



HOW STUDYING
MASTERWORKS
CAN IMPROVE
YOUR WRITING



Conscious Reading
Creates
Purposeful Writing

BY REBECCA MONTERUSSO

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Introduction

The first thing I need to cover is whether or not you can improve your writing. Many people believe that there is some genius to being a writer. That, if you're not born possessing it you'll never have access to the well-turned phrases or words that connect people at their core. Only the lucky few will every be a successful writer and everyone else is screwed.

I think that's crap.

Though, I can't say everyone can and should be published, I do believe that anyone who wants to improve their writing is able. You just have to realize that it's hard work. And, that the idea of being a writer isn't the same as actually being one. Being one means you put your butt in the chair even when everything in you is telling you to answer your email. Or call you mom. Or clean out that closet that hasn't seen the light of day in a few

decades.

No. Being a writer means you write. That's it. The publishing? Book deals? Bestseller lists? All of that is just extra. Those things do not define a writer. They might validate you, but will never be as satisfying as you think. The satisfaction, instead, comes from within. From reading your last draft of a piece knowing that it works and has a chance at being read by someone else.

That's the real deal.

But how do you get to that point? How can you learn to turn that jumble of words into a workable draft? You could hire an editor (and I am one, so I do recommend that route), but it can get expensive. You could spend years and years in a basement honing your craft and mastering every level of storytelling, though that takes time most people don't want to give.

Or, you could study masterworks in the genre you want to write.

What are Masterworks?

Think of your favorite book (or movie, TV show, play, etc). The one that you could reread over and over while never getting sick of it. The one that still makes you cry even though you know that character is going to die (and, gosh darn it, why do they have to die?).

Part of it might be sales. You can't get past the major hit Harry Potter is, after all. But, masterworks are stories that work because they make you *feel* something. They hit the conventions and obligatory scenes (I'll get to this later) within their given genre and can teach you about what it means to write a story like it.

Masterworks are the stories at the top of their genre. They are backlisted, meaning copies are always available on the shelves of a bookstore. And, they hit all the right moments in such a way that the reader leaves the story feeling satisfied, if not surprised. These are

books that you come back to again and again not because you're nostalgic (though that might be the case), but because something about them draws you in.

The specificity of the created world begets universality and within the pages you learn something not only about the characters, but about the world we live in. About yourself. Whether you meant to get more than entertainment out of it or not, masterwork books are rich in insight. They provide a deeper level of understanding. And, they have the power to get you to look at the world in a new way. Something I believe only stories have the power to do: to change people.

Why not just get the latest writing guide from [insert author, company, etc. here]?

Though you absolutely can get Stephen King's *On Writing*, Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*, Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones*, or

Shawn Coyne's *Story Grid*, Robert McKee's *Story*, Larry Brooks's *Story Physics*, or any of the numerous guides out there created by authors for prospective writers, and I encourage you to do so, nothing teaches in quite the same way as reading. In fact, if you don't read, you probably aren't a writer (sorry to burst any bubbles out there).

Though I'd venture to say you already knew that, considering this piece is about why *masterworks* will help you write better and not the latest and greatest writing guide.

The difference between masterworks and writing guides are that guides *tell* you what to do while masterworks *show* you. So, while I believe that it is very important to understand your craft and study people like Shawn Coyne, Robert McKee, Stephen King, etc. it's vital to couple that knowledge with the active use of known writing principles/"rules."

If you know, for example, that your book should include an All is Lost moment (or crisis)

when things cannot go on as they have been in order to achieve a goal, that's a great start. (And, if you didn't know that, consider your genre and doing some research.)

But, where do you put that moment? At the beginning? Middle? End? Should the character internally change at all? Or, is the All is Lost moment related to an outside situation where things seem hopeless, but are just about to be solved? That information comes from studying the top 10 masterworks in the genre.

Yup, I said 10 (and that's a minimum). Want to write crime? Get your hands on Agatha Christie, she is the master after all. Is Love your thing? Start with Jane Austen. Performance? Rocky. Chances are, the book you want to write has already been written, just not with the flair and originality you'll bring to it.

And a careful study of the books in your chosen genre will not only give you an idea of the cliches to avoid, but will also provide a feel for pacing, the types of characters necessary to

fill out the cast, and the types of scenes you need to include.

You have to know the rules in order to break them.

Let me say that again, you have to *know* the rules in order to *break* them. That's not to say there are rules you can follow to write the perfect book everyone will want to read. What I mean is that your audience is smarter than you are. Especially if they are fans of the genre you're writing in. They may not be able to articulate why a story didn't work, but they will know if/when yours doesn't. And, they'll never read anything by you again.

Sorry, but it's true.

So, to keep your readers satisfied and on their toes, you need to study the masterworks in your genre.

What can you learn from a masterwork?

The most important lesson to be gained from studying masterworks is: what are the conventions and obligatory scenes of your chosen genre. Conventions are the things that are generally included in the type of book you want to write. Lovers share secrets, for example. A thriller needs a hero, victim, and a villain. Obligatory Scenes, on the other hand, are the scenes necessary to satisfy readers in a certain genre. A Hero at the Mercy of the Villain scene, for example, is necessary for action and many other genres. An All is Lost moment. And a performance story better have the Big Event scene.

To get a sense for the conventions, read as many masterworks as you can finding your genre. Look for patterns. Crime stories need a master detective or amateur sleuth, for example, someone to solve the crime and collect the clues. The more you read, the more

likely you'll notice when characters play a certain role necessary for the overall story.

As for the obligatory scenes in your chosen genre, take note of the scenes that make your blood boil, the skin on the back of your neck stand up, your eyes well up with tears, or any other cliché I haven't yet mentioned. Those are the scenes that really make the book. Without them, a story wouldn't be the same and wouldn't work. You should have a scene that functions in the same way in your own work.

Patterns will arise between the collection of masterworks that will provide insight into your own writing. Again, read as many as you can get your hands on before you even start to craft your story. The conventions and obligatory scenes will seep into your mind such that you'll have internalized them once it's time for you to get writing. And, the more you pay attention to how masterworks are crafted, the better you'll be at editing your own story and knowing when something is missing or not

working. Once more, knowing what works and what the rules are allows you to consciously decide when to break them without alienating your readers.

Second to that, masterworks are an active example of something you want to create. You do love the book you want to emulate, don't you? You want to create something like it? Or, at the very least, something that makes you *feel* similar to the way you feel after reading the masterwork? If not, you might be looking at the wrong genre.

Otherwise, a masterwork will provide a real-time example of a series of events that work. Were you surprised when you read it? Did the second (or third) read through uncover something you hadn't picked up on the first time?

It's easy to tell you "the rules." You know that you have to show and not tell. You probably understand, if subconsciously, what makes a scene, or keeps you reading. But an

active study of a story you love will help you articulate the things about the story that work. Being able to do so honestly will help you see it in your own writing (or see what's missing). You'll be better equipped to critique what you've written if you can analyze what works and what doesn't in another story. Especially one that you already know you love.

Nothing is perfect. And being honest about that in other people's writing will help you to be so with your own. Stop criticizing yourself so much (or being overly confident when it's unwarranted). Just honestly look at what's on the page and whether you've accomplished what you set out to achieve when you sat down to write that story in the first place.

Use the masterwork as a guide and inspiration to keep going.

Examples

Since I studied with Shawn Coyne for a whole week on how to become a developmental editor, I'm using the content genres found in his book *The Story Grid*. Additionally, I prefer young adult (YA) novels, so many of my examples are in that category (though I'm researching more).

And note that genre is a categorization for the specific value at stake in a story. For example, action stories turn on life and death.

External (change happens outside of the mind)

Action: *Illuminae* by Jay Kristoff and Amie Kaufman, *Kingsman*

Love: *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austin, *Daughter of Smoke and Bone* by Laini Taylor

Society: *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin

Thriller: *The Knife of Never Letting Go* by Patrick Ness, *Silence of the Lambs* by Thomas

Harris

Performance: *Rocky, Pitch Perfect*

War: *Gates of Fire* by Steven Pressfield,
Inglorious Bastards

Horror: *Stranger Things, Frankenstein* by
Mary Shelly

Crime: *Truly Devious* by Maureen Johnson,
Breaking Bad

Western: *True Grit, A Town Called Mercy*
(Season 7 Episode 3 of *Doctor Who*)

Internal (change takes place inside of the mind)

Worldview: *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott
Fitzgerald, *Carrie* by Stephen King

Status: *Little Miss Sunshine, Gladiator*

Morality: *Casablanca, The Scarlet Letter* by
Nathaniel Hawthorne

So, there you have it

Masterworks are invaluable to your writing.
What's more, so is writing. Nothing can replace

the act of sitting at a desk typing (or handwriting) words as they flow from your mind into creation. So what if it sucks. It's supposed to.

Masterworks coupled to the study of craft guides will help you get better over time. Practice is the only thing that truly works. No matter how painful it might feel at the time.

So get to work, writer. Write. Stop putting it off. The world needs your novel.