

## Fiction Unit Menu – 20 books from which to choose 1

There are millions of books to choose from. **In January you can choose anything you want. For this First Quarter, please select from the following list of books ... why? Because**

1. they have been approved by FCPS
2. we probably have copies of them available free in the bookroom or library
3. the authors are known for their literary style and creativity and
4. Mr. S. knows the books, authors, and some of the lessons available from each, so we can have intelligent conversations about the books, or Mr. S. can help answer questions you might have about the texts

Please note that you are not to choose a book you have already read for school work in another class. Also, watching the movie for a book can be fun, but the book will always be better, and you cannot learn about the author's style of writing if you do not read her or his sentences.

The books come from different times and places, a variety of authors, backgrounds, and with a diversity of gender, culture, religion, age, etc.

### **1800's**

**Frankenstein** by Mary Shelly. Written on a dare, Mary Shelly composed this book in a very short period of time when she was quite young. The book is deep, discussing what it means to be human, and the nature of evil in society. Gothic/Romance (not about love but about a specific outlook on life), old-fashioned, and certainly better than any of the movies.

Female/1800's/English/Gothic

**Adventures of Sherlock Holmes** by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. (Part of a series of books) Not just mysteries to be solved, these short stories deal with social justice issues from the 1890's in England. The stories give a window into Victorian England and are among the first in the genre of Mystery stories. Or try **The Hound of the Baskervilles** – a complete novel instead of a series of short stories. Male/1800's/English/Mystery

**Short Stories** by Edgar Allen Poe. Short stories that deal with horror and murder, life and death, and above all – fear. Poe is considered one of the first and best examples of this genre.

Male/Mid 1800's/American/Gothic

**The Picture of Dorian Gray** by Oscar Wilde. Wilde's only novel, this is a story of choice, life, and death. Wilde's style and personality come through in this work which is part fantasy, part Gothic Horror story, part controversial work from a late Victorian author who was gay.

Male/Late 1800's/English/Gothic

**Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde** by Robert Louis Stevenson. The movies simply never do it justice. This book delves deeply into choice and responsibility, free will and fate, the nature of evil itself in human nature as Dr. Jekyll seeks to find a way to help man evolve into a higher moral being. But, as we all know, science is not meant to tamper with things in this way (see Frankenstein by Mary Shelly, above). The suspense is kept in the book in a way it cannot be kept in the movies.

Male/Late 1800's/English/Gothic

## 1900's

**Their Eyes Were Watching God** by Zora Neale Hurston. From the Harlem Renaissance in literature, the author describes the life of a young Black woman in America. Both the subject matter and the style are surprising and fresh. Then author makes great use of metaphor and diction, also employing a verbal dialect to express speaking patterns of that time.

Female/Early 1900's/African American/Historical

**The Man Who Was Thursday** by G K Chesterton. Mystery story with a twist ending that looks at the modern world of spies and government control and bureaucracy. Male/Mid 1900's/English/Mystery

**Death of a Ghost** by Margery Allingham. (Part of a series of books) Allingham presents Albert Campion, with his butler Lug. Together they solve mysteries and help rescue those in need, while presenting a window into upper English society. One of a few in this genre – see Sayers. Female/Early 1900's/English/Mystery

**Cloud of Witnesses** by Dorothy Sayers. (Part of a series of books) Sayers presents us with Lord Peter Wimsey (not his real name) and his manservant Bunter. They too represent the best of the upper class, working to right wrongs and solve mysteries, all while staying behind the scenes. Whereas Lug is a lower class, one-time thief, Mr. Bunter is the ideal gentleman's gentleman. Female/Early 1900's/English/Mystery

**The Hobbit** by JRR Tolkien. (Part of a series of books) Tolkien's book started as a Children's story but took on more and more depth as it sought to understand human nature, the nature of evil, and the difficulties of modernization in English society. These themes would blossom in full in his Lord of the Rings trilogy which continues the story started here. And while the movies are wonderful, the book has the depth of Tolkien's language (and his poetry).

Male/Early 1900's/English/Fantasy

**The Great Divorce** by C. S. Lewis. Lewis wrote a series of children's allegories called "The Narnia Series." Though a friend of Tolkien's, they had very different views on fiction with Tolkien speaking very poorly of allegories. Here, Lewis writes a self-contained story about one man's journey to hell and heaven, describing the kinds of people he met along the way.

Male/Mid 1900's/English/Christian Allegory

**A Wizard of Earthsea** by Ursula K. LeGuin. (Part of a series of books) LeGuin is called the "Queen of the Semicolon" for her use of this form of punctuation in her writing. Here we have the first book in a set that looks again at human nature, evil, and the question of choice and free will. A young boy discovers he has powers, and his desire to show off scars him for life and creates a path he has to follow to correct his mistake. Female/Mid 1900's/American/Fantasy

**The Little Prince** by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. What appears to be a children's story with attractive drawings is actually an existential tale of choice, of life and death, and the meaning we find in the world. Short and easy enough to read, the book uses analogy (Tolkien's style) rather than allegory (C S Lewis's style) to take much deeper issues.

Male/Mid 1900's/French/Fantasy-Young Adult

**Train to Pakistan** by Khushwant Singh. Singh weaves together Muslim and Hindu and Sikh, Indian and Pakistani, genders, ages, races to describe the effects of the Partition of India in a fictional border village in 1947. The author has a great command of storytelling, literary device, and sentence variety. The surprise ending is also a bonus. Male/Mid 1900's/Indian/Historical

**Things Fall Apart** by Chinua Achebe. Achebe tells stories in the Igbo tribal tradition about life in a small village in the mid 1800's before and as white men arrive to colonize and change things. By telling stories, each with its own moral at the end, we learn the wisdom of the people while also watching the characters and plot unfold. Male/Mid 1900's/Nigerian/Historical

**The Alchemist** by Paulo Coehlo. This life-changing book follows a young man on his path through Christian and Islamic worlds, looking for both a great treasure and the meaning of life. Such celebrities as Will Smith have credited this book with helping them make sense of the choices and possibilities life offers. Male/Late 1900's/Brazilian/Fantasy

**The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy** by Douglas Adams. (Part of a series of books) Absurdist look at life, the universe, and everything as an ordinary boring Englishman tries to make sense of the bureaucracy and insanity found in society, no matter what planet it comes from. The humor in this series of books covers up commentary on social issues and culture in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, a time when people still thought digital watches were pretty cool. You do need to enjoy dry English humor/satire to get into this series of books, but once you do you understand the author's style for building sentences where others boldly would not go.

Male/Late 1900's/English/Science Fiction

## 2000's

**Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows** (volume VII -- part of a series of books) by J K Rowling. This is the final book in the Harry Potter series, and as Harry has become older, his choices have become harder. This book deals with choice, free will, life, death, sacrifice and the nature of evil. Indeed, the author considered the story to be obviously Christian in nature and could not understand why some churches were burning her books. Here we read this not just for the plot or the characters, but for the magic of the style of writing and the depth of the themes.

Female/2000's/English/Fantasy

**Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children** by Ransom Riggs. (Part of a series of books) Riggs writes with a great sentence variety and style, in ways many modern writers do not. The characters and story is suspenseful, and deals with life and death choices in a way that makes sense for Youth-fiction. Many follow-up books came after – and little of the book and the movie match up, for those who want to watch the movie. Male/2000's/American/Dystopian

**Shatter Me** by Tahereh Mafi. (Part of a series of books) Mafi is a Muslim, Iranian-American author who just happens to be married to Ransom Riggs (see above book). This book is written with a limited personal perspective as a 17 year-old woman tries to find out what has happened to her and why she is being treated harshly by her family and others. Mafi uses an interesting stylistic device to show the thought process of her heroine by crossing out lines of text in the book. Female/2000's/American/Dystopian-Young Adult

## To be able to write better, read more

<https://www.nownovel.com/blog/learn-write-youre-reading/>

What is the one most common piece of advice established authors give aspiring ones? It's not 'show, don't tell' or 'kill your darlings'. It's 'read more'. Reading as much as you can helps you learn how to write as you read. Here are ideas for how to improve your writing through conscious reading:

### 1. Learn how to write in many voices and settings by reading widely

All writers should read widely both within and outside of their genres. It pays to read contemporary books alongside classics. Why? Because we meet characters from different eras, characters who have different world views to our own. We can't stroll down the street for a chat with a Victorian gentleman in a top hat. But we can find him in a Dickens novel (even if we're surprised by just how much like us he is in his goals, hopes and fears). Read consciously to broaden the parts of your writing you feel are undeveloped. For example, if you struggle to write:

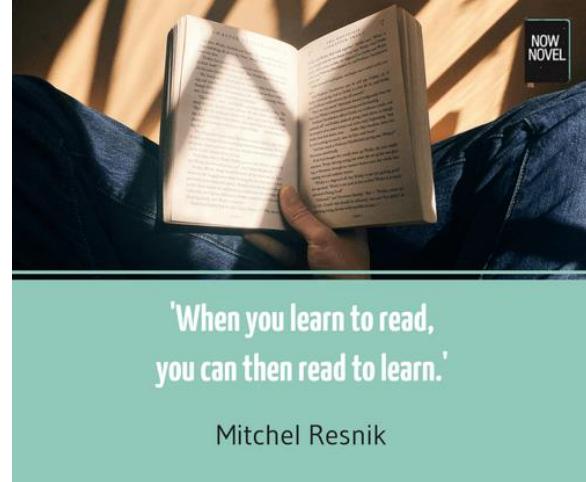
- **Believable settings:** Read historical fiction (or historical non-fiction) in which setting is key
- **Well-developed characters:** Add more character-driven literary novels to your reading diet
- **Breathtaking rising and falling action:** Find reading lists of the best thriller novels (like [this one at Buzzfeed](#))

You get the idea. Think of the task ahead like planning balanced nutrition. You'll grow your ability to move between eras, characters and styles of writing with greater ease.

### 2. Become an expert in your genre

Whether you want to write historical fiction, crime, romance, literary, fantasy, sci-fi or any other type of genre, knowing your genre well gives you an edge in multiple ways:

- **You have a broad idea of the genre's history and current trends and tropes** – there's a lot to plunder, alter and 'write back' to



'When you learn to read,  
you can then read to learn.'

Mitchel Resnik

- **You're more capable of describing context for your own fiction** and explain where your work falls in the spectrum of similar tales

When you read in your favorite genre, note the common genre tropes authors use. A trope is a significant or recurring theme or motif in fiction. Does the author simply reproduce tropes (e.g. 'the chosen one' who must save the world) or subvert it (i.e. do something unexpected with it). For example, in Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), she tells the story of the hidden 'madwoman' in the attic in Charlotte Brontë's classic Victorian gothic novel, *Jane Eyre* (1847). By knowing the story well, and the genre, Rhys is able to draw on elements of the novel and its shortcomings (its treatment of madness as something to hide) and write her own powerful novel that talks back to some of Brontë's narrative choices. To learn to write from your favorite genre, when you read, ask:

- How does this book fit into my genre? Does it reinforce cliches or does it break new ground? How?
- Have I learned anything I wasn't aware of before about my chosen genre? For example, descriptive details authors use in common when writing about similar subjects (e.g. vampires) or settings (The South, Victorian England, present-day New York)
- How is the book regarded within the genre? Do you agree or disagree with the majority of readers' assessment of it? Why?

### 3. Learn how to write by paying attention to other authors' structure

Reading diverse authors is an excellent way to learn structure. This is key when tackling a longer form like a novel or short story collection, because structure makes it easier to follow a story's many threads and piece the narrative together. As you read, notice at what points the author builds suspense and creates conflict. Does the author do so successfully, or not? If not, what weakens the suspense or conflict? Perhaps their sentences are too long. Or else they build up to a climax but then start loading on distracting subplots.

Here's an exercise that will teach you a great deal [about structure](#). You can do this exercise with any book, but it is best approached with a book that is not only in the same genre as yours but similar to yours in other ways as well. For example, if you are planning to write a murder mystery from multiple viewpoints, choose a murder mystery written from multiple viewpoints. You should also choose a book that you have already read and feel has a strong structure that you can learn from. You will need to take notes for this exercise to be effective. To begin:

1. **Write a brief summary of what happens in each chapter.** You may want to look at other aspects of the structure as well. For example, for the multiple viewpoint crime novel, note what chapters and sections are in which characters' points of view.
2. **Note where the major plot points occur and how the author introduced them.** Are they told via flashbacks and memories? Do they occur in the present time-frame of the story?
3. **Note length – how many pages is the average chapter?** Also note the relationship between length and tone and mood. What can you say about the shortest chapter (what is the most important thing it achieves for the story?) And the longest chapter?

#### **4. Write better characters by studying others' character development**

As with the structure exercise above, make a reading exercise to [improve your writing by studying others' character development](#). Are characters in the book you're reading believable? Or do they seem like stereotypes? Are they underdeveloped? If so, how might the author have better developed them? By giving them clearer motivations? Or by giving us more details about their personalities, loves, fears? Just as you did with structure, choose a book or a few books that you felt had particularly compelling characters. Reread the books while paying particular attention to character development. Ask these questions (and any others you can think of):

- **How does each character speak?** Is the dialogue believable for the character's age, social circumstances, intelligence, and the time and place in which the story is set?
- **Does the author physically describe the character at all?** If so, how is it done, and what does the visual (dress, movement, etc.) tell us about the person?
- **Does the character have a backstory?** [Is the backstory effective](#) in developing the character?
- **What other techniques does the author use to reveal more about the character?** For example action, the characters' interactions with others, or their inner thoughts (AKA 'internal monologue').

#### **5. Examine how successful writers use language**

You can learn a great deal from examining how different writers use language, in other words, their style. Writers' styles can vary from resembling poetry to clean, efficient prose, to workmanlike sentences that may lack grace but get the job done. Compare, for example, the poetic, comparison-laden language of Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things* (1997) to Hemingway's language in *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952):

*'She appeared quite suddenly, a little after midnight. No angels sang, no wise men brought gifts. But a million stars rose in the east to herald her arrival. One moment she wasn't there, and the next – there she was on the concrete pavement, in a crib of litter...'*

In this example, from a chapter titled 'The Nativity', Roy uses rich metaphors blending the idea of the Christian nativity with the grubby reality of the city. The style is descriptively rich. Compare this to Hemingway's prose:

*'No one would steal from the old man but it was better to take the sail and the heavy lines home as the dew was bad for them and, though he was quite sure no local people would steal from him, the old man thought that a gaff and a harpoon were needless temptations to leave in a boat.'*

Here, Hemingway describes the old man's decision to not leave his equipment, risking theft. The prose is simple and clear, with minimal descriptive words.

When reading to learn from authors' style, ask:

- How do they tend to structure sentences? Are they mostly longer and complex, or brief and punchy?
- How is the style fitted to their subject matter and genre? What reasons are there for it to be this way?
- Do they focus more on visual description, character's inner monologue, action, or other fictional elements? Is it skewed to one element or is there more of a balance?

As an extra exercise, try this. Read over a page of a favorite author's novel. Close the book and try to continue the story for the next two paragraphs. Reopen the book and compare your sentences side by side. How do they differ in length and structure? Tone and mood?

### **Keep reading as a writer**

Naturally, you'll want to sometimes just read for pleasure and entertainment. Do it. Yet when you want to pinpoint areas of your own craft to refine, the ideas above will help. You'll develop a reading practice that is like a carefully considered nutritional plan, designed to feed ideas.

**And to start you on your diet, here is an opening menu of books from which to choose. Your mission is to pick one of these and read it. By December.** Then you will be asked to respond to the book by analyzing some of the author's choices – how she or he uses language to express his or her theme. So your purpose in reading is to learn how to write better on your own – perhaps finding sentence styles you can copy or literary tricks you can borrow. More detailed instructions are available on the attached worksheet.

**Please note:** if you select one of these books and find it hard to read, or that you do not like it, that's fine. You can pick another. Find something you like and learn from it.

## Other Internet Articles:

### 4 Tips for Improving your Writing by Reading

In sports, they say you should always compete with someone more skilled than you because it forces you to rise to a higher level of competency. Similarly, reading the writing of authors who have shaped the canon will expose you to excellent craftsmanship and challenge you to up your game. Here are some tips for developing the kind of reading habit that will strengthen your writing:

1. **Read voraciously:** Writers are shaped by other writers. The books we read as children influence our tastes and can often have an impact on our writing style as adults. The writers who shape us are almost like unofficial mentors: By reading widely and closely, voracious readers can learn at the feet of history's most famous writers.
2. **Read with purpose:** Don't just read for pleasure. As you work your way through a novel, study the ways different writers tackle different subjects, how they craft their sentences and story structures, and how they handle dialogue.
3. **Build your vocabulary:** If you read *Ulysses* by James Joyce, for example, chances are your vocabulary will improve. Your work won't necessarily come out sounding like his, but your process will be informed and elevated by his style, and you'll likely come out on the other side familiar with new words.
4. **Recognize what other authors do best:** Other authors can teach you different lessons in craft: J.K. Rowling can teach you how to build fictional worlds; Nicole Krauss can teach you how to layer multiple narrators and perspectives; Rebecca Curtis can teach you how to use patterns and repetition for humor. All you have to do is study their work.

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From: <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/become-a-better-writer-by-reading#5-ways-reading-improves-your-writing>

# Become a Better Writer by Reading: 5 Ways Reading Improves Writing

If you want to be a great writer, start by reading more. Reading different genres can broaden your horizons and offer techniques to use in your own writing.

If you aspire to be a great writer, you'll gain mastery of your craft, in part, by reading extensively. Aspiring authors who develop strong reading habits will learn a lot from the books they consume. Read actively in order to discover creative writing strategies, word choice strategies, and syntax control that you'll invariably want to incorporate into your own writing skills.

Perhaps you wish to write *New York Times* bestsellers. Then read the work of bestselling authors like Dan Brown, Stephen King, and J.K. Rowling. If you're interested in literary fiction and narrative nonfiction, start reading books by good writers like Margaret Atwood, Tim O'Brien, and Jennifer Egan. If you dream that one day your work will be taught in college and high school classrooms, study the great writing of Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Joyce Carol Oates, and Kurt Vonnegut.

## 5 Ways Reading Improves Your Writing

Better readers become better writers. You must read books both for pleasure and with the mindset that you're investing in your own writing craft. The art of reading like a writer does not come instantly; you must work at it. Here are a few key tips and reading strategies to make the act of reading fiction and nonfiction books as productive as possible.

1. **Reading helps you develop critical thinking skills.** As you read, ask yourself: "Am I reading good writing? And if so, why?" Decide for yourself who the good authors are, and find great books that inspire you. More importantly, think about *why* you consider your favorite books to be great. Is it the character development? The author's use of theme and subtext? If you can critically assess a work of literature and determine what makes good writing good, you'll be better able to bring a similar thoughtfulness to your own work.
2. **Reading exposes you to a variety of writing styles.** Reading different styles of books can help you focus on the mechanics and stylistic choices that make various genres of writing

work. Approaching varied works of literature with an eye on the authors' stylistic tendencies will help you find your own style.

3. **Reading allows you to study grammar in context.** Think of reading a novel or short story as a hack that lets you study grammar without having to work through a textbook. The best books clearly communicate their messages, and to clearly communicate, you must have a working knowledge of English language grammar. Since you're already reading fiction and nonfiction books to learn the craft, why not also take note of how professional authors tackle grammar questions you were never quite sure about in your own work? Study the way they use punctuation and grammar conventions, and you might just spare yourself the headache of reading a formal grammar book.
4. **Reading helps you expand your vocabulary.** While there's no need to take notes like you're prepping for an exam, note-taking does help ensure that you remain engaged with the book you're reading. Highlight or write down various turns of phrase that you find especially masterful. Jot down any new words you don't recognize. Learn them, memorize them, and assimilate them into your own prose in your next writing project.
5. **Reading inspires new ideas.** By making reading a fixed part of your regular routine, you can continually expose yourself to new ideas and techniques and recharge your creative juices for your next writing assignment. The truth is that reading is most productive if it becomes a daily habit. Most working authors partition time in their day for reading, just as they set aside time for writing, editing, and rewriting. A disciplined reading habit gives you the daily opportunity to happen across ideas that inspire you—and you may be able to channel that inspiration into a new written work written in your own words.

# Reading to Write

This handout suggests reading, note-taking, and writing strategies for when you need to use reading assignments or sources as the springboard for writing a paper.

## Reading strategies

- **Read (or at least skim) all parts of the reading.** Sometimes the cover, title, preface, introduction, illustrations, appendices, epilogue, footnotes and “about the author” sections can provide you with valuable information.
- **Identify the genre of the reading.** What kind of a reading is it? (Journal article? Mass media? Novel? Textbook?) Why was it written? Who does the author assume is going to read this work? (Books about politics written for an audience of political scientists, for example, might be very different from books about politics written for the general public, for historians, or for sociologists.)
- **Consider the author.** What do you know or what can you learn about this person? Why did he or she write the book? What sources of information and/or methods did he or she use to gather the information presented in the book?
- **Guess why your instructor assigned the reading.** How does it fit in with other readings, class discussions, major course themes, or the purpose of the class?
- **Get out a calendar and plan your reading.** Get out a calendar and plan your reading. Plot the number of days or hours that it may take you to complete the reading. Be realistic. It may help to read one chapter of the reading and then revise your calendar—some readings take longer than others of a similar length. Make an appointment with an academic coach at the Learning Center if you’d like to learn more about scheduling your work or reading more quickly and effectively.
- **As you read, record your reactions and questions.** Any reaction or question is valid, from the specific (“What’s that word mean?”) to the general (“What’s her point?”). Write them down now so that you’ll remember them later. These reactions and questions can serve as material for class discussion, or they can be the jumping off point for brainstorming a paper.
- **Read with a friend.** Find someone else who is reading the same book. Set reading goals together and plan to share your reactions to sections of the reading before class, after class, over e-mail, and so on.
- **Think about what is missing in the reading.** Issues, events, or ideas that are missing, left out, avoided, or not discussed/addressed in the book might be important. Thinking about these omissions can give you a critical perspective on the reading by showing you what the author (consciously or unconsciously) doesn’t want to deal with.
- **If you know you will have to answer a particular question in response to the reading, read with that question in mind.** Sometimes faculty will give you essay questions in advance. As you read the text, refer back to those questions and think about your emerging answers to them.

## Writing strategies

### While reading

- **Write as you read.** Record your reactions informally and briefly after you've read for a while. When you're done reading a section, write for five minutes to capture your personal thoughts, reactions, and questions as you go along.
- **Keep your notes with your book.** Tuck a few sheets of paper or a notepad inside the book to record your ideas as you read.
- **Share your informal writing with a friend.** Trade notes/questions/reactions to the book. Write five-minute responses to one another about the reading. This can be done by e-mail.
- **Draw while you read.** Drawing pictures, maps or diagrams of relationships or important issues that you see emerging from the reading can help you understand them. Be willing to revise or redraw the map as you read.

### After you read

- **React to the whole reading.** Take twenty minutes to record your reactions to the reading as a whole. (Return to the reading strategies list to get you started if you need to.) Don't be afraid to guess, hypothesize, or follow a tangent.
- **Reread the writing assignment.** The Writing Center has a useful handout on understanding assignments that may help.
- **Get out a calendar and schedule the time you will need to write your paper.** Working backwards from the due date, plot a timeline for producing the paper. Include time for at least one rough draft and one chance to receive feedback from others (a friend, your teaching assistant, your professor, the Writing Center, etc.) before turning it in.
- **Plan your research and think about citation.** If the assignment requires library research, decide upon a strategy for collecting and citing sources as you research and write. Be sure to cite any quoted information or information that was not generated by your own analysis. Your instructor can answer all of your questions about this important step.
- **Write a draft, preferably a few days before the paper is due.** Instructors can usually tell the difference between papers that have been carefully drafted and revised and papers that have been hurriedly written the night before they are due. Papers written the night before often receive disappointing grades.
- **Get feedback from at least one person, and preferably several people, before you finalize your draft.** When possible, give your readers a copy of the assignment, too. E-mail can make this process easier. See the Writing Center's handout on getting feedback.
- **Proofread your paper to catch errors before handing it in.** Taking the time to spell-check and proofread will make your paper easier to read and show your reader that you cared about the assignment.