 a tendency towards melodrama, he may not be able to see why melodrama is a problem until he observes it in someone else’s writing.

If you are not interested in writing professionally, it probably isn’t worthwhile to join a critique group like I described above, because the goal of such groups is publication. You can, however, adapt the idea to a study-group format to help you and your classmates complete writing assignments to the best of your ability. I was part of a study group like this for one of my college writing classes, and I found it helpful. The main difference, as I recall, is that we circulated each other’s papers, reading and annotating them silently. Then we discussed them as needed. If you meet with your group regularly, you will gain much insight about how to develop your own writing skills; plus, you will improve your grades.

CLOSE READING: Examining the works of great writers calls on all your powers of observation. If you continually practice paying attention to the world around you and engaging in active reading, you will be in a good position to observe the techniques and artistry of the authors you read.

By this point in your education, you have probably read a lot of literature -- novels, short stories, informational texts, biographies, plays, poems, articles, essays, and more. Even if you have not done much active reading, you have probably had many thoughts and insights about what you’ve read. 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 relevant literary terms and may struggle to articulate your thoughts, but your opinions are there.

“Close reading” is all about intentionally noticing an author’s craft and artistic choices. As in critique groups, you must examine the literature carefully; however, with close reading you may do it alone and are not looking for strengths and weaknesses. Instead you must start from the assumption that the writing is excellent, 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 read actively (i.e., annotate, take notes, practice a technique, etc.). They also do extension activities, such as taking special

classes and cutting books apart in order to understand them better. (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! This can be instructive, too, as well as fun. Studying the masters is a much surer route to your goals, though.

It may not be practical for you to study as some serious writers. You can, however, pay attention to *how* an author achieves excellence—because it wasn't by accident! If you enjoy a story or poem, ask yourself why it's so good and take some notes on what you observe. Then apply what you learn to your own 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 \$100 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 known for his writing.

Not only did he help draft our country's founding documents, he also published one of the first monthly magazines. Other publications included pamphlets, articles, and a book, and he also published (but didn't write all the content for) an annual periodical called *Poor Richard's Almanack* 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 (my term, not his). He discusses his study methods in the early pages of his autobiography:...

End of Sample