

To the aspiring fiction writer,

In my last blog we talked about what to read. Now let's consider *how* to read.

Most people read to relax, to escape, to feel emotion. They read for fun. To read like a writer, I learned to take reading more seriously. I told myself I was reading to learn the craft of writing. Doing so requires observation and concentration. Through an online class with Stanford, I learned to read with an agenda. Guess what. It was even more fun to read this way because I could appreciate the nuances that I might have missed otherwise! Reading like a writer is eye-opening.

First off, don't read when you're tired. Maybe you have a commercial novel that you like to climb into bed with. Fine. But when reading as a writer, read during the best part of your free time, when you are alert and focused. Don't allow anything to disturb you: turn off your phone, tell the kids or grandkids to play outside, lock your dog in the next room.

Allot a certain amount of time for your reading session. Whether it is twenty minutes or an hour, set an alarm and don't look at the clock until it rings.

Make a list of what you want to examine. Then choose one to focus on during this session. Things like:

- 1) Point of View: There are entire courses, entire books dedicated to the many facets of first, second, and third-person point of view. Spend some time reading up on these, then ask yourself: What selection has the author made and why? From whose perspective is this story being told? *Just Lisa* is told in first person, as if she is talking directly to someone, yet it moves into scenes containing dialogue and descriptive setting. I chose first person to clearly relay Lisa's voice, so the reader can get a better feel for her.
- 2) Tense: Is the story being told in past tense or is it unfolding in the present? Why did the author choose this tense? There are degrees of time and distance within each tense. Read a few online articles to learn what to look for. Notice when the tense shifts with flashbacks. *Just Lisa* is written in present tense to mimic conversation and to make it easier to slip into past tense when relaying backstory.
- 3) Setting: How is a sense of place created? Does the author go into great detail? How does the setting convey the emotion of the current scene? Does it contain symbols? Or relate to the deeper theme?
- 4) Characters: Who are the main actors? How soon are they introduced? What characters form subplots, secondary storylines? Note a major detail about each character: maybe it's the pipe he is always sucking on, or that she wears turtlenecks, or that the kid rubs her forehead whenever confused. What do each of these characters want and what is at risk if they don't get it? That is their motivation. Do you find certain characters sympathetic while others turn you off? Does this change as the story progresses?
- 5) Plot: The story itself unfolded chronologically, but PLOT is how the author chooses to tell the story. In what order is information conveyed? Not every story starts at birth, like in *David Copperfield*. When does this story start and why? Many stories begin "in media res" or "in the middle of things" so as to immediately engage the reader. Crucial aspects about the past are related later through flashbacks. In my novel, we get to know Lisa better as the story progresses. This is where "secrets" come into play, adding to the tension that



keeps the reader reading. What is the “inciting incident” that disturbs the status quo and sets the story in motion? Is there a midpoint twist, something unexpected halfway in that ups the ante? What is the climax? How does the story taper off after that?

6) Summary, Half-scene, and scene: Read about these in the many online articles describing them. This is how the author plays with time. A summary jumps across time; a half-scene is summary with a few bits of critical dialogue thrown in. A scene slows down into real time with detailed movement, setting, dialogue. A scene is where the writer zooms in to get the reader to pay attention. What choices does the author make and why?

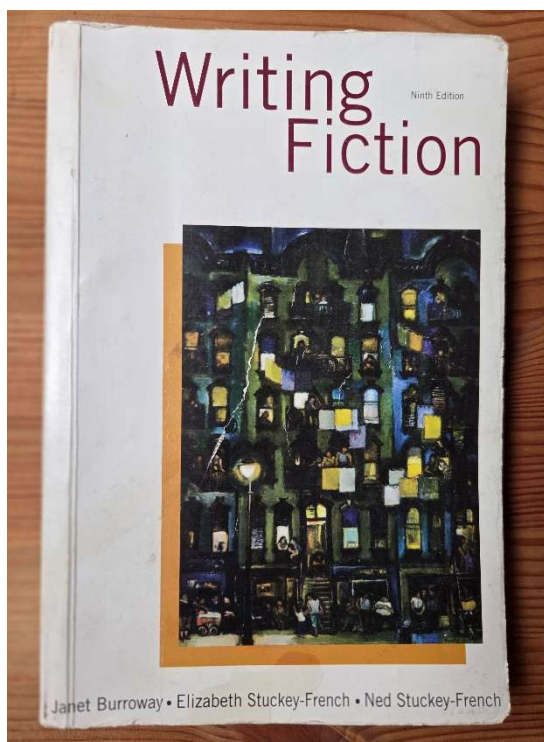
7) Theme: what is the deeper, universal meaning that is being conveyed? What question is the story asking? It can be as simple as “can we find true love?” or it can be social commentary about what is wrong in our world. How is the theme related to what is at stake for the narrator/protagonist?

8) Tension: this is more than the main conflict in the story. What keeps us turning the pages? It is often related to how the author has created sympathy for certain characters. How does the author worry the reader, make them wonder how things will turn out. What has the author withheld, until when, and why?

9) Voice: what choices does the author make about how the story is told, the flavor in which it is told. First person point of view naturally has a strong voice that reveals characteristics of the narrator, so how is this particular voice unique? Even third person resounds with the voice of its characters. When does that ring out?

10) Style: Is this story action-packed or does it linger in the main character’s subconscious? Is the writing humorous or more journalistic or is it very lyrical prose? I love the lyrical prose of Anthony Doerr’s *All The Light We Cannot See*, just as I love the lyrical writing in *Where the Crawdads Sing*. But I chose a humorous style for *Just Lisa* to lighten the theme about death and make it more accessible. What styles of writing do you prefer? Why did the author choose this style?

Voice is the unique personality, worldview, and "soul" of the writer or main character, while style is the technical, chosen manner in which that voice is captured on the page. Voice is often described as inherent (who the writer is), while style is applied (how the writer writes). Barbara Kingsolver writes in very different styles if you compare *The Poisonwood Bible* to *Demon Copperhead*. But she subtly voices opinions in the underlying social commentary in both books.



This is already a long list, but don’t forget to think about the title and the opening line or paragraph of the story. How does the writer hook the reader? What questions arise in your mind as the story progresses? Take note of who the protagonist is and who opposes them as the antagonist. In *Just Lisa*, Dolly is Lisa’s everyday antagonist, but their relationship changes as a new antagonist arises in the form of Courtney Tabatha Lindstrom.

What is the *external* story unfolding as you read, and is there an *internal*, more emotional story happening? Take note of any symbols or repetition in the story.

I scribble in the margins. I highlight in different colors (orange for setting, green for character description, etc). I reread interesting sections. I underline unique verbs. If you are using library books, take notes in a notebook or on a computer. It will slow you down a bit while reading, but it is worth your time.

Read as though you are studying the author’s craft. Read to become a better writer. [Subscribe to my free newsletter.](#)