

READ LIKE A
Writer
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WORKBOOK

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TRANSFORMING STORY



Welcome!

Exercise your writing muscles by learning to read like a writer.

This past fall, I participated in a fabulous day of inspiration with some of my fellow Author Accelerator-certified writing coaches. During that day, we created a profile for our ideal coaching client and “avid reader” was at the top of my list. Whether you’re just starting out or have multiple manuscripts under your belt, the best thing you can do to improve your craft is to **read, read, and read some more.**

You might think that I’m looking for writers with marketable ideas, who already have strong line-level writing, a social media presence, or even an MFA in Creative Writing under their belts. And I’m not saying those aren’t nice-to-haves. But after many years of working with writers, I’ve found that the best predictor of a fruitful coaching relationship is whether the client reads widely and well.

What do you mean, by “reads well?”

Reading like a writer is a different thing than reading for pleasure. It goes beyond the basics of reading comprehension you practiced in middle school. It’s all about looking at the big-picture story and then analyzing how the writer has achieved that big picture with a combination of character development, plot structure, pacing, and figurative language.

Why read widely?

If you know you’re going to write YA Romance, why read adult fantasy or middle grade adventure? I like to think of the stories we consume (both written and visual) are the well from which we draw our writerly inspiration. The deeper that well, the more vivid our stories will be. Just look at the success of *The Magicians*, which is an adult fantasy full of Harry Potter hat tips or *A Wish in the Dark*’s beautiful middle grade take on *Les Misérables*.

READ LIKE A WRITER

A Reading Exercise to Help You Get Started

If you'd like to practice reading like a writer, get out your highlighters and choose a book that's in a similar age category and genre to yours. Photocopy several pages or even a whole chapter and do your marking up there (I'd never tell you to write *IN* the book—I'm not a monster!).

Choose one that was published in the last three years or so. And maybe one that hasn't hit the New York Times Bestseller list or recently been optioned for a movie franchise. Although commercial success is a wonderful thing, a lot of the books that make it big break the rules. And you need to learn the rules before you can (intentionally) break them!

Get out those highlighters and choose a color for each of the following categories:

Dialogue	Action	Setting	Interiority/character	Backstory
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Note: Some genre stories may require a few more colors. For example, historical details, world building, or clues/red herrings. Customize your list accordingly.

Now get busy marking up those (photocopied) pages—each line of text should be marked with one of the colors you selected above. It's possible that there can be overlap between, for example, backstory and character development, or action and setting. That's fine—you can mark them with both colors or use whatever method makes the most sense to you.

Once you've marked up a scene or even a whole chapter, take a look at the color balance on the page. If you chose an opening chapter, you'll likely have more setting, action, and dialogue, and less backstory (although there are exceptions). If you chose an action scene from later in the book, there may not be much character development at all. Notice how the five components above fit together in the passage, how the words flow, how the sentences are put together, how the author shows emotions, the rhythm of the dialogue.

Did you find some phrases that do double-duty? Some that were hard to categorize? Look at the balance between Action (which includes both action and dialogue) and Exposition (setting, interiority, and backstory).

As you read on, flag passages that really move you. Once you've finished the book, go back and read those passage out loud. What can you learn about the rhythm of the words, the word choice, the sound of the dialogue, and the voice by reading aloud?

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Bonus Writing Activities

Once you've practiced on a few published stories, you can apply these same techniques to your own writing.

Activity 1: Color code your first chapter and compare it to the published book you chose. Does the balance between Action and Exposition look similar to what you found in the published passage you marked up? How is it different? How could you revise your chapter to make it stronger?

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Bonus Writing Activities

Activity 2: Choose a scene you're struggling with. Then go to the mentor text you chose for the reading exercise on page 2 and find a scene that serves a similar purpose to the one you're struggling with. Read the mentor text scene aloud. Then read yours. Does it feel the same in terms of cadence, rhythm, and pacing to the mentor text? Did any edits suggest themselves to you as you read? If a sentence tripped you up as you read aloud, consider wordsmithing—that's one that's likely to trip your readers up as well. Would swapping out weaker nouns or verbs with something more vivid or descriptive improve the rhythm? Edit and then read it aloud a second time to find out.

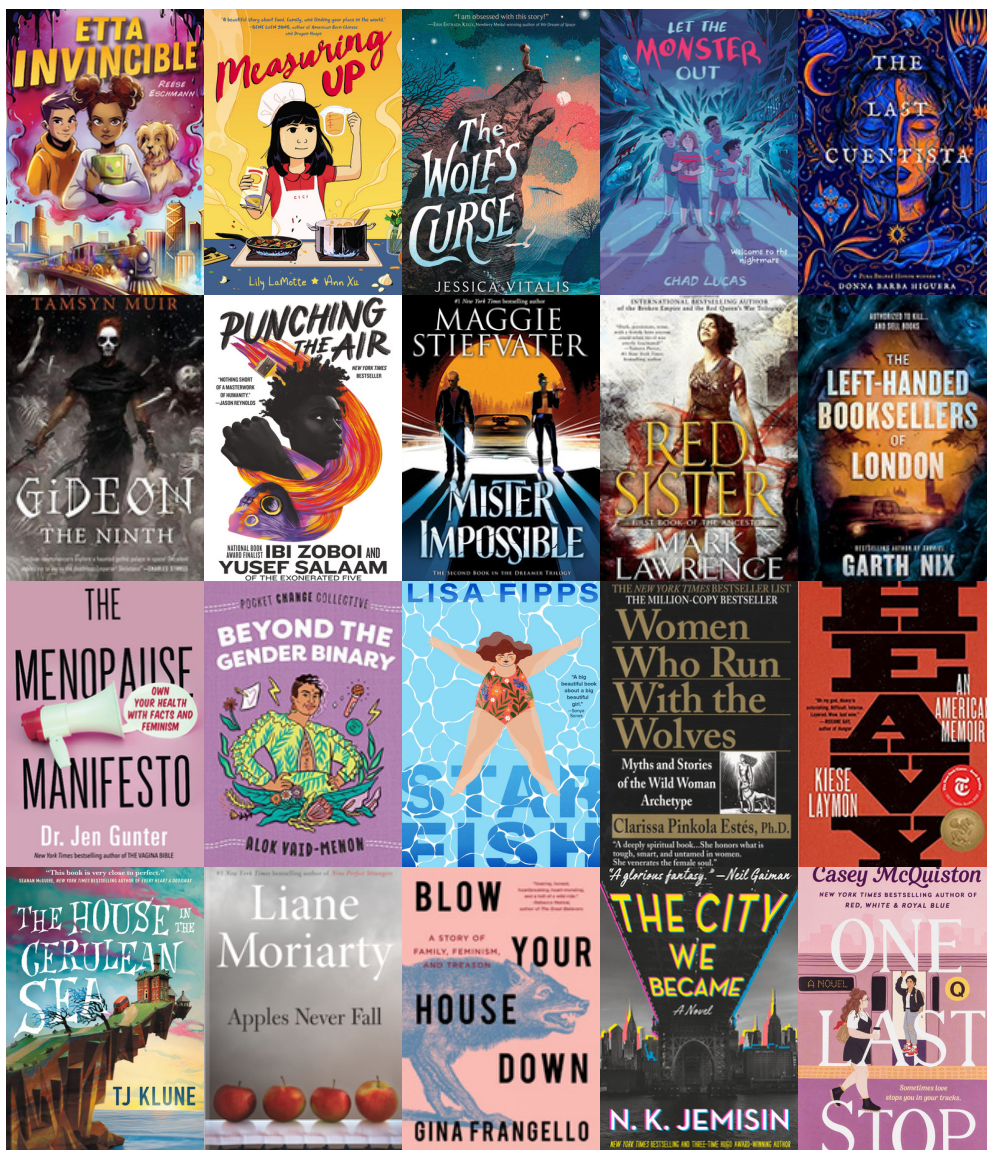
Did you learn something new as you started reading like a writer?

If so, let me know on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), or [Facebook](#).

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Need Some Inspiration? Check Out My Recent Favorites!

I don't just tell my clients to read widely...I read widely myself. Here are some of my favorite reads from the past few years. I hope they inspire you to add some variety to your 2021 reading list. Note the variety of genre, age category, and representation. If you want more on that, check out [Decolonize Your Bookshelves](#).



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