

Reading as a Writer: What Could Possibly Go Wrong?

Valeriya Sytnik¹

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Introduction

Written for WRS 101, Valeriya Sytnik's reflective essay explores what it means to read like a writer. Valeriya argues for a three-part approach to learning to write from the texts that we read. She suggests that we balance our intuition and conscious knowledge about writing as we learn from the texts we read. This balancing act continues as we try to wrestle our ideas into written form. At this stage of the writing process, we must negotiate the tension between our perceptions and reflections. Finally, Valeriya suggests that we must learn from example texts and practice what they teach us. This essay is an excellent example of using research sources to support a unique and compelling argument.

Keywords: creativity, drafting, reading, writing process



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¹ Valeriya Sytnik is a third-year BA Honors Psychology student at the University of Alberta with a minor in Creative Writing.

² *Writing across the University of Alberta* (WAUA) publishes undergraduate student writing from writing studies courses and courses focused on writing studies practices and scholarship at the University of Alberta. You can find WAUA online at <https://writingacrossuofa.ca/>.

Introduction

I am an awfully slow reader. I always take my time to reverse-engineer texts in my head to understand how they are created. However, it was not until I read Mike Bunn's article "How to Read Like a Writer" that I realized I read this way in order to learn how to write. This insight inspired me to look back on some of my reading experiences in light of the existing theory on using reading to develop writing. Originally identified as a method by Professor Charles Moran in 1990, "reading like a writer" is referred to by many terms in academic literature, such as "close reading" (Brewer 635), "the whole reading approach" (Daane 184), and "read like a writer (WRS)" process (Bunn 71). An empirical study supports this reading method (Graham et al.), while some authors compare it to the way architects, carpenters, and gardeners study the work of their masters to build houses (Tate 506, Jauss 64), grow apples (Mueller 1021), and cultivate roses (Prose 268) themselves.

Indeed, to read like a writer means to look carefully at various "writerly techniques" (Bunn 72), such as "textures, rhythms, structure, and logic" (Daane 188), or anything else that is "particularly well put" (Smith 563), and decide whether we might use any of those techniques in our own writing. In this essay, I would like to expand on this view by redefining Bunn's concept of RLW into RAW. I propose that RAW stands for both "Reading As a Writer" and "Reading – Awareness – Writing." I believe that RAW is an integral three-part process that consists of reading other authors' raw texts, becoming aware of our own raw ideas, and writing raw drafts. I will address each of these parts in three corresponding sections of this essay. I will reflect on the pitfalls I encountered in the past when trying to craft myself as a writer through reading and discuss how the RAW approach helped me avoid those pitfalls in writing this very essay.

Apples and Oranges: Raw Texts

RAW begins with reading raw texts in a way that is both intuitive and conscious. Frank Smith suggests that we acquire knowledge about writing from reading "without deliberate effort" (560) and realize that we have "vicariously learned" only later when we implement techniques from the texts we have read in our own writing (563). I agree with Smith's idea of intuitive learning. Once, without recalling where I had learnt it, I applied a literary technique to explain an idea with a metaphor in my university financial essay. I illustrated how the relative purchasing power parity (PPP) theory fails in the short run due to the economic laws, much like an apple that falls within a short radius, or "not far from the tree," due to the laws of physics. My professor gave me a low grade with a comment that creative techniques were inappropriate for financial essays.

Obviously, I made no mistake in acquiring knowledge “without awareness,” as Smith states (560), but I faced a pitfall by applying that knowledge without awareness as well. Bunn states that RLW requires not only identifying “writerly choices” (72) but also considering the potential responses of other readers to those choices in our own writing (81). Clearly, I failed to consider the audience for my financial essay. I found myself in what Peter Elbow calls “[a] conflict in [g]oals” between “[b]eing a [w]riter vs. [b]eing an [a]cademic” (A Conflict in Goals 72). Ironically, I attempted to compare apples to oranges by employing a creative writing style in an essay for a strictly academic audience. Although Cynthia Dollins notes that infusing “creative craft” into “boring, basic reports” contributes to developing “a strong, engaging voice” (58), I still should have been more conscious during my RAW process.

In fact, I believe that the reading methods of Smith and Bunn can be synthesized into a single approach with the following equation: Intuition * Consciousness = Science. By taking seriously Stephen King’s “permission” to read whatever our “little heart desires” (192) and following Adam Savage’s advice to stop “screwing around and ... writ[e] it down,” we can practice RAW in a scientific way. For instance, both my intuitive inclination and conscious evaluation prompted me to think that the creative technique from my financial essay would be a better fit for this essay, as it is a reflective piece for my writing course. Only, instead of adopting a metaphor to explain the PPP formula, I am using a formula to explain the RAW metaphor. And this time, I have chosen the writing technique with my heart and executed it with my mind.

From Rigour to Vigour: Raw Ideas

RAW continues generating raw ideas in a way that honours our freedom to express them. Elbow and Smith concur that schools do not provide an environment where students can become “members of the club of writers” (Smith 566) because the contemporary education system prioritizes “learn[ing] the ideas of others” over having “new ideas of your own” (Elbow, *The War between Reading and Writing* 12). When I was 13, I realized that Fyodor Dostoevsky’s portrayal of his protagonist, Rodion Raskolnikov, resembled Victor Hugo’s approach to creating his character, Jean Valjean. When I shared my insight with my school teacher, she advised me to postpone my “PhD dissertation on this topic” until I had checked whether someone else had already expressed this idea before me. The rigorous response from my teacher is an example of emphasizing “evaluation over purpose,” which casts a student in the role of “a consumer of knowledge, not a producer” that Smith (566) and Elbow (17) warn about, respectively. Essentially, my teacher implied that my ideas were less worthy than those in the books. As a result, I did not write them down immediately and used reading to “serve” my ideas, as Elbow puts it (21). By the time I confirmed my

realization about Raskolnikov and Valijean, I had completely forgotten what I, myself, had to say about them.

The truth is that many inspired ideas come to us when our minds hover somewhere between perception and reflection, which I see as Perception * Reflection = Inspiration. We spend 23% of our reading time wandering in random thoughts, which may reduce our comprehension (Schooler et al. 213) and recall (Dixon et al. 528). Yet, by taking a “pause” (Dixon et al. 528) and becoming aware of our distracted state of mind (Schooler et al. 213), we may achieve deeper levels of reflection (Dixon et al. 518). I would add a level of perception into the equation and argue that it is essential to record all our ideas during the RAW process because, as one of my writing professors, Dr. Dorothy Woodman, says, even mundane thoughts, such as the reminder to purchase milk, can inspire profound ideas (Woodman 2023). For example, I perceived Elbow’s statement, “Let’s start with what you have to say.” (The War between Reading and Writing 14) when I recalled a Dostoevsky / Hugo episode. Instead of letting this memory simply pass through my mind, I typed it up, as raw as it was: “I wish I had written my idea down back then, it would have brought me rigour.” Suddenly, I realized that the misused words “rigour” and “vigour” perfectly reflected the essence of this section. Thus, the title of this section emerged from the written randomness of my mind.

Copy and Adapt: Raw Drafts

RAW concludes with writing raw drafts in a way that removes the pressure of being perfect. Mary Daane found that students who barely read struggle with writing more than experienced readers, not because they lack creative ideas or “imaginative language” in their drafts, but because they lack the confidence and skills to weave them into their final papers (187). This is exactly how I felt when I opted out of writing a thesis for my first undergraduate degree. I had equated a dissertation with a major scientific breakthrough that was beyond my reach since I believed I had nothing significant to say. Unfortunately, there was no course to reveal that a bachelor thesis is, in fact, a more down-to-earth undertaking. While Dollins insists that students should be exposed to the same genre in which they learn to write (57), Beth Hewett uses her own writing process as a case study for her students to explore. This type of course would have been invaluable to me then, and it is exactly the type of course I appreciate now. With all the opportunities we have to read about writing, experiment with writing, and comment on writing in our writing class, I might now be one step closer to writing my thesis, after all.

I believe that we discover ourselves as writers through practice by example, which I express as: Example * Practice = Discovery. Many authors maintain that we improve as writers by emulating the work of other writers. Carillo advises against fixating on the names of authors’ techniques and instead encourages to simply mimic them (22), Dollins calls for

imitating “mentor texts” (49), Brooke suggests emulating authors as individuals rather than their texts (23), and Mueller bluntly states: “steal, and steal from the best!” (1021). Of course, the trick lies not in copying and pasting an author’s work but in borrowing and adapting their approach in a way that sparks our own unique creativity. For instance, inspired by Ellen DeGeneres’ “[w]hat went wrong?” joke about Bruce Dern in her 86th Oscar opening speech, I chose a similar idiom for the title of this essay in order to make it less about me and more about RAW. I also followed the example of the article “Like Watching a Movie”: Notes on the Possibilities of Art in the Anthropocene (Necyk and Harvey) by incorporating a quotation into my title. Initially, I placed the title of Bunn’s article, Reading Like a Writer to the left side of my title. However, after developing my vision of RAW, I replaced “like” with “as.” In this way, I discovered my own writing by practicing writing examples of other writers.

Conclusion

When we learn to write by studying the written work of others and are open to inspiration, we discover our capacity to create written pieces ourselves. In this essay, I reflect on my experience of learning to write by reading—by viewing it through the theoretical lenses of reading like a writer. I summarize my reflections on the concept of Reading As a Writer (RAW) which implies three aspects: Reading – Awareness – Writing. I believe that reading as a writer is a process of self-discovery. It starts with a self-permission to trust our intuition and our willingness to maintain consciousness while we read the raw texts of others. It continues with an effort to distinguish between procrastinating and productive tendencies of our minds while we generate our own raw ideas. It finishes with a commitment to learn by example and practice on our own while we write our raw drafts. I conceptualize RAW in the formula: $RAW = Science + Inspiration + Discovery = (Intuition * Consciousness) + (Perception * Reflection) + (Examples * Practice)$. In its essence, RAW embodies acceptance of who we are as writers and individuals at the present moment in space-time, not constrained by the need to be perfect but motivated by the desire to be better.

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