

*To the Student:  
On Becoming an “Apprentice”*

*Nature is commonplace.*

*Imitation is more interesting.*

—Gertrude Stein

**I**ndulge me for a moment by using your historical imagination. You live in Florence in the fifteenth century; you come from that burgeoning middle class of merchants and artisans and are training to be a painter. Your father has apprenticed you to one of the well-known painters of the day, and for years now, since you were quite a youngster, you have worked your way up in his workshop. First you merely swept the floors, cleaned up the dyes and tints and frames and such at the end of the day; then you learned to mix the paints. After years you were allowed to do fill-in work on small compositions; gradually your master gave you parts of compositions to complete. More recently you’ve been learning the new art of single-point perspective; you’ve been learning your master’s style; his way of arranging figures and shading and color; the sorts of compositions, religious and, more recently, secular images from the Greek myths, that the master uses. At the same time, you’ve been learning the business of being a painter: the delicate and yet competitive process of securing commissions from patrons,

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the troubles of securing materials, of securing apprentices like yourself, of paying assistants to help in the largest projects. You have confidence that, if your master were to ask you to produce a crucifix for a new church, you could make one so good that few, if any, would know the difference between your work and your master's. At the same time, you've begun to think that you might see things a bit differently, have your own styles you'd like to try—perhaps different subject matter, perhaps new ways of handling color and line and shading. Of course you don't do these in your work for the master, but you've begun experimenting a bit on your own. He's taught you well, and you feel ready to produce your Master Piece, that first piece of work that will show that you, too, can be a Master, open a workshop, obtain commissions, have apprentices and assistants of your own.

Or you are a jazz musician. You were first attracted to the music by its energy, style, artfulness, the freedom of improvising—of making it up as you went along, of the freedom to play whatever you wanted, rather than having to follow the notes on the page someone else had written. Of course that was years ago. Since then you've realized that to do that well, you have to know chords and scales and modulations and patterns—in fact, an enormous amount of musical theory—quite well, and you've memorized and practiced these over and over again. But not only that. As you met other jazz musicians, you found that you wanted to learn their phrasings, their “licks,” their snippets. And they told you they had learned these from others. So like many jazz musicians, you went back to study the greats—Charlie “Bird” Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis—writing out their most famous solos and memorizing them until you could play them in your sleep. Of course you soon realized that no one wanted to hear you play a copy of a Diz solo, but doing this gave you a closetful of resources, phrases, licks, out of which you began to construct your own distinctive style.



I give you these two vignettes because in them is bound up the central method of this book: imitation of the greats as a way to learn an art and develop into an accomplished artist oneself. It

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is, in fact, the way almost all crafts, all arts, have been learned throughout history, from blacksmithing to shoemaking to jazz to, yes, writing. Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton, and countless others learned the art of writing in a school system that, in teaching Latin, forced these students to translate and imitate the great classical writers of antiquity, over and over again. It instilled in them a respect for these writers, for they knew intimately not just the things the writers said, but the rhythms and patterns of their prose, the meters and shadings of their poetry. Like the jazz musicians, Milton could imitate effects from Virgil (and Homer, and the Bible, and more) in *Paradise Lost* because from the time he was quite young he had read, translated, and imitated the *Aeneid* over and over. And he could make a new kind of English poetry by discovering his own voice in adopting and adapting these masters.

Now, few writing books on the market today teach you to write by making this method the important step in learning. Some of them suggest that if you just express your inner self enough, through free-writing and such, you'll figure out how to write well just by constantly saying what's inside of you. Others explore writing as politics (usually from the left), and encourage you to see writing as a negotiation between your situation and the power structures around you. Still others tell you about the basic forms—of assembling an essay (intros, bodies, conclusions), of argument (definitional, causal, evaluative, etc.)—and have you try your hand at assembling the writing through working on mastering these forms. All of them have a grasp on a piece of the truth, but all of them, as G. K. Chesterton says of heretics, think their piece of the truth is the whole truth. Writing is at times self-expression, but not always, and self-expression alone is not going to teach you the crafts and skills necessary to organize and assemble a complex piece of prose. (Imagine setting a young painting student in front of a canvas and saying, "Just paint what you feel," and telling him little else: how would he learn the techniques of perspective, shading, line, composition? And how many of us have heard awful solos, in jazz or rock, from musicians who just "play what they feel" without any knowledge of the craft of good music?) And indeed, writing is

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political—as is painting, as is jazz—but it is also much more, and focusing on political engagement is not going to teach us how to craft sentences better, or organize our thoughts better so others can understand them and be persuaded by them. And yes, it is important to know something about basic forms in writing, but just being told about them does not help much; like the jazz musician, you have to know the forms intimately, and you do so by following the contours of those forms the great ones constructed.

So what should you do if you want to learn how to write? (And I suppose you do, if you are holding this book right now.) Well, this book suggests that you learn writing the way it (and all other arts) have been taught, at least in Western culture, and in fact in many others as well, for over 2,500 years—by imitating the greats, the accomplished writers from the past who are almost universally acknowledged as masters. That is, to learn to write better,\* you must become an apprentice, working under a series of masters in a Writer's Workshop.

What I have arranged here, then, is a brief beginning of that process. In using this book, you often will have a text from a great writer set before you, and you will attempt to imitate his or her writing. You will be like the Florentine painter, learning how to mimic every move of your master. And I encourage you to do this—try to imitate small things, like syntax, or metaphors; try to get at the rhythm of the writer's sentences; try to grasp the larger movements that make up the writer's sensibility, his worldview, if you will. Become an apprentice, and enjoy the fact that you are apprenticing with some of the real masters of us-

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\* You already write pretty well. I'm quite sure of that, too, if you are holding this book right now. If you do not believe me, take a look at some recent essay you have written. Now imagine you are just learning the English language for the first time—can you see all of the complex rules, requirements, and idioms you are using, and using well, without even realizing it? If you do not, try translating the essay into some language you are taking or have recently taken in a class—Spanish, French, Russian, whatever. Or try writing an original essay in that language. You'll quickly see how much more fluent you are writing in English. So the point is not to write well for the first time, but to write better. And I know you need to do that, not just because you are holding this book, but because we all need to do that, all the time. And we need to do that because better writing enlarges our minds, gives us a greater mental universe in which to exist, opens and leads our souls in different and new ways.

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ing words. I will lead you through a series of masters, each with something to teach you, something to enlarge your competence and ability and world.

Realize, too, that imitation is not just a matter of learning technical skills. Imitation can lead to deeper, further knowledge. A few years ago, my friend Keith Rhodes took up the electric bass. He thought that the way to do it would be to learn from one of the masters. So he got out all his old Beatles albums—I know, they are well before your time, and in fact a little before mine, but indulge me here for a minute—and started playing along with Paul McCartney’s bass work, from *Help* to *Let It Be*. He learned so many of the “moves,” the riffs, the “tricks,” but he also, he told me, thinks he discovered something about the Beatles. The standard rock-critic opinion is that John Lennon was the real artist of the group, McCartney just a pop-song writer. But seeing the songs from McCartney’s viewpoint, because he was imitating him, Keith had an intimate knowledge of McCartney’s work in the group. He began to see how McCartney grew more as an artist than any other Beatle. Maybe the group broke up—that *awful* event for the ’60s generation!—because he just wanted to find musicians who would grow along with him, and he felt John, George, and Ringo were not going to grow musically. McCartney’s playing, his inventive writing, came forth to my friend in a new way, and Keith says he would never have seen this had he not played along with him—imitated him, learned from him—in a careful, systematic way.

Imitation is not going to trap you into doing what everyone else has always done. On the contrary, it frees you to find your own individual way of doing things, by giving you the grounding for writing as the champions have always done. As I said, musicians almost all learn by the method I have described—patterning themselves on the great ones, then branching out on their own. Writers do the same. If you don’t believe me, look at any short list of writers who were schooled in imitation and have developed some of the most distinctive works in all of literature: William Shakespeare, John Milton, Jane Austen, T. S. (and George) Eliot.

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One more thing. I always remember learning best when I was having fun. Sometimes this can be a hard thing to pull off in an academic setting. It is not even necessary that you have fun with this book in order to learn from it. Yet it really ought to be possible to have fun learning with this book, or at least more possible than usual. The activities and exercises often encourage you to take your imitation work in particular with a light heart. I have recently been watching *The Magic Schoolbus* with my two sons, and the unusual teacher on that show, Ms. Frizzle, is fond of saying, "Take chances! Get messy! Make mistakes!" This book will work best when you have that attitude of risk-taking, of trying something new in an imitation, of not worrying too much about making mistakes because you are taking chances and trying new moves. Many of my students have done their best work when they took this advice to heart, and it certainly makes the work go down more easily.