

Notes from the Whole Novel Workshop

How to read like a writer.

In *The Primed Mind* (Holy Cow Press), Alexandria LaFaye's forthcoming book on writing, she calls on readers to look at text differently. She asks us to read like a writer, or to practice what Alexandria calls forms analysis. The skills it takes for a reader to decode the threads of writing are ones that require a bit of practice, thought, and attention. But once the code is cracked, books become a resource of craft writing for almost every story, plot, character, or problem. Where to start?

Seeing and doing. It's the job of every writer to create and decorate the literary landscape of his or her novel. We do that by first living, looking at everything in our environment and experiencing as much of life as possible. Alexandria calls it the raw material of fiction. So next time you are out having a latte instead of butt in chair, don't be so hard on

yourself. Just make some notes about the smell of the coffee, the swirl of the cream on top, and the people populating the coffee shop.

Reading Description. When you read, notice how familiar things are described in a text. A town may be *small and dusty*. Or it might be nothing more than a *map dot with a Texaco, a closed down Post Office, and three wild biddy chickens running down Main Street from Mr. Holgram's chicken house with his two year old broke fence that he's still hoping to fix.* Using specific language and detail gives a manuscript a "poetic register" that should support the tone of the overall story. Next time you read, take a highlighter to description. What are the specific concrete details that draw pictures in your mind as a reader? What mood do those words evoke? Can you apply that same practice to your own writing?
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Ten Tips for Revision:
Ask yourself these questions.

1. What does my character(s) want?
2. Is the plot grounded in logic? (Even if it's a fantasy, there is the logic of the created world.)
3. Does my plot build via escalating cause and effect?
4. How much backstory should I have? (None.)
5. How much interior monologue should I include. (Almost none.)
6. Are my nouns doing double duty for setting and character?
7. Are my verbs active and interesting?
8. Do I have too many tags for characters with too many adverbs?
9. Am I using clichéd body parts?
10. Am I writing my story "big" or am I holding back?



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Fresh is better. While you are working through the description in the novel you are reading, make a note if some image or comparison strikes you as particularly interesting. Alexandria reminds us that fresh comparisons of familiar things are “the hallmark of style,” and for readers, there’s almost nothing more satisfying than a good turn of a phrase. So, pay attention to your own similes and metaphors and extended metaphors. If they seem tired, they probably are. Play around a little with your comparisons to keep it fresh and new.

Write it slant. This goes along with another lecture from the March Whole Novel Workshop. Cut the backstory and interior monologue. Let the characters’ own words hint to the reader what has happened and what is to come. When Alexandria’s character Heirah (*The Year of the Sawdust Man*) is criticized for starting a fire, she says, “I could also pack up and leave.” The reader is given insights into Heirah’s character without any hint of backstory or interior monologue. It’s not needed. Like a good poker player, keep your hand close when writing characters, using inference rather than straight-on telling.

Resources for your writing from the Whole Novel Workshop

At the March 2013 Whole Novel Workshop, we shared articles and advice about the craft of writing. Here’s a roundup of ideas that resonated with our group.

- ✓ “Imagery and the Third Eye.” Stephen King. *Wordplay*. This article gives great advice for writers who think in details rather than visual pictures when it comes to the setting and fictional people of their manuscripts. It makes a huge difference, and Stephen King tells us how he does it.
<http://www.wordplayer.com/pros/pr13.King.Stephen.html>
- ✓ Here’s a quick infographic on *How To Write a Scene in 11 Steps* by Ryan Rivard. <http://ryan-rivard.com/blog/2013/sharing-the-scene>
- ✓ “Don’t Look Back: The Problem with Backstory” by Benjamin Percy. *Poets & Writers*. This article was in the November/December issue of the magazine and isn’t offered online. You can order the single issue on your Kindle or via snail mail (\$10) or go to your local library to check it out. This article gives great examples of how backstory can be incorporated into the forward narrative of a story. Interesting reading! Benjamin Percy has a new book coming out in May. Catch him on tour if you can!
http://www.pw.org/content/dont_look_back
- ✓ “Storyboarding Your Way Out of the Forest” by Tami Lewis Brown. This is a blog post written in February 2013 on Tami’s blog *Writing Dangerously*. Tami uses this technique with students at the Whole Novel Workshop, and it’s a winner.
<http://tamilewisbrown.com/storyboard-your-way-out-of-the-forest/>



The best advice this week was one you’ve probably heard over and over. If you are going to write, you must read. Once you become skilled at “reading for writing,” you can begin to see how authors solve craft problems in their work. Books become your teachers. What have you read lately?

Notes from the Whole Novel Workshop is a quarterly newsletter to help keep you connected and motivated with your writing. Let us know how you are progressing, what’s working for you, and what successes you are having along the way! Email Helen Hemphill at hempills@comcast.net to share your news and information.