

Learning to Write from the Masters



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from the Inside-Out

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Dear Writer,

I don't know if it is possible to be more excited about writing than I am at the moment, sharing with you in this third eBook some techniques for improving awareness of form and enhancing your prose style.

The first two eBooks in this series demonstrated some very simple and spare techniques that shift one's attitude and can make a huge difference.

One problem, though, is that they are so easy and spare that it might be difficult to believe how powerful they are if used consistently. It is entirely possible that you read it, "got the idea," and then made some mental note that "that looks good," and then moved on.

And if so, it's probably because you are like me: the mind is really conditioned, and also strangely attracted to, difficult hard work. Even if I don't always like hard work, my mind seems to be convinced by it. So if I am shown some simple and easy things, I'm not going to bite so easy. I'm not going to put them to the test because it's way easier

for me to believe in things that are more worky work type, effortful things.

Looking for worky work? Well now we've got it!

The technique here is something you can really sink your teeth into. You can work at it and get results that match your efforts. It is a specific technique, with specific steps, that you carry out and then reap the effects of. It is also totally believable—when you see it you won't doubt if it will work. And if you have that kind of streak—and who doesn't in academia?—that really wants to dig in and work hard and turn things around, then this is for you.

It's a favorite exercise among my students, and there is a lot of depth and meaning to it. Besides the actual technique itself, presenting it here also gives me a concrete way to talk to you about an attentional shift that is very important to understanding your writing instrument (you). And that is to see it (your writing instrument, aka you) as a changing form of causes and conditions, into which you can intervene with strategically chosen causes and conditions. This is at the heart of the skillfulness that leads to creative productivity.

Wishing you all the best,

Alan

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

Have you ever spent some time reading a book and then gone to write and found that your writing, after that, sounds and feels just like that author's prose?

Somehow, we take other peoples' language into ourselves, and then it also comes out from us. No doubt this process is native to learning language, which is what we are all doing, all the time.

Knowing this, it makes sense to in-take the best writing possible so that what comes out of us on the other end—

ew, that didn't sound great, but you know what I mean—

is the best it can be.

Why inundate ourselves with awful prose if it is going to

influence how we write in a consequently awful way?

Well, there are lots of reasons. Like, it was assigned reading. Assigned to us, or, even more dreadful, we assigned it ourselves. Or it is required reading in the subject we are addressing, or reviewers put a gun to our heads and said—address this muckity muck or we won't publish you. Not only that, but we'll subtract one publication from your CV!

So, we aspiring great academic writers often find ourselves imbibing copious quantities of dry, awkward, flat, and joyless prose. And we have been doing it for a long, long time.

Should it be a surprise if, on occasion, we feel uninspired to write, or feel disappointed in the quality of our output when we do?

Look at what we have been putting in!

When I was writing my dissertation, I placed a pretty strict rule over my drafting process, and I encourage any one who can to keep as strictly to this rule as possible:

While on a writing stint, read only great prose.

During the bulk of my dissertation first drafting, I

limited my diet strictly to three authors: Hemmingway, Faulkner (further limited to *Light in August* only), and Morrison, each for a unique reason.

Hemmingway, which I recommend to ALL academics, because it washes out abstraction and just about everything else. It's plain, minimal. It isn't even "concrete" as opposed to abstract because it's not particularly sensual. It is plain yet artful and everything academic prose is not. But maybe you can't stomach things like hunting animals or fretting about what it means to be a real man—I get you—but you can't beat Hemmingway as a perfect antidote for most academic writing ailments. Luckily, if you're allergic to Hemmingway, you can substitute Raymond Carver. Or double them on each other and take liberal, daily doses for... like, ever.

Faulkner in his less wild moments is so supremely indulgent in language that he provides a counter to Hemmingway and at the same time some of the more sensual and descriptive elements of prose which can liven up flat language and make academic writing more compelling. I think it was John Gardner who said something like "Read as much Faulkner as you can, then wash it out with Hemmingway." Many of us could use a bit

of Faulkner lingering in us, myself included, as we could stand to be more descriptively vivid in our work.

And Toni Morrison I added in for a variety of reasons, mostly the sheer elegance of prose but also the seamless and yet complex constructions of her narrative arcs that are absolutely and inextricably tied to the rhythms in her language—see *Jazz* for example, where she very much focuses on rhythmic prose as well as winding, almost improvisational narrative riffs—very different than the more Bach-like fugues in Faulkner's *Light in August*.

So the authors might vary, but the point is that it was not random choices. I had specific ideas in mind of what I needed, what I wanted to emphasize. And what I wanted to avoid.

And instead of trying to go ahead and deliberately make that happen in my writing, I used this other route: which is instead to absorb what I wanted into myself.

Of course all the while also consciously excluding everything else, especially dry and dull writing.

Now what is so great about absorbing these influences is that little can go wrong like it can with consciously programming your prose in a certain way. For example, you can decide that you need to be more descriptive, but

then get really wordy and wind up boring people to death or just being awkward and forced. Now, of course we absolutely should have some conscious plans to develop our work in a certain way. I'm just saying it comes with risks and consequences.

But when we influence ourselves, what comes out has far less chance of being stilted or out of place or misfired.

Of course, simply reading good writing may not sound like it is enough. And you can certainly do more focused techniques to create this effect (that is the point of this eBook).

But before we poo-poo the power of reading, let's get clearer about this:

What if...

You practiced total abstinence on reading dry, dull prose. Total.

What if...

You only read your one or two or three very carefully chosen and very powerful authors. No other reading.

What if you read a lot of this stuff, every day, for quite a while?

This is a training, a discipline. If you really stuck to it, it has got to have an impact. But, you have to try it and see. We can't assume we know what will happen without trying it.

On the other hand, probably we can already assume that what we are as writers is a conglomeration of causes and conditionings and influences that is manifesting its effects from moment to moment. Therefore, shaping these influences is going to have causal effects. It has to.

But now, what if we took it even further?

What follows is an extremely useful exercise. It is one of the best ones I know. It is always a favorite of my students.

Not only is it a very powerful way to absorb prose and form into oneself (so powerful in fact that you need to choose wisely how you use it), but it is a huge productivity booster as well. If you practice this regularly, prose will flow out of your veins. It's just as good as a regular writing

habit, and you can build such a habit on this foundation. Moreover, it doubles with this prose-absorption effect.

Do it early and often.

In its all its variants this exercise can be said to be as old as the teaching of writing itself.

I call it “Emulation,” which sounds like “imitation” and also kind of like “simulation,” and it is both of these things.

EMULATION

What You Will Need:

- One sample of writing from a master writer
- choose wisely! (see below)
- photocopied, electronic or original
- about 2-3 pages or so (length can vary, but this is a good length for the first time)

Notebook or Laptop

The first time, I highly recommend doing the exercise

exactly as explained without skipping any steps.

Step 1. Copywork

Copy the text out, word for word, exactly like the original. That's right, either in your own hand, or typing it out, write the exact same text as your Master did. If reading is a way to absorb language into your writing instrument (you), then imagine what writing it out is like. Actually step one here is an exercise all by itself that deserves it's own eBook all to itself. This is the classical method of education, with Greek roots in the writing gymnastia. I am old enough to have been exposed a little bit to this technique in grade school. But it's mostly gone now—because of a misguided understanding of what being original and creative is. My kids don't get this in their public school.

I remember kind of hating it, to tell the truth, copying stuff out. But mostly because the teacher always gave it to us to do right before recess saying you can go play when you are done. Copywork was always what was standing between me and play. So I guess I am super lucky that I found my way back to it, mostly by reading lots of books by

great writers and seeing how much imitation figured in all of their development.

So yes, copy it out, all two pages or more. And while you are doing so, to enhance the effect and get the most out of it...

Use Proper Exercise Form

Practice with holding as much as possible in your memory—that is, don't look at the text and see two words, write them, and then look back for another two, etc. Try and get big chunks of language into your short term memory and then write them out. And don't make mistakes. No mistakes. Memorize it perfectly and write it out perfectly.

Well, that's the exercise. You are training and that is what you are shooting for. When training in anything you can go through the motions or push yourself a bit. And this is a training. So the pushing yourself a bit is in holding long strings of prose in memory and copying it out perfectly, as much as possible. The more you practice this exercise the better you will get at the memory part, and also the deeper the effects will be lodged into you.

Note that these effects are not only about getting the

master prose lodged in your soul—you are also increasing your capacity to cue up and deliver your own sentences, thoughts and ideas. Just a few weeks of training like this, a few times a week, and you'll find yourself at the keyboard just flying, fingers flailing away desperately to keep up with the artful sentences, rolling out fully formed from your mind.

So, do your copywork, and do it well.

Choosing

And, of course, choose wisely—because this copywork is going to be hugely influential to your prose not to mention it is used in the next step in the exercise, which is just as influential. If you want to influence your prose think strategically—who do you wish you wrote more like? Do you need to get shorter sentences or longer? Do you have a problem with being clear about what you are saying? Choose antidotes. Other times, play to your strengths.

Chose writing you admire, you love, writing you wish you could do, and/or just writing you feel would be a good

influence on you.

Maybe you tend to write overly complicated sentences... maybe your sentences are too simple and unvaried. Or maybe you want to get a first hand feel for how theory and source material can be interwoven successfully. It could be literally anything. You can literally move your writing in any direction whatsoever with this exercise.

Of course this is all a matter of taste. In my classes I have seen some students who wanted to get a bit more lively with their writing style, and were, say, also kind of abstruse and overly complex in their writing, and then they brought in these Masters' samples and I was like (silently) "Really? You're choosing *that*?" and it's some very brainy abstract theoretical exegesis which, however famous and popular and applauded and smart, is hardly the antidote to that student's problems. But hey—it's a personal taste and judgment—and maybe it's playing to the student's strength, or maybe this wild abstruseness in the student can be tamed by being paired with a writer of similar temperament who has tamed their demon and made it their saint.

So I bring this up not to say that I or anyone else knows what is good and what you should choose—I don't know that—but just to remind you to choose carefully. As long as you choose well, choose writing that you feel is good, then you will get the effects.

Because as you will see, we are going to take it further in step 2:

Step 2. Emulation

Now you are going to copy it again, but with a big difference. Now you will go through it sentence by sentence and the exercise is: to put YOUR content into the master's form.

That content would probably best be something you are interested in, such as the subject of your article, book, or dissertation. Go through the text line by line, changing it into a text about your topic, but written the same way, with the same form.

Let me explain.

So, if the first sentence is a quote from a major theorist, then in your version the first sentence will also be a quote from a theorist, only a different one of your

choosing. If the second sentence further explains what the theorist meant, then you explain what your quote means. If the second sentence immediately disagrees with, trashes and flails that theorist, then this is what you will do. If it begs to differ, you beg to differ.

If instead the piece starts with the presentation of an anecdote from first person observation, then you do the same. You can also make up an imaginary context or imaginary content if you have no experience or anecdotes of your own, in almost as many sentences.

You go through the whole selection like this, substituting content while preserving form.

When there is a long sentence making a complex theoretical assertion, then you make a long sentence like that. Description, analysis, interpretation, argument, quote: do it just the same as the original, but the content is all about your topic, your research, your issue, your theorists, your thought, etc.

WARNING!

But remember-- and this is super important for this exercise-- there has to be a lot of give and take and free play here. Being too exact may or may not work. Ease up if

you are experiencing the exercise like a really difficult puzzle. Just be more sloppy and forgiving about the fit. Don't try to "get it right." Be flexible and improvisational, this way or that. For instance, your idea that you are trying to express accurately and to reflect what you actually think: it might have to be sacrificed, changed, altered, for getting it to fit into the form. Or, fitting it into the form might have to be sacrificed a bit for staying true. It's give and take, and it's play, and it's merely practice and training.

Some texts you select will be very easy to perform this operation on, some will be impossible. Some you will stick very close formally to the text, even preserving the number and length of the sentences, and some will be far looser. And it can change within a single text.

If you are getting bogged down and can't seem to "get it right," you either need a new text or you need to do it a little looser. But whether you are following closely, or doing some processing and fudging: either way is just as good. All kinds of neurons are firing when you are doing the fudging, too. You are benefiting either way, and no way is better than another. Do it lots of ways. Lots of times. Emulation is amazing.

Rinse. Repeat. Do this with lots of different texts. There is just no limit to what you can accomplish with this technique.

Want to write an article for *Southeast Arctic Pebble Sedimentation Quarterly*? Get some examples out of the journal and run emulations on them. Then you'll really know what you are doing.

But remember to be careful: you are what you eat! This is powerful magic, and I recommend you use it mostly for the betterment of your art and craft. Run this ritual too many times on winning grant proposals and you may make money—but consider the cost!

And if you get bored with emulation or copywork, don't do it. Put it aside and do something else if it strikes you. You can also do mini versions, or, and I've never tried this myself nor have my students to my knowledge-- super long versions.

I challenge you to do this exercise: do part one, copywork, and part two, emulation, just one time each,

and not become a much better writer! No one can do it. Everyone improves. Every single one. You will too, for sure.

If I charged you anything for this book, I would give you your money back if you did not improve. But since I didn't ask anything I can't give you a money back guarantee on this.

Simply no one can fail to improve.

Even doing it one time alters your career for the better. And the more you do it, the more you improve, grow, develop as a writer.

And it can be done in groups. Chain emulations is an exercise students enjoy very much—emulations of emulations of emulations. Besides the great energy of writing unleashed in the group experience, there is a tremendous communication of all kinds of ideas, concepts, forms, prose styles and other surprises that are born in writing groups. This is certainly one of the many activities we can be doing at Academic Muse on the more creative end of things (remember, the upcoming Get It Done writing bootcamp can't spend too much time on these things, by definition: we are getting our work done!).

AWARENESS OF FORM

I challenge you to do techniques number one and two several times and then declare that your perception of form and structure is not enhanced, that you do not see and read like a writer. Just try it and see.

When we read as consumers of writing, as readers, which is how we usually read as academics in seminars, on our own, etc., a considerable balance of our attention is on content. We are trying to understand what the writer is saying. We are interested in what they are saying or describing. We are getting ready to talk about this with others. The emphasis is habitually on content.

In this exercise, we strongly twist that balance in the other direction. We are seeing long sentences and short sentences. We are seeing the distribution of theory, description, interpretation. We are seeing sentence construction, to name a but a few things of the giant treasure unlocked. In short, *we are seeing as writers*.

I am sure you can't tell, but I am in a coffeeshop right now about to fly out of my seat and hardly able to get my fingers to land accurately enough on the keys, and fast enough, to type this. That's how excited I am right now. I

can hardly contain myself: this is just that important—seeing as a writer.

How we see is simply a matter of our conditioning. And there is nothing wrong with the heavy emphasis on content in academic conditioning. It's just that such a great power is missed if you don't also train to see as a writer. This exercise is a fantastically powerful way to shift the perspective, not to mention all the other benefits of taking great writing into yourself, absorbing it deeply into your writing instrument.

This is much more valuable than a “Learn How to Write a Dissertation” or “12 Steps to Your Article” writing advice type of thing. The truth is, there is no “way” to write a book or article or dissertation. That kind of advice is ok. It can get you thinking about your structure and your piece. You try their formula and advice, and then through trial and error find out how it doesn't work for you, and then figure out your own way. It also doesn't hurt to drop some money on a writing book—when you put some money into it that gets you motivated to do your work. Also, some of the content in these texts can be motivating, somehow (but only some of them!).

But far better than a blueprint for how to structure your

text is to learn to see form and structure for yourself. This is a shift in the balance of your attention. Exercises like these, and many others I have, are a great way to make that shift, to train in it, emphasize it, and drive it deeply into your interior writing well. And having a structure to stay focused in this training, like the community we are setting up at academicmuse.org, is a great way to ensure you take these trainings in as deeply as possible.

So, in short, you could say that this writing advice I am giving you now is not for “learning how to write” but “learning how to learn” to write.

Do some emulations. Everyone will learn something different. Everyone will find their way. And you will learn, without a doubt.

And finally, there is one more element and benefit here that might not be obvious, and it circles back to productivity and momentum, which if you haven’t noticed, is something I really emphasize about the art and craft of writing. All the great writers have a regular writing discipline. And although this eBook seems mostly about the artfulness side of things, it actually is also about boosting your productivity. Because copywork and emulation is a

great way to exercise the writing muscle.

If you are having trouble getting started writing or sticking to it, with your own work, I think you will find doing emulations is rather easy, yet still creative, still original, and still about your work. So, given the structure that is provided by the Master writer, you just chug along and write and input and fit and improvise your way through the exercise. And you are writing, moving, gaining momentum. Plus you are gaining awareness of form, imbibing prose style, all the rest. And one more secret tip: if you want to boost your writing ease, choose master texts written by people who write a whole lot. Some of that ease will transfer over too you.

Ever had a busy schedule where writing seemed like the last thing on the plate? Maybe you get a day in here, a day in there, next week. I don't know about you, but when I am just getting started up writing, it's a semi-horrible experience. Things come hard. It's clunky. And the perception of "this is difficult" then leads to all kinds of thoughts, and I'll be brief, but, you know it's tough. It really seems like there's no way I am going to be able to write this thing or going to have any good ideas.

Fortunately, like many of you, I have been through this experience so many times and come out the other end that I know not to believe too much in what appears to be happening at the beginning. It feels real. It seems real. And it is hard. But it's going to change and I know that. After I pile up and string together some of these bad days, they begin to change, momentum builds, and then things are easier.

Problem is, when my schedule seems to put writing last on the list, and I'm only getting in a day here or a day there, I might work say 7 days in a month, but the problem is:

It's the same day!

Seven days of day one, which is semi-horrible. If I am getting started, it's seven days of starting, and restarting, and restarting. If I am revising, it's getting re-oriented, reading things over, making some notes and plans—over and over again exactly seven times. You can't make any progress having the same day, over and over again.

Not to mention how crappy it feels!

So this is why I am such a great fan of momentum. A structured way to keep writing flowing consistently is what keeps up momentum and lets me have beginnings, startups,

and day ones and experience them only once, and after that get into the flow and let that carry me along. And momentum leads to change and transformation and creativity.

An exercise that really can carry you along, like emulation, and a writing resource that keeps writing on the front burner of your attention, even if it's just enough to keep the lamp lit and the momentum going, these are invaluable to your writing powers. Keeping "day one" off to the past, where it belongs, does not take a lot of work. It just takes smart work.

In the next eBook, I will get some more into what you can do to increase your momentum and keep the attention framed on writing, even in a busy schedule and situation.

For More on Implementing
all this and to finish your dissertation,
article, grant proposal, or book, join the
creative academic writing bootcamp.

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About the Author:

Alan Klima is Professor of Anthropology at University of California, Davis, and the author of *The Funeral Casino*, *Ghosts and Numbers*, and the soon to come *Ethnography #9*, to be published with a director's cut of the film *Ghosts and Numbers*.