

Lesson 7:
How to deep-read sample essays
And your own
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“If you want to write well, you have to read well” I’ve heard (or read) from countless authors. To write good poetry, read good poetry. Same with fiction. And math papers, I suppose. The same is true here. Reading completed essays helps give form to the abstract ideas we discuss, and launches our brains into a creative mode suited for the task of writing them.

With that in mind, the most important thing you can do is just read a bunch of good essays. And they don’t all have to be by veterans either. The first one I read was by a teenage girl who wrote about her alcoholic mother. I didn’t share any of her experiences, but I appreciated the way she told her story and described her growth, so I was inspired by it.

That said, if you want to get a little extra out of your reading, here are some ways to think about the process:

1. We mentioned reading each essay (at least) twice. On the first time, try to read all the way through without stopping (not even for notes.) This helps you get a general idea of the essay, as a continuous piece of writing (which is what it’s meant to be.)
 - a. Try to summarize the essay. You should be able, in a couple sentences, to give a few details about the author’s background and intentions. If you can’t, you should let them know.
 - b. Does it flow? Flow is hard to pin down, but ideally your paragraphs build on each other in a way that makes sense. Think of them like footprints: not connected, exactly, but going in the same direction.

- c. What do we learn about the writer? Where do we see storytelling?
 - d. Does the essay (kind of) answer the prompt?
2. On the second read, focus more on the details such as:
- a. What stood out to you? Where do you want more clarification/information? This is similar to the “Helpful Feedback” section. Often the answers to these questions in the first read.
 - b. Does the writer show warmth and competence? Does their structure (if any) work?
 - c. Do sentences/paragraphs transition smoothly? If you find yourself re-reading a sequence of sentences, it’s possible that they’re not well connected. Note that. Also note when everything flows well. That is a huge compliment to a writer.
 - d. Note cases of repetition. This could be intentional (for dramatic effect) or an accidental redundancy.
 - e. Note where sentences (or even paragraphs) feel irrelevant to the central theme.
 - f. Finally, if you find yourself “glazing over” parts of the passage, note that too. You should still go back and read them, but note how you responded to them.

Happy reading.