



Sarah Selecky
WRITING SCHOOL

How To Do a Self-Directed Writing Workshop (part 2)

1. Get yourself a stack of books.

Read widely. This is important — don't just stick to one genre or style. Go to the library, and find books you don't know that you'll even like. Get books that feel like they're way too fun, or way too serious. You can make it a scavenger hunt! One YA fiction title. One sci-fi title. One classic. One novel in translation. One autobiography. One book that's been made into a Major Hollywood Picture. One book you're afraid to read because it might be too much like the one you're writing. Etc.

2. Begin reading for clues.

(More on how I do this in Part 1 of this series.)

3. Document the title and author of each book.

Your subconscious will be learning all sorts of good stuff from each book, but the point of this self-directed workshop is to bring it into the conscious mind. So before you return the library books, document them somehow: take a photo of each book you've read, write down the title, keep a page in your bullet journal, whatever works for you.

4. Take notes in writing.

I prefer to write down what I learn from the books I read, because I believe that something alchemical happens when I put words on a page. Yes, it can be satisfying to talk about my thoughts and responses, especially with someone who has read the same book. But the lessons that each piece teaches me about my own writing are personal, intimate, and connected to my process.

I don't share a lot about my work-in-progress, because I like to keep the lid on the pressure cooker, so to speak. Writing down notes for myself, and nobody else, keeps the lid on the simmering pot. It

keeps the learning concentrated.

If you haven't tried a self-directed writing workshop already, I encourage you to try it now. Start a new journal (always nice to have a reason to start a new journal!) and start a reading tracking list, at the very least.

Remember, you're not just counting titles. You aren't a book collector — you're *studying writing and craft*. Reading slowly can be part of the point, too. Because it's all about what you recognize when you read.

What captivates you? What repels you? What makes you uncomfortable? What comforts you? Why?

*Let books teach you how to write
what you want to read.*

In the hopes that seeing my notes might be useful for you, here are some more lessons I've learned from my recent reading.

Reading Notes

Love In the Time of Global Warming by Francesca Lia Block

Remembered why I wanted to become an author. Write for magic, Write for love. You can also write about darkness, loneliness and sadness — don't be afraid that it will make your book "heavy."

My New American Life by Francine Prose

Write to get away with it. Have fun with your dialogue, and your dialogue will be funny. Write it for fun. Stretch what you think you can do — write what you don't think you can write. Don't be afraid to sound too dumb, don't be afraid to sound too intelligent.

I'll Drink to That by Betty Halbreich

A linear narrative is overrated. Scenes can come as they come, and if you're transfixed by the details, the narrative will continue. Also: fashion is more meaningful than you think. Making note of style

and design isn't superficial, it's detailed.

Elizabeth Is Missing by Emma Healey

Get in the head of your unreliable narrator, fully know her story/reality. At the same time, learn the details about what's happening in "reality." It will feel like writing in double-exposed film. For your writing to ask, "what is real?" you need to be slightly confused yourself. Also, utterly clear. Hold two stories in your mind at once.

The Clasp by Sloane Crosley

Don't explain anything in your dialogue. Let it be fast and jagged, let conversations overlap, let it be hard to understand. Let your characters drop quick references, write scraps of dialogue in different languages, be marvellously cryptic. It just makes the reading more interesting.

Writing contains mysterious patterns and coincidences. Let images come to you, and trust them. The way they come to you as you write them down may be a significant part of the form and content of the story itself. Don't overthink it — just get the scenes down, and trust the images.

This is how people learned how to write before there were writing workshops, after all.

Sarah

