

2. Read what you want to write

No matter what your chosen form – genre fiction (Romances, Thrillers etc), literary fiction, poems or plays – you must begin to immerse yourself in it, focussing on what is currently being published or performed. Instead of reading or watching passively, however – purely for pleasure – start doing so actively and critically. Start reading and watching as a *writer*.

(The focus here is on fiction writing, but the questions apply equally well to other forms.)

Select your favourite book/story. Read twice through the opening paragraph or even the first page – the first time for pure enjoyment, the second time with a critical eye. Ask yourself the following questions:

- How does the first sentence catch your attention?
- How smoothly do the next few sentences follow on from the first and draw you into the story?
- How does the end of the first paragraph/page make you want to go on to the second paragraph/page?

Now read it for a third time, delving even more deeply. Ask yourself the following questions:

- If it's a description – of a place (a landscape, a street scene) or a person – which aspects of the place or person has the writer focussed on? Which aspects have been ignored?
- Can you sense a character behind the description? In other words, can you tell that the description is by a narrator who is a character in the book, rather than by the author her/himself? How has this been achieved?
- What does the description tell you about the person who is doing the describing? Further, what does it tell you about the *relationship* between the describer and the described? How, precisely, has the author done this?
- If the first page consists mostly of dialogue, how are the different voices presented? If not (or rarely) by name, how do the speech patterns and vocabulary that each character uses differentiate her/him from each of the others? [Try cutting out little scraps of paper and covering up the identities of each speaker. Would you still be able to tell, purely from the way they talk, who is saying what?]

Now open the book/story at random and select another paragraph. Ask the same questions. You should now be starting to see how your favourite author achieves many of the effects that you enjoy so much. Try creating a first paragraph of your own, putting into it as many of your discoveries as possible. Repeat often enough, and you will start to develop your own writing muscles – this sort of thing isn't called an exercise for nothing.