

READING

Writers encounter the term “reading” in a confusing set of contexts. Writing students are exhorted *to read*. Anything, everything, and lots:

particularly in the genre they are affiliating with. They are told to *attend live readings*. They are told to *read past masters of their genre* in order to join the tradition. They are taught to undertake *close readings* of texts in order to have a language for discussing other texts in their genre. They are expected to *read and respond* to writing workshop classmates' texts before the next class in order to help fellow writers grow in their craft. They are told that *postmodern theories of reading* have changed how we approach and understand texts and challenge the idea of authorship and authoring, the very act writers are undertaking (see "Author" and "Postmodernism").

When writers read analytically and for stylistic analysis they join their concerns to concerns held by those in composition: they are *reading rhetorically*. Often, too, they *read for advice* since textbooks and how-to trade books offer insight into craft, while professional and trade magazines provide discussions about what's going on in certain writing communities: what's hot and what's not. New writers are inevitably told to *read the journals* they plan to submit their work to, in order to help them begin tailoring their work to particular editorial tastes and publishing communities (see Corey and Slesinger 1990). Since writers' work will never be read by others unless it has certain attributes, they need to read widely to see what those attributes are; in fact, reading is the route to imitation—from routine to inspired. Some writing teachers claim that writing can't be taught but that *writing workshops educate readers* to better appreciate creative works and therefore create a future readership within a world that is often more taken with computer, video, and audio media.

Other teachers are less optimistic about students' ability to read carefully and well. Denis Donoghue writes that "the best way to read English, especially in present circumstances, would be to read it as a second language and a second literature. Most of the defect of our reading and teaching arise from the fact that we are reading and teaching English as though our students were already in command of the language. We assume that they know the language well enough and are qualified enough to move to a study of the literature" (1998, 75–76). Donoghue makes it clear that, in his opinion, assumptions about student competence are unfounded.

Because of the variety of ways we deploy the term reading, it's not surprising that a lot of kernel advice—writerly lore—becomes linked to the word: it generates a lot of baggage. But linking writing knowledge to reading knowledge is essential, as we can see when we look more closely at some of our uses of *reading*.

Students of writing should read in the genre they practice. While this is sound advice, it's not advice that's followed scrupulously by all. Many poets we know read more fiction than poetry. Many prose writers can tell more about the latest crop of Academy Award nominee films than they can about collections of short fiction published in the last year. However, there are more arguments for reading deeply and widely in your genre (and other genres) than reasons to point out the exceptional few who thrive by not doing so.

Any writer wishing to develop fluency in her genre will want to read the writers of the past. T. S. Eliot, in his influential essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1975), argued that all our new writings are influenced by the writings of those that came before us, even as our new work inevitably alters our understanding of those earlier works. Therefore, we use our reading as a way of joining the conversation of past writers, and it is certainly true that those writers who have been canonized through reading lists and course offerings in universities have shaped the tastes of our potential readership. Famous texts shape the texts that follow, and readings of those texts permeate our culture from the classroom to the next *Simpsons* episode. To ignore them is to be continually trying to reinvent the textual wheel. Our supposedly innovative technique strikes someone who has read widely as derivative and clichéd unless we are using it with a knowledge of how it has been used before and then deploy it intentionally in a manner more useful for our own writing aims.

But it is not only past writers who inform us (and many excellent writers of the past who did not attain public notice are regularly being rediscovered and shared with us through historical scholarship). We also go to live readings to hear what our contemporaries are doing and saying. Despite the predominating image of the solitary writer in the garret, writing is actually an intertextual and a very social practice. We are always sharing our texts with other writers and readers of texts. There are schools of writing and communities of writing. And live readings let us do several things. We explore the aural and dramatic potentials of our texts and we come to better understand the reception of our writing. Audience—the silent reader or the appreciative listener—is important to any professional writer. We can hear our text in our inner composing ear and read it aloud in our writing room, but we need the response of readers/listeners to improve our own work, to advance it.

Because of this need to understand audience, we need to become expert readers ourselves: this is less a matter of genre than of overall

approach. That is, many writers would argue that, yes, it's important to read in your genre because that is how you join that community, but it's as important to read widely, to understand how all texts are created, received, and circulated. In the late twentieth century, the dominant form of close reading—paying attention to only the words on the page, unattached (as far as possible) to a writer's history or the circumstances of composing—was challenged by a variety of postmodern critical theories: structuralism, deconstruction, New Historicism, feminism, and reader response, to name the most common. Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory* (1996) provides a useful (though admittedly Marxist) overview of these theories. And David Lodge's *Modern Criticism and Theory* (1999) introduces us to key twentieth-century texts, including those of Barthes and Foucault, mentioned below. Since much of the work of reading and theorizing about reading takes place in university English departments, writers will find it useful to look at Robert Scholes's *Textual Power* (1986), which examines the hierarchies of reading and writing within the academy.

While different critical theories yield different and useful insights for writers, several have had particular impact. Two challenges to authorship are found in Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" (2000) and Michel Foucault's "What Is an Author?" (2000). Both essays, often presented together, warn writers to explore the way culture marks and circulates texts, and both highlight the actuality that our words, tropes, and genres are already determined and influenced by the ways these words, tropes, and genres have been used in popular discourse, in the work of previous authors, and in the cultural context from which the writer arises and wherein he or she works. These and other postmodern theorists question the stability of texts, the nature of reality, and the notion of an integrated self. Feminist theory challenges the way the traditionally male-dominated writing market (and universities that house many writers and writing programs) valorize certain voices and asks us to examine the influence of race, class, and gender on the production and circulation of texts. While Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985) offers an early and still useful overview of mid-twentieth-century feminist approaches, much work continues to be done in this area. Finally, reader-response theories ask writers to consider more carefully how their works are read by examining readers' differing interpretations of the same texts.

Lest these theories seem divorced from the act of composing that writers best understand, writers who aim to understand theory in action will do well to turn to Patrick Bizzaro's *Responding to Student Poems: Applications of*

Critical Theory (1993). Bizzaro applies theory to student poems and in the process shows writers how to become better readers of their own and others' work. Equally useful is Steven Lynn's "A Passage into Critical Theory" (1990), which looks at a single paragraph through various critical lenses.

When we read rhetorically, we are reading to improve our own technique and to make better writerly decisions. For example: Sakada is working on her poetry thesis, a collection of her own poems. We discuss poetry books and ask ourselves and each other: how does one organize an effective book of sixty-four pages (the traditional length asked for in national poetry book manuscript contests) from the 150 or more poems in various draft states that she has on hand? We decide she should read rhetorically. She collects twenty books of contemporary poetry. She is not reading historical poetry to join the tradition; she is not reading these works to enter the current conversation, looking for trends, techniques, and effective poetic voices. She is looking, instead, at the structure of book making, asking how are effective (because they are published) books constructed? She looks for patterns. She absorbs and she analyzes and starts jotting down observations and possible category systems. She learns much that she can borrow from in supporting her own book-manuscript-in-progress. Sakada finds the poets she is examining have recurring drive words or themes, they repeat (words, themes, sections of poems, types of poems), they mix abstract and narrative poems, they rely on an obvious structure (the death of a family member, phases of the moon, a migration of butterflies, a guiding question), they have a "core" section or a poetic sequence showcased, some work intentionally to build a story while others complete a weave of similar or dissimilar poems. This rhetorical reading is not complete or comprehensive (since the set of poetry books was limited), but it performs a useful function in allowing Sakada to further her own project.

In the same way, writers read literary journals in order to see what the journals are publishing—both for ideas of what they might write themselves and for a sense of whether that journal would be receptive to publishing their own work (see *The International Directory of Little Magazines and Small Presses*). They also read academic and professional publications (see the *Writer's Chronicle* and *Poets and Writers*) for advice on issues of common interest to most professional writers, from how to get an agent to listings of current contests and awards.

It is not really a surprise, then, that there are so many exhortations and adages about reading in the lore of creative writing, since reading is the

equal, if sometimes silent, partner in the act of composing: continually we reread to understand what we have written. Just as we read ourselves into our writing community, into the history of writing, and into our writing futures.