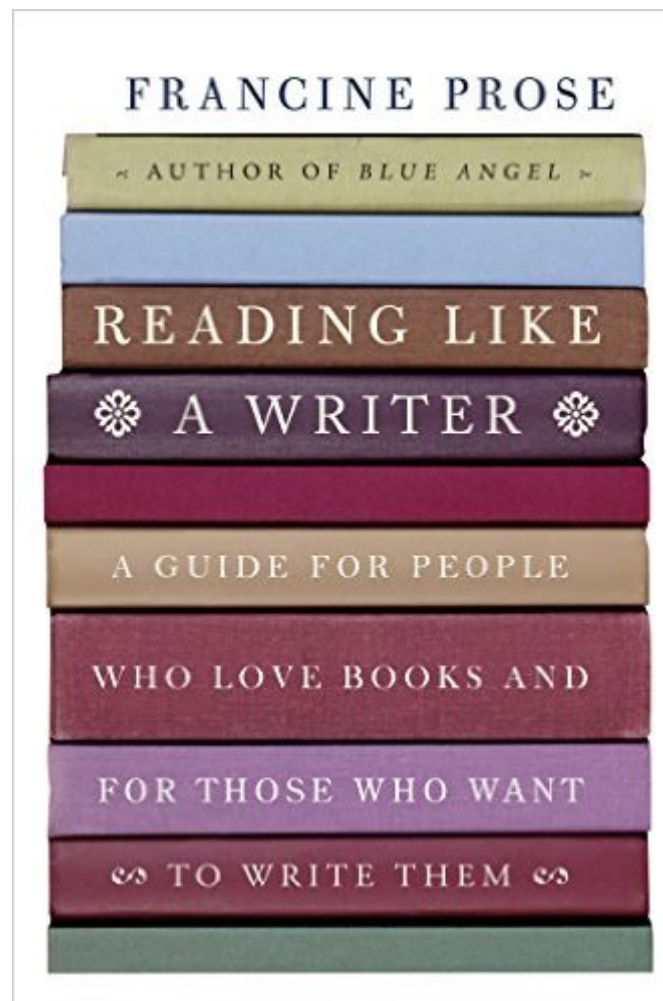


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Reading Like A Writer: A Guide For People Who Love Books And For Those Who Want To Write Them (P.S.)



Synopsis

Long before there were creative-writing workshops and degrees, how did aspiring writers learn to write? By reading the work of their predecessors and contemporaries, says Francine Prose. In *Reading Like a Writer*, Prose invites you to sit by her side and take a guided tour of the tools and the tricks of the masters. She reads the work of the very best writers—Dostoyevsky, Flaubert, Kafka, Austen, Dickens, Woolf, Chekhov—and discovers why their work has endured. She takes pleasure in the long and magnificent sentences of Philip Roth and the breathtaking paragraphs of Isaac Babel; she is deeply moved by the brilliant characterization in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. She looks to John Le Carré for a lesson in how to advance plot through dialogue, to Flannery O'Connor for the cunning use of the telling detail, and to James Joyce and Katherine Mansfield for clever examples of how to employ gesture to create character. She cautions readers to slow down and pay attention to words, the raw material out of which literature is crafted. Written with passion, humor, and wisdom, *Reading Like a Writer* will inspire readers to return to literature with a fresh eye and an eager heart.

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Francine Prose, in "Reading Like a Writer," argues that creative writing cannot be taught in a classroom. A workshop may provide valuable encouragement and support for a fledgling writer, and a good instructor may show a novice how to edit his work more effectively. However, a writer learns his craft by reading and rereading the books, novels, plays, and short stories of great writers, and he improves his skills through practice. Prose recommends studying "meter with Ovid, plot construction with Homer, comedy with Aristophanes." She backs up her thesis by giving a host of examples from writers she admires, such as Austen, Hemingway, Joyce, Chekhov, and others who are a bit more obscure. Prose discusses the basics, including the use of the exact word, sentence building, paragraphing, point of view, character, and dialogue. Close reading, she asserts, enables us to understand not only what the writer is stating, but also what he is implying. The subtext is often as important, if not more important, than the text itself. Throughout "Reading Like a Writer" are excerpts, some brief, some lengthy, from a variety of sources, followed by Prose's witty, insightful, and informative commentary. Why does the writer choose one particular word or phrase rather than another? How do the seemingly minor details and gestures in a scene sometimes convey more information than the characters' statements?"Reading Like a Writer" is not a handbook or a manual. It is a love letter to the mysterious alchemy, the magic that occurs when a reader encounters a book, poem, or story that not only entertains him, but also moves and transforms him.

Because my opinion is so divergent from the other reviews here (all but two gave five-stars), I read them to see what I might have missed. Instead I found myself wondering whether we had read the same book: See "Review the Reviews" below. Reviewer Bukowsky (October 2, 2006) states "... not a handbook or a manual. It is a love letter ..." thereby unintentionally capturing the basic failing of this book - its title states that it is "A Guide ..." What I expected was a series of examples with analysis of what made them work or not work. There were far fewer examples than I expected, the analysis was typically slight, and there was too much extraneous material. For example, in the chapter on "Sentences", too much of the commentary on the examples was simply effusive praise of the sentence's author. I strongly disagreed with Prose's assessment of roughly a third of the sentences cited, but she didn't provide enough analysis for me to understand her point of view (declarations of something as great is not an argument). In the chapter on "Paragraphs", the author starts with an example from Babel's "Crossing into Poland." At first I thought it strange to be using a

translated work as an example, but then she presented another translation as a counterpoint. I then thought "What a brilliant way to get examples of the effects of the differences in choices by two professional writers." However, she failed to effectively follow through. Also, I differed with her on the analysis of the passage in question: "... the highroad ... built ... upon the bones of peasants." Her analysis was that it "introduced some element of unease.

While I am pleased to add Francine Prose's "Reading Like a Writer" to my how-to-write-good canon, I think I'd like her to do it over, not as a replacement, more as a corollary. Keep the title and most of the content; change the subtitle to "A PRACTICAL Guide for NEW Writers Aspiring to Make a Living in a Dysfunctional Industry". Ms. Prose has been at this game for so long and been successful for nearly as long that she has forgotten what it's like to be an FNG (effing new guy) to professional writing. She certainly hasn't experienced anything like being unknown and unpublished in the last 10 years where the barriers to entry have become even more entrenched than they ever were before. So what to put in the new improved version? Besides an index, start with losing the references that were written before, say, 1960. It's obvious Ms. Prose loves the classics. So do I. Those writers were giants in their day. But it would be career suicide to try to write like them today, especially the overfed prose of the British writers. Today's writers have XBox, reality shows, and cellphone-texting standing by ready to steal the reader with the flick of a switch. Today's writers need to grab the reader quickly and not let go. That can't be done with 181-word sentences. This is the age of the short attention span. It is no accident that Harold Bloom has little regard for J.K. Rowling. Neither is it an accident that all the world is reading Rowling's work. How to account for this phenomenon? Though Ms. Prose and I are nearly the same age, she has spent her life in literature while I spent mine first as an Army officer and later as an engineer. I've only been at this reading/writing game for about five years. Before you scoff, engineering and writing are more alike than they are different.

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