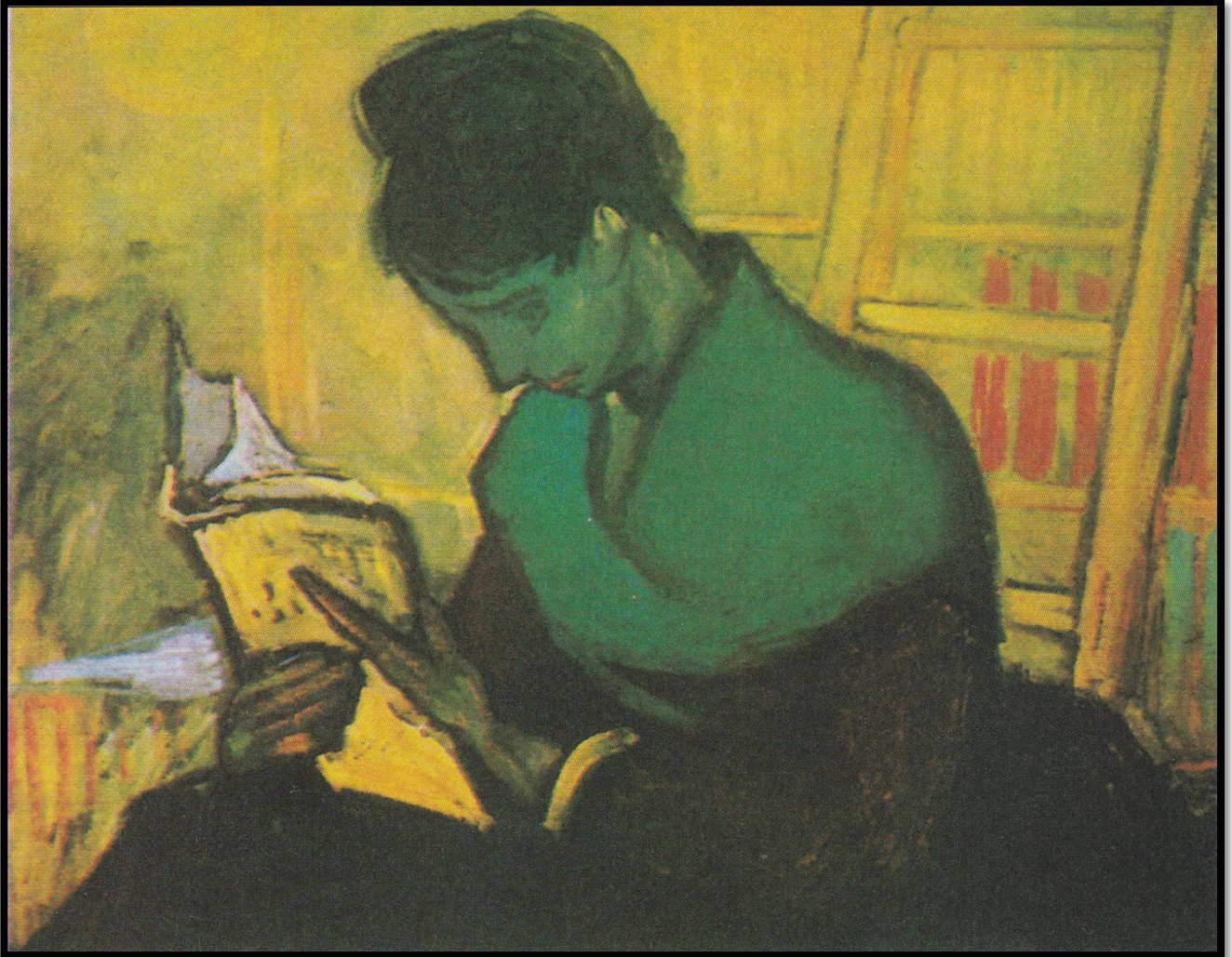


Intro to ELA 4

Reading and Writing



Vincent van Gogh, *Woman Reading a Novel*, 1888.

Warm-up questions:

1. What makes someone a good reader?
2. Is there such a thing as a 'bad reader'? If so, what are some of those characteristics?

Reading about Reading:

1. Read your assigned source, using all your techniques that makes you a 'good reader'.
2. Explain your source to the rest of the class. You can include:
 - a. Your interpretation (and possible other interpretations) of the source
 - b. The extent to agree with it – or disagree with it
 - c. Extensions on it – do you have any new ideas now? Can this help you in a literature course?

Source 1: C.G. Lichtenberg (1742 -99).

A book is a mirror: if an ass peers into it, you can't expect an apostle [source of wisdom] to look out.

Source 2: W.H. Auden, 'Reading', 1948.

To read is to translate, for no two persons' experiences are the same. A bad reader is like a bad translator: he interprets literally when he ought to paraphrase and paraphrases when he ought to interpret literally. In learning to read well, scholarship, valuable as it is, is less important than instinct; some great scholars have been poor translators.

Source 3: J.M. Coetzee, excerpt from the novel *The Master of Petersburg*, 1994.

'What is it that frightens you, Councillor Maximov? When you read [a story] about Karamzin or Karamzov or whatever his name is, when Karamzin's skull is cracked open like an egg [by a murderer's axe], what is the truth: do you suffer with him, or do you secretly exult behind the arm that swings the axe? You don't answer? Let me tell you then: reading is being the arm and being the axe *and* being the skull, reading is giving yourself up, not holding yourself at a distance and jeering...'

'You are a very clever man, Fyodor Mikhailovich. But you speak of reading as though it were demon-possession. Measured by that standard I fear I am a very poor reader indeed, dull and earthbound. Yet I wonder whether, at this moment, you are not in a fever.'

Source 4: Orhan Pamuk, *The Naïve and Sentimental Novelist*, 2009.

Another part of our mind wonders how much of the story writer tells is real experience and how much is imagination. We ask this question especially the parts of the novel that arouse our wonder, admiration, and amazement. To read a novel is to wonder constantly, even at moments when we lose ourselves most deeply in the book: How much of this is fantasy, and how much is real? A logical paradox exists between, on the one hand, the experience of losing oneself in the novel and naively thinking it is real, and, on the other, one's sentimental-reflective curiosity about the extent of fantasy it contains. But the inexhaustible power and vitality of the art of the novel stem from its unique logic and from its reliance on this type of conflict. Reading a novel means understanding the world via a non-Cartesian logic. By this I mean the constant and steadfast ability to believe simultaneously in contradictory ideas. Thus, a third dimension of reality slowly begins to emerge within us: the dimension of the complex world of the novel. Its elements conflict with one another, yet at the same time are accepted and described.

Source 5: Simon Leys, *The Hall of Uselessness*, 2013.

As you may perhaps remember, some time ago the English actor Hugh Grant was arrested by the police in Los Angeles: he was performing a rather private activity in a public place with a lady of the night. For less famous mortals, such a mishap would have been merely embarrassing; but for such a famous film star, the incident proved quite shattering. For a while, it looked as if his professional career might sink—not to mention the damage inflicted upon his personal life. In this distressing circumstance, he was interviewed by an American journalist, who asked him a very American question: “Are you receiving any therapy or counselling?” Grant replied, “No. In England, we read novels.”

Reading: A Path to Better Writing

In spite of the attention we are about to give to developing a voice in your writing, it's important to remind you that good writing grows out of good reading. And yes, good writers learn by reading other good writers.

The reading that you gravitate to may in fact be a kind of unconscious impulse towards the kind of style you want to develop. So, in fact, your set of 'good writers' may be different to that of your friends. You may like Barbara Kingslover and Douglas Adams and someone else may decide that John Grisham and Malcolm Gladwell make the best reading.

Whatever style you aspire to, if you want to make your reading a tool for improving your writing, then you need to move into a more analytical mode; you need to **re-read (!!!!)**, and study how your writer chooses words and makes sentences out of them. You need to see how they open a piece and how they close, and how they sustain a reader's interest along the way. There are many small and large elements of a good writing style; these are only a few.

Assignment:

One of the tried and true ways that many prose writers have learned to write like the 'greats' is to engage in exercises that involve imitation. While doing this sort of exercise may seem like minute and trying work, it can also be viewed as quite a creative and challenging endeavour.

1. Read carefully through the two short extracts that follow, one by Virginia Woolf and one by Anton Chekhov. Choose one, change the subject (**introduce yourself or write about your summer vacation**) *imitating the style of the original*. In order to become closely familiar with the prose style of the two very different stylists, you must:
 - a. Follow the *exact placement of words and the very same sentence structure*
 - b. Where there is a noun, substitute your own noun, where there are several clauses, or where there is a simple sentence, you must imitate these also
 - c. Try to end up with the same number of words as the original (it's ok if you're a bit off.)
2. Post your writing on Canvas Discussions by September 6, 22:00. It will be worth 5 points (done/not done).

Virginia Woolf, extract from *Orlando*, 1928.

Orlando looked no more. He dashed downhill. He let himself in a wicket gate. He tore up the winding staircase. He reached his room. He tossed his stockings to one side of his room, his jerkin to the other. He dipped his head. He scoured his hands. He pared his fingernails. With no more than six inches of looking-glass and a pair of old candles to help him, he had thrust on crimson breeches, lace collar, waistcoat of taffeta, and shoes with rosettes on them as big as double dahlias in less than ten minutes by the stable clock. He was ready. He was flushed. He was excited. But he was terribly late.

Anton Chekhov, extract from 'The Lady with a Little Dog', 1899.

Then they had a long discussion, talked about how to rid themselves of the need for hiding, for deception, for living in different towns and not seeing each other for long periods. How could they free themselves from these unbearable bonds?

"How? How?" he asked, clutching his head. "How?"

And it seemed that, just a little more – and the solution would be found, and then a new, beautiful life would begin; and it was clear to both of them that the end was still far, far off, and that the most complicated and difficult part was just beginning.