

Master Works Journal

Teachers, editors, publishers, agents and professors all agree about one thing: the best writers are readers.

Reading—and reading high quality writing—is the only way to learn to write. We are going to help ourselves do this by spending one week in each unit reading Master Works. We will use a combination of teacher-selected master works and student-choice master works.

Once you have read a master work (and I recommend reading it at least twice), then you will create a journal entry that analyzes what you read. The journal is 20% of your trimester grade in this class.

journal details

Please obtain a composition notebook (a single subject notebook with no spiral) for your journal.

I will collect journals *at random* throughout the trimester to check your work. Please understand I really mean “at random” When I ask to check your journal, you earn your grade based on what is in it. Unwritten entries earn zeroes.

Your journal entries are 20% of your trimester grade. That 20% is based entirely on random checks...you have been warned. Twice.

For each journal entry, you'll answer all of the following questions:

1. What did you read? Who is the author? Refer to the author by his/her last name only in the rest of this journal entry.
2. What do you like? Why? What do you hate? Why?
3. Are the sentences or lines long or short? What about the stanzas or paragraphs? What about the chapters or sections?
4. How does the writer transition from scene to scene? Chapter to chapter? Stanza to stanza? Line to Line?
5. **If it's poetry**, write down the first words of the first ten lines. And write down the last words of the first ten lines. What kinds of words are most frequently first and last? **If it's prose**, write down the first and last sentence of the entire selection (short) or of one chapter (book). What do you notice about these two sentences?
6. How does the writer make the piece feel finished?
7. Copy and paste or cut and paste a one-paragraph (prose) or one-stanza (poetry) section of the piece. Then answer these questions about the selection you chose:
 - a. How often does the writer use nouns?
 - b. Verbs?
 - c. Adjectives?
 - d. Adverbs?
 - e. Which of these are the most evocative words in the piece? Why?
 - f. How many words are in each sentence (prose) or line (poetry)?



Don't be tempted to write
vague or evaluative
statements for your journal
entries. They don't help.

Explanation & Examples

Studying master works and writing about them asks you to do a kind of thinking you might not have done before. You want to be able to learn how to write from the authors you read. So your journal needs to be as specific as possible.

For example, there is a prompt that asks you "How does the writer transition from scene to scene?"

You might find yourself wanting to write:

The author makes smooth transitions from scene to scene, which makes it less distracting and better to read.

But this is vague and evaluative language. Why? Well, what makes the transitions "smooth?" And in whose opinion are they smooth? What, exactly, is "better?" And according to whom? How is the transition "less distracting?" And what is it "less distracting" than?

A stronger journal entry might say something like this:

At the end of the first three chapters, Rowling writes a line or two that are really a hook into the next chapter. The best example of this is in chapter three, which ends "Someone was outside, knocking to come in." The beginning of the first three chapters all indicate that time has passed in some way. The best example of this is in the second chapter where Rowling writes "Ten years had passed," but she also does it more subtly in the second chapter when she writes "The escape of the Brazilian boa-constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment." This tells readers that time has passed by explaining what has happened, almost as if she is catching the reader up to speed on real events. But other times the beginning of a chapter is a continuation of the previous scene—though it might introduced a new character, like Chapter 4, when Hagrid shows up for the first time.

This is stronger because it is specific—it uses quotes, it explains how the author makes transitions, and it stays away from evaluative language.

Specificity is king, at least in this assignment.