

“WRITING IS LEARNED BY IMITATION”

What if I told you there was a trick, an easy method, that’s been proven to take our average, perhaps even subpar, writing up to unimaginable levels? Would you be interested?

Such a method, with all its various exercises, really does exist.

It’s the practice of imitation, the act of observing the techniques and tendencies—actions, if it’s a sport or craft requiring movement—of another person, preferably highly skilled or proficient in a certain area, and then recreating or mimicking the methods we watched them use.

The discussion and practice of humans imitating other humans has a long, storied history.

Over 2,000 years ago, and, until recently, everyday since then, it’s been common practice for students of various fields to copy or mimic the “masters,” the ones who’ve perfected their particular profession.

In his 350 B.C. treatise, *Poetics*, Aristotle connected the act of imitation to the very fabric of human nature.

By observing children or babies “learn [their] earliest lessons through imitation,” we, wrote the ancient philosopher, can see that “the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood.”

One way we can distinguish man from the “other animals” is by seeing that he “is the most imitative of living creatures.”ⁱ

Aristotle was on to something.

When we look throughout history, we find examples of people, of various skills and crafts, who have imitated their way to the top.

It’s been well documented that artists from the past as well as more contemporary artists, such as Pablo Picasso, have achieved their legendary status by mimicking the great artists, by observing and recreating their subtle use of shapes or the diverse directions of their brush strokes, that came before them.

We even have modern day examples of people who have used the act of imitation to propel themselves to the top of their field.

Kobe Bryant, a now retired five-time NBA champion who’s often considered by sports journalists and commentators to be one of the top five basketball players of all time, admits that his techniques and skills, the ones that helped him reach legendary status, developed from studying and mimicking the the actions and tendencies of the players that came before him. “I seriously have stolen all of my moves from the greatest players,” confesses Bryant.ⁱⁱ Imitation launched Bryant into elite status.

As a young boy growing up in Italy, Bryant spent his time meticulously dissecting the footage of taped NBA games recorded and sent to him by his grandfather. He would then go to the court and emulate what he watched until he perfected every nuance. Today, Bryant is known as one of the greatest scorers the game has ever seen, having a picture-perfect post fade-away, and, at least when he was younger, possessing elite driving abilities.

By practicing the moves of the masters, Bryant became a master himself.

What the practice of imitation did for Bryant—help a young, thin motivated kid perfect the techniques of his trade—it has also done for writers throughout history.

Some of the most famous people in history—whether well known and admired for their writing or not—have discussed and, at times, even attributed the practice of emulating great authors to be the single greatest exercise to improve their writing.

When Benjamin Franklin opened up a copy of *The Spectator*, a daily paper once distributed throughout England, he became fascinated. “I thought the writing was excellent, and wished, if possible, to imitate it,” wrote Franklin in his autobiography.ⁱⁱⁱ

To incorporate the techniques that intrigued him into his own writing, the Founding Father and inventor of the lightning rod attempted to reproduce certain sections of the publication from memory. After struggling on his own to rewrite the original, after writing without looking at the paper, he would then “compare” his own writing with that of the text in *The Spectator*, uncover all

the subtle differences and nuances between the two, and finally “correct” his own writing until it was an exact replica of the section he was trying to copy.

Before Jack London ever wrote his 1906 classic *White Fang*, he copied Rudyard Kipling.

Desperate to improve his writing, London set out to copy by hand the author that had most inspired him. He would read a section of Kipling’s work and then write it down to absorb his style.

London would later confess that practice of copying Kipling’s writings led to Kipling’s writing style—particularly his rhythm and cadence—permeating his own writing. “As to myself,” explained London, “there is no end of Kipling in my work.”

London even goes so far as to admit that it was the practice of imitating Kipling’s writing that gave him the skills necessary to produce his classical works. “I would never possibly have written anywhere near the way I did had Kipling never been. True, true, every bit of it.”^{iv}

What’s also true, as London would suggest, as is consistent with the idea that greats reached their status by copying other writers, is that Kipling’s work was the result of imitating other writers. “And if several other men had never existed,” wrote London, “Kipling would never have written as he did.”^v

The author of *The Call of the Wild*, the 35th greatest novel of all time according to *the Guardian*, London is often considered as being among the best of American writers. Far from the exception, learning to write by imitation is the rule.

Learning to write by imitating others was once even the standard method for teaching students how to write, the most widely and deeply accepted technique used to learn and grow at writing.

Imitation is the most efficient, sure-fire method to rapidly growing as a writer.

When we move our eyes across a text of great writing, with the intent to detect and dissect what makes that writing stand out, when we observe and linger over its qualities and characteristics, we begin to absorb and add, quite quickly, the very qualities that makes that piece of writing great. The techniques that great authors have used to make their own writing exceptional—eloquent sentences, clever transitions, ordering of arguments—now become ours.

It becomes like a second nature to us. As we begin to use the methods absorbed in imitation, we begin to see how easy writing becomes. It's as if the practice of imitating others installs into us or, to use a biological metaphor, embeds deep in our DNA hundreds of templates and solutions for every kind of writing situation. By seeing the way that others have written, by having a perfect model to look to for constant instruction, we find that we have much more to write about and that what we do write comes out more easily and efficiently, and, perhaps most important of all, it comes out much better than we could ever imagine. Imitation, as Aristotle long ago suggested, compliments human nature.

Around 1930, just as America entered in to the Great Depression, English teachers and educators began to phase out the practice of rhetoric and, subsequently, the practice of imitation.

The very technique that served Shakespeare as he wrote his masterpieces, led London to write *White Fang*, now seemed somewhat foreign and archaic.

Instead of studying and adopting the writing methods and techniques of other authors, teachers would show their students the rules or qualities consistently found in the writings of great authors. Students would then learn the rules and be “set free” to produce more “original” writing, something more consistent with each writer's own unique personality. Organic, unique, and groundbreaking, the teaching of rules and principles would launch the next generation of writing masters.

That never happened.

As the idea of originality expanded, writing skills diminished.

Students, having trouble keeping in their minds the hundreds of writing rules and techniques offered to them by professors, failed to produce the quality of writing that had been prevalent throughout past centuries. By giving students hundreds of rules to memorize and utilize in their writing, while leaving them without a model or example of an author who successfully exemplified those rules, stressed their minds and turned the process of writing into quite a strenuous practice.

As London had suggested, even those who excelled at utilizing the rules of writing, Kipling in London's case, didn't learn to write by being taught these rules. They learned the rules of writing through imitation.

That's not to say we should ignore the rules.

The trick is to learn the writing “rules”—the basics like favoring active verbs, using concrete nouns to even more advanced rules like using appropriate diction or winsomely structuring arguments—while simultaneously observing a model who exemplified those rules.

By seeing the rules performed effectively, and then later copying that author's use of the rule, not only helps us learn how to successfully perform the rule but also helps us to realize all of the various exceptions and nuances that come with it.

More and more writing teachers and authors who write about writing have been reverting back and adopting the practice of imitation, shifting their focus to the proven method.

Some advice on learning by imitation can even be found in our modern day “classical” writing guides.

William Zinsser, a long time writing instructor and journalist who recently passed away, believed that the key to growing as a writer comes by imitating the works of other writers. In his 1976 book *On Writing Well*, Zinsser urges aspiring writers to “make a habit” of reading other writers, modern writers as well as writings from the “earlier masters,” to get a sense of their rhythm and cadence, to uncover the writing voice that makes their writing special.^{vi}

“Writing,” wrote Zinsser most explicitly, “is learned by imitation.” Zinsser goes on to admit that he himself learned to write “by reading the men and women who were doing the kind of writing *I* wanted to do *and trying to figure out how they did it* [emphasis added].”^{vii}

Stephen Pinker makes a similar point. A cognitive scientist who also appreciates the art of writing, claims that we can really advance as writers by observing the works of others, reading or, as he put it in his 2014 book *Sense of Style*, “by spotting, savoring, and reverse-engineering examples of good prose.”^{viii}

As Zinsser sought to “figure out” what the masters did, Pinker “reverse-engineers” their texts.

Like Franklin and London of earlier times, more modern authors and bloggers have had great success in copying and imitating.

One of those writers is Jon Morrow. The king of writing blogs that go viral, Morrow achieved his status by copied another king whose writings often find themselves on the “best-sellers” shelf at your local bookstore: Stephen King. According to Smartblogger.com, a blog that Morrow frequently writes on, Morrow opened up King’s book *On Writing* and began to write down what he saw was in the book, or at least some of the book, “word for word.”^{ix}

Now Morrow is one of the world’s most successful bloggers. Most everything he writes goes viral.

In an interview with Demian Farworth found on Copyblogger.com, Morrow claims that he still utilizes King's writings before he goes to write. "I often read Stephen King for 5-10 minutes," says Morrow. "Out loud."^x

Those last two words are important. Morrow gives us one method or exercise we can use to absorb an author's style.

The idea of reading another author's work "out loud" is to make sure we can hear what writer's often refer to as voice, the way a particular author sounds while we read, the sum of all that particular author's techniques.

Zinsser, like Morrow, also suggested using this method saying, "Find the best writers in the fields that interest you and read their work aloud. Get their voice and their taste into your ear—their attitude toward language."^{xi}

Copying and imitating has been used throughout history. It has been the method of choice to develop abilities by painters, sculptors, NBA players, and even writers. As easy as it is proven, the practice of imitation is the greatest method to growing rapidly as a writer.

Now go out there, find some writers you admire, and, like Bryant, steal all their techniques.

For a good exercise in imitation click [here](#).

ⁱAristotle, *Poetics*, Unabridged edition (Mineola, N.Y: Dover Publications, 1997), 5.

ⁱⁱ“MacMullan: Kobe Perfected His Game by Watching Film,” *ESPN.com*, June 4, 2010, accessed July 1, 2016, http://espn.go.com/nba/playoffs/2010/columns/story?columnist=macmullan_jackie&page=kobefilmstudy-100604.

ⁱⁱⁱBenjamin Franklin and Henry Stueber, *Memoirs of Benjamin Franklin; Written by Himself: With His Most Interesting Essays, Letters, and Miscellaneous Writings, Familiar, Moral, Political, Economical, and Philosophical* (Harper & Brothers, 1847), 28.

^{iv}Jack London, *The Letters of Jack London: 1913-1916. Volume Three* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 216.

^v*Ibid.*

^{vi}William Zinsser, *On Writing Well, 30th Anniversary Edition: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 34.

^{vii}*Ibid.*

^{viii}Steven Pinker, *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century!* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2015), 12.

^{ix}“The Brain-Dead Simple but Astonishingly Effective Way to Become a Better Writer • Smart Blogger,” *Smart Blogger*, June 19, 2013, accessed July 1, 2016, <https://smartblogger.com/better-writer/>.

^x“Here's How Jon Morrow Writes - Copyblogger -,” *Copyblogger*, January 14, 2014, accessed July 1, 2016, <http://www.copyblogger.com/writer-files-jon-morrow/>.

^{xi}Zinsser, *On Writing Well*, 236.