

Want to be a better writer? Become a better reader

by Laura Orsini

Every craft takes practice. The best athletes spend hours on the court, the ice, the field. Gourmet chefs take days, weeks, months to perfect a single recipe. So it stands to reason that in order to become a better writer, you should practice by writing every day. However, it takes more than just practice to become a better writer. It also takes immersion in reading the writing of others — and not just of the genre in which you specialize.

What is your reading style? Chances are that if you are a writer, you already are a pretty good reader. But chances are that you also tend to stick with one or two primary genres. Do you prefer modern fiction? Tend always toward sci-fi? Were the last 25 books you purchased business books? Shelves filled with sports bios and autobiographies? Floor, desk, and bedside table strewn with self-help literature?

There is nothing at all wrong with reading a lot in one subject — however, you will stifle your growth as a writer if you fail to read beyond that single genre. If you really want to improve your writing, you will be willing to read across multiple genres, pouring over virtually anything you can get your hands on.

Yes — this also means reading the stuff you do not like. Take some time and try to figure out why you do not like it. Is it too technical? Is it the style that bothers you? Do you find the voice or characters problematic? The further you study the work that troubles you, the more likely you will find yourself either growing to like it, or at least developing an appreciation for it. At the very least, you will learn how not to do the same things in your own writing.

Studies have shown that fewer than 10 percent of all people who buy books ever read past the first chapter. What kind of reader are you? Do you tend to have several books going at one time? Do you read in spurts, one after another for several months, and then take a complete reading sabbatical for a while? Do you find yourself so hungry for reading material that you will literally read the back of the cereal box if the newspaper arrives late on a weekend morning?

To begin improving your writing, let everything you read influence you. You obviously want to read books, journals, and literature within your industry and allied trades. You also want to read your competitors' materials, as well as regularly attending

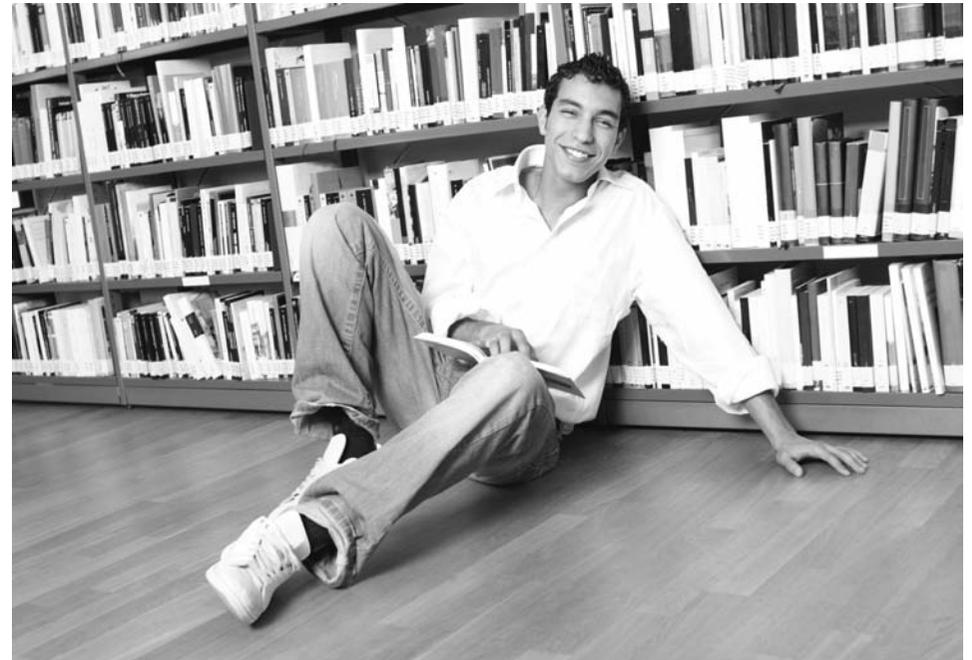
workshops and seminars in yours and related fields. Consider keeping a journal with notes from your readings. When you come across things that particularly speak to you, jot them down, or record the thoughts and ideas they trigger for you.

If you write nonfiction, read fiction — good fiction you can begin to model. In her inaugural novel, *The Good Mother*, (ITALICS) Sue Miller described a scene in which the main character cut her leg shaving. That single, tiny detail gave authenticity to the entire story. Ken Follett, in *Pillars of the Earth*, (ITALICS) achieved a similar effect when describing a group of one-dimensional, background characters whose necks eventually began to ache from craning up for hours at a time to watch construction of the magnificent church.

Whether you enjoy fiction or not, find and read good stories so that you can become better at telling good stories. As Internet guru Joe Vitale teaches, the most hypnotic writing always tells a story. Even your nonfiction should connect emotionally with your readers because it tells them a story that grabs their attention and draws them in. Mimic the styles and phrases that appeal to you in others' writing. Practice using them yourself until you feel confident and comfortable and can make them your own.

Venturing into a bookstore can be an intimidating experience for virtually every aspiring writer, but it does not have to be. It helps if you remember that, in all likelihood, you will not be the first to tackle your subject; unless you are on the cutting edge of medical or scientific research, your idea probably will not be brand new. That in no way implies that you should not write your book, article or Web site.

Human beings learn through repetition, meaning that most of us need to hear the same messages again and again before we finally assimilate them. So do not worry that there are other titles



similar to yours on the store shelves or scads of other articles on your topic out there. Ever notice when you purchase a book on Amazon.com how they give you a list of other books selected by readers who purchased the book you bought? Ever notice how frequently they are on the same subject?

Do not let the vast numbers of pre-existing volumes scare you. Do not let others' good writing intimidate you. Rather, allow them to inspire you. You can do it. You have a message to share, something important to say, and it is essential that you convey that information to the world. What is your purpose? Your passion? If you are not sharing your knowledge and your expertise, you are welching on your agreement for being in this life in the first place.

Get out there. Read more. And become a better writer.

Laura Orsini is a professional editor, writer and marketing advisor with a BA in Nonfiction Writing from the University of Arizona. www.wordsmadeeasy.com, Laura@wordsmadeeasy.com or 602-253-8463.