



[AUDIO] GREEK HUMAN CREATION MYTHS

RAMBLE ON READING

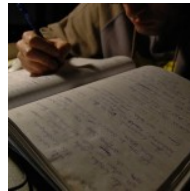
## [Guest Post] The Perils of RWW (Reading While Writing)

ON AUGUST 20, 2012 · 10 COMMENTS ·



This is a guest post by Noelle Sterne.

We've all heard the venerable advice: to learn our craft and hone our skills, read, read, read. Granted, when we first start writing, reading the works of other writers helps. It shows us many approaches and techniques, enlarges our sense of subjects we thought were unthinkable, and gives us models for thrusting out to write what's really burning in us.



But with all this reading stoked up, there's a time to stop.

Surprising? Probably. Heretical? Maybe. True? Unequivocally.

I don't advocate this action—or inaction—out of peevishness, contrariness, hatred of those published, or any other self-indulgence. Rather, like many other writers, I've experienced the distressing effects of too much reading.

When you're Reading While Writing (RWW), first, you see a terrible gap. Your teeth clench and you want to throw up your hands and throw out your computer. "I'll never write like that!" A friend many miles away, with whom I've had a long writing-related correspondence, started to struggle with a memoir of his growing-up years in New England. I mightily encouraged him and regularly fed him nuggets of advice.

Then he made the mistake of reading others' memoirs. He wrote to me, "I've been reading Alfred Kazin's *A Walker in the City*. Now, that's a memoir." I could see his face droop across the miles. "Damn," he continued, "I'm out of my league."

This remark signaled he was in danger of deserting his project. I whipped off a reply crammed like a care package with nourishing motivational chunks to counteract the pollution of his reading.

Neither was my friend immune to the second effect of reading while you're writing: you get jealous as hell. You compare yourself—unfavorably, of course—with the other writers you're reading. Despite the contamination, like inhaling aerosol, you're unable to put them down. You aggrandize them, worship their descriptions, roll around their phrases in your head. You fester with envy that you haven't thought of those grand, pithy, sonorous, sagacious words or done what they have.

And you're sure you never will. The gap between your work and theirs is wider than the Grand Canyon, and you crave with a fervor greater than for maccheese on a diet that you actually were those other writers. As my friend self-diagnosed, "I'm suffering from memoir envy."

Once you get over the horrible shock of the other writers' brilliance and exhaust your fantasies that they'll be stricken with a writhing voodoo plague, a funny thing happens: you begin to write like them. This is rarely conscious, of course, but it's a particularly insidious consequence of reading too much while you're writing.

You can now subscribe to Read.Learn.Write via Kindle.

Search

### Subscribe.

Enter your name and email address below to have updates sent directly to your inbox.

enter your name

enter your email

Sign Up

SUBSCRIBE TO THE READLEARNWRITE.COM PODCAST BY CLICKING THE LOGO BELOW



Read, Learn, and Write for your Life.

Have you been away from reading for some time?

Did you read less last year than you wanted to?

Do you want to contribute to a community that views reading as an essential activity, as essential as breathing?

I want you to read, learn, and write for life.

I want reading to be the activity through which you seek answers to

My friend recognized this affliction during his own creative throes. He read yet another memoir and mused, “Am I, I’m athinkin’, lookin’ at a whole rewrite? Sorry for the dropping of the ‘g,’ but I just read Bob Dylan’s Chronicles.” If he imitated Dylan in his letter to me, who knows what Minnesotan Dylanese he imported into his New England memoir?

I recognized my friend’s experience in my own. As a yearning teenage writer, I read constantly, especially Jane Austen and Ray Bradbury. My stories revolved around superintelligent alien beings flirting coyly, sipping extraterrestrial tea over witty conversation, and always monitored by puzzled, insufficient humans manipulating complex machines. It took a long time to change my settings and mindset.

In those years, I had no critical distance, but as an adult, to my writerly chagrin, I’ve also subjected myself to greater, and inappropriate, style infection. After reading Hemingway, I wrote a love story in terse, gruff prose. After reading Tom Jones, I wrote about a new corporate high-rise with stilted eighteenth-century flourishes. After luxuriating in two of Henry James’ novels, I wrote an article on a 3K race in endless, half-page sentences.

Even if you haven’t fallen prey to the imitation virus, note the words of others. In an essay unambiguously titled “Don’t Read While Writing,” veteran writing teacher Leonard Bishop says, “The moment your involvement with professional writing becomes a commitment, your reading habits should undergo a transformation. . . . When you begin writing seriously, it is wise to transform the time you use reading into time to be used for added writing.”

Why? Bishop likens the writer’s mind to an onion, made of “layers sheathed around deeper layers.” To reach more of our own core of knowledge, we must constantly peel away the layers we’ve accumulated of other people’s views, outlooks, and style. Bishop explains: “Isolation from reading while writing; separation from the ‘escape’ habit of reading; removal from the analysis of other people’s work help you peel away the sheaths.”

Creative coach Julia Cameron is more ruthless. For writers suffering from creative blocks, she prescribes a severe remedy: total “reading deprivation.” That’s right. No reading at all.

Why? She echoes Bishop more toughly. “For most blocked creatives,” she declares, “reading is an addiction. We gobble the words of others rather than digest our own thoughts and feelings, rather than cook up something of our own.”

To extend Cameron’s metaphor, too often we abandon our own kitchen and rush to eat at others’ restaurants. But what does this avoidance get us? Only intellectual bloating, a queasy feeling of wasted time, and the nausea of self-disgust. And worse: stuffing ourselves with all that reading keeps us from discovering our own feelings, thoughts, perceptions—in short, our “voice.”

Reading deprivation is crucial because it forces us into ourselves. As Cameron says, it “casts us into our inner silence . . . our own inner voice, the voice of our artist’s inspiration.” To write anything worthwhile—anything true to ourselves—we must explore, delve inside, and, whatever our discomfort, stay there. We must peel away those layers, to “begin to listen,” as writing counselor and psychologist Joan Bolker puts it, “to the demands of the inner world.”

Only this way, I believe, will we reach our own core and our unique expression in content and style. My friend, reading Kazin’s memoirs while working on his own, judged himself out of Kazin’s “league.” But my friend hadn’t stopped reading others to listen to his own voice. When you finally stop reading and enter, even tentatively, into your own nurturing mental and physical silence, you are, as Bishop assures us, “no longer out of your depths—you are pushing into them.”

But when you continue to read others as you write, your production will be a stale imitation of those you admire. It will not ring with your own resonance or stamp. And very likely you’ll never get to know what your own stamp is.

Why are you really writing, after all? Aside from the superficiais—the hoped-for money, recognition, non-corporate-cubicle life—isn’t it your voice you crave to appear on the page, and not that of anyone else? Isn’t your fondest desire to say something original and unique, to develop the voice that’s quintessentially yours to express?

Of course.

Maybe you’re protesting with old rejoinders: Nothing is new under the sun, we stand on the shoulders of giants, everyone has the same experiences. Well, let me remind you of a few things.

the questions you can’t answer anywhere else.

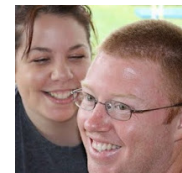
I want reading to be the activity through which you find new questions or new ways of asking old questions.

I want you to be inspired to read and I want you to inspire others to read through your stories and advice.

Subscribe to the site to have updates emailed to you or reach to me via email at [readlearnwrite@gmail.com](mailto:readlearnwrite@gmail.com) or @readlearnwrite on Twitter.

---

## ABOUT



---

## NEW? START HERE

[Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How of You the Reader](#)

[Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How of Read.Learn.Write](#)

[How Do I Find the Time to Read?](#)

[The What About Bob Approach to Reading](#)

[How Do I Read Without Falling Sleep?](#)

[20 Things You Can Do Today to Become a Better Reader](#)

[Be Superficial When It Comes to Reading](#)

[A tumblr library of readlearnwrite.com books of interest](#)

[A tumblr library of readlearnwrite.com quotes of interest via findings.com](#)

---

## ARCHIVES

Select Month

Even if you write about the most common, overworked subject, no one else has had your experience or can filter it through your eyes and mind. No one else can bring your perspective to this subject. No one else has your voice or your core.

We're afraid of going into our "depths" because we think we'll discover only emptiness, or worse, inanity. Maybe we're sure we'll find only a pit of clichés, like snakes thrashing fiercely to get onto the page first. Maybe we fear we'll find only shells of what we've read before, shadows of other writers' phrases wafting through amorphous space like ghost ships. Maybe we fear, worst of all, that we really have nothing to say.

It takes trust to go deeper. We must quiet all virtuous instruction, external influences, stimulations, and admirations. We must trust in the richness and inexhaustibility that is in us to discern what's really there and bring it out.

So, go quiet and listen for your own voice—your ideas, emotions, perceptions, views, vision. Go deep into your experiences—the ones you dread and the ones you treasure. Let them surface.

The deeper you go, the more courage you'll gain and the more strength you'll find to transfer to the page what you've discovered. As you keep writing, you'll marvel at the unearthings of a you you didn't know, a you who offers worlds more to discover and transmute for others. And maybe to your shock, you'll find that you even like what you see. You'll find your own splash of freshness on the world, your own power.

Turn from the ubiquitous easy distractions. Within you are fertile worlds hardly plumbed. They're humbling, exciting, and infinitely accessible. They'll show you what you're meant to write. Stop reading, listen inside, and begin.

=====

Author, editor, ghostwriter, writing coach, and spiritual counselor, I write fiction and nonfiction and have published over 250 pieces in print and online venues. I have contributed many guest blogs and in July 2012 started a column in *Coffeehouse for Writers*, "Bloom Where You're Writing." With a Ph.D. from Columbia University, for over 28 years I have helped doctoral candidates complete their dissertations (finally). In my current book *Trust Your Life: Forgive Yourself and Go After Your Dreams* (Unity Books; one of the ten best 2011 ebooks), I draw examples from my practice and other aspects of life to help writers and others release regrets, relabel their past, and reach their lifelong yearnings. [www.trustyourlifenow.com](http://www.trustyourlifenow.com)

Photo: [Some rights reserved by xJason.Rogersx](#).

**Editor's note: I'd be interested to see some lively debate on this topic. Can you make an argument that a writer should never stop reading? Or, as Noelle beautifully states, is there a time to "[s]top reading, listen inside?"**

1	<i>Share the Love</i>	<a href="#">Tweet</a>
2	<i>Get Free Updates</i>	<input type="text" value="enter your email"/> <input type="button" value="Submit"/>

## 10 Responses to [Guest Post] *The Perils of RWW (Reading While Writing)*



Anjali says:

August 20, 2012 at 11:44 am

I totally agree with you. Make reading part of the preparatory phase. Once you start writing put away the reading and listen only to your "inner voice".

REPLY



**Noelle Sterne** says:

August 20, 2012 at 1:36 pm

Appreciate your response, Anjali. With so many writing how-to books and articles available, as well as fascinating reading, we writers often shut out or ignore our inner voice. But it is what keeps our writing ours and true to ourselves.

**REPLY**



**Karen** says:

August 21, 2012 at 8:27 am

Noelle, your guest post was inspirational and I enjoyed reading it. I did have to stop and reflect about my own writing process.

I'm not sure I can give up reading. For me, it's all about balance.

Karen

**REPLY**



**Chris** says:

August 21, 2012 at 9:54 am

I loved this post. Of course I can't possibly give up reading. What I try to do, is when I'm writing a certain kind of book, article, or the like, is give up reading that genre and type of writing temporarily.

**REPLY**



**Noelle Sterne** says:

August 21, 2012 at 10:39 am

Karen and Chris—Thank you for your lovely words. You have both reached the reading that works for you. As you say, reflect on your own writing process and exercise judgment about when, when not, and what to read. Keep reading and writing!

**REPLY**



**Francine Garson @francinegarson** says:

August 21, 2012 at 11:21 am

Your beautifully written post certainly made me think, Noelle. But my views are more in line with those of Karen and Chris. Give up reading? Sorry, can't do that. Ever. Lifelong voracious reading across genres has made me who I am, and that love of reading has led me to writing.

I think you'll get a lot more comments on this one...a sure sign of a great post! Thanks for making me think, even though I have to respectfully disagree.

**REPLY**



**Noelle Sterne** says:

August 21, 2012 at 3:11 pm

Thank you so much, Francine, for your comments. I respect them and glad the post stimulated your thinking. Reading—literature, spiritual subjects—feeds me and makes me sing inside. Not reading steers me to my inner song(s) to then write about what feeds me and, optimally, others.

**REPLY**



**Amarie Fox** says:

August 21, 2012 at 6:37 pm

Great post. In my own personal belief, though, there is a strong cyclical type of relationship between the writer and reader (since the writer is a reader, as well.) It all goes full circle.

Sure, we all want to have a unique voice and put something down a page that is totally groundbreaking and original, but that sort of hope is futile and impossible. We're influenced by everything – our surroundings and what we come into contact with on a daily basis. You acknowledged this, but I think that to solve this “problem” we have to approach writing with a different attitude. It is one that I have found helpful, which is that all we can ever hope to do is rework scenarios and make them our own. I mean, some of our great literature fed off of other books. Some of our greatest novels came into being based around an idea from the bible (Paradise Lost, East of Eden... two great ones off of the top of my head.)

I think that is the key. Not avoidance, but interpretation. Strive to be as great as those who

came before you, borrow from them, but put your own spin on it. Whitman articulated it well when he said that everything was percolating all around him and he had to be the one to grasp it and pin it down.

REPLY



**Erika D.** says:

August 22, 2012 at 6:59 am

I'm with those who may choose to read differently when working on certain projects...but can't stop reading altogether. (Not to mention the fact that a number of my projects involve writing about books!)

REPLY



**Noelle Sterne** says:

August 23, 2012 at 10:59 am

Amarie and Erika—Appreciate your comments. Erika, well taken and respected. Amarie, your words remind me of the truism that there's only a certain amount of plots and that we almost cannot help but duplicate one or another. See the classic book (!) of 1945 *Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations* by Georges Polti. My reprint edition was published by The Writer Press.

Not to coin a phrase, we all stand on the shoulders of others—as did Milton and Steinbeck and Homer and Shakespeare and . . . I would say that even if we read nothing, a plot we choose would still reflect one of the major ones. How many great and ungreat works revolve around the boy-meets-loses-regains-girl theme? But as you say, when we “rework scenarios and make them our own” we do make them our own. We write through our own filter, understanding, experience, insights, creativity, and dictates of our inner voice.

REPLY

## Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published.

Name

Email

Website

Comment

You may use these HTML tags and attributes:

```
<a href="" title=""> <abbr title=""> <acronym title=""> <b> <blockquote cite=""> <cite> <code> <del
datetime=""> <em> <i> <q cite=""> <strike> <strong>
```

You are subscribed to this entry. [Manage your subscriptions.](#)

Notify me of new posts by email.

[Audio] *Heroes (Io, Europa, and Odysseus)* <http://t.co/xQJdyK1f> — @readlearnwrite