



The Art of Fiction: A Guide for Writers and Readers

Ayn Rand , Tore Boeckmann (Editor) , Leonard Peikoff (Introduction)

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In 1958, **Ayn Rand**, already the world-famous author of such bestselling books as **Atlas Shrugged** and **The Fountainhead**, gave a private series of extemporaneous lectures in her own living room on the art of fiction. **Tore Boeckmann** and **Leonard Peikoff** for the first time now bring readers the edited transcript of these exciting personal statements. **The Art of Fiction** offers invaluable lessons, in which Rand analyzes the four essential elements of fiction: theme, plot, characterization, and style. She demonstrates her ideas by dissecting her best-known works, as well as those of other famous authors, such as **Thomas Wolfe**, **Sinclair Lewis**, and **Victor Hugo**. An historic accomplishment, this compendium will be a unique and fascinating resource for both writers and readers of fiction.

The Art of Fiction: A Guide for Writers and Readers Details

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JJ Vid says

Rand offers ample reason to dislike her. She claimed to be the best author alive (at the time), claims to be better than Victor Hugo & Dostoyevsky, and says this claim is not a subjective claim but is objectively based. Her confidence exudes vanity, her modesty nonexistent, and her book was fantastic.

"[The purpose of writing is to objectify values.] In this sense, every writer is a moral philosopher." p23

"The more struggle a story involves, the better the plot" p33

"Make it as hard as possible for the characters, and tie the lesser characters' tragedies to the main line of events." p49

Do not substitute form for content.

If writing doesn't apply to human choice, it's not worth writing or reading.

"A good style is one that conveys the most with the greatest economy of words." p162

"I read a novel for the purpose of seeing the kind of people I would want to see in real life and living through the kind of experience I would want to live through." p195

Oddly, she hates obscenities and recommends they never be used.

Zy Marquiez says

Analogous to the Art Of NonFiction, the Art Of Fiction, by Ayn Rand details the core concepts of Rand's writing repertoire, crystallized for all to see.

In the first half of the book Rand cogently creates very practical, and yet methodical approach that narrows down on importance of the subconscious in writing, theme, plot and its development, climax, and characterization. The latter half of the book focuses on style from a variety of angles, all from her objectivist point of view.

Throughout the book Rand speaks at length of the two types of writing that exist in her eyes: naturalist writing vs. romanticist writing.

Naturalistic style catalogues things, which often are inconsequential. On the other hand, romanticist writing employs carefully selected concrete words in specificity to capture the essentials, what really matters, of a scene.

Rand juxtaposes the two, offering samples that precisely describe why in her mind one is superior to the other. Moreover, after showing the reader the pros and cons of each style, Rand speaks at length about how to maximize writing while not overstating words.

Imperative as well is the importance of avoiding floating abstractions, choosing instead to gravitate towards making writing more concrete, more specific. She also covers a few issues with style, for instance, narrative vs. dramatization, which was quite insightful. Exposition is also covered, as well as flashbacks, transitions, and other notable points.

On the importance of style, Rand notes:

“What constitutes the heart of any style is the clarity of the thoughts a writer expresses – plus the kind of thoughts he choose to express.”[1]

Further:

“A good style is one that conveys the most with the greatest economy of words. In a textbook, the ideal is to communicate one line of thought or a set of facts as clearly as possible. For a literary style, much more is necessary. A great literary style is one that combines five or more different meanings in one clear sentence. (I do not mean ambiguity but the communication of different issues).”[2][**Bold Emphasis Added**]

More importantly, however, Rand elucidates on the importance of precision in writing:

“I never waste a sentence on saying: “John Smith meets James Brown.” That is too easy; it is playing the piano with one finger. Say much more, just as clearly, say it in chords, with a whole orchestration. That is good style.”[3]

Anyone who has ever read any of Rand’s book knows that Rand’s novels function on multiple tiers, employing various layers of insights, just like a building features various floors that carry out different functions. For instance, analyzing one of her passage from Atlas Shrugged, she points out how one passage had four purposes: a literary one, a connotative one, a symbolic level, and an emotional level. The seamlessness of how Rand fuses multiple tiers of purpose is one of the many reasons Rand writing will always remain in the upper caste of the field/discipline.

Although not originally created to be a book, and was instead drawn from Rand’s prior lectures, this book impeccably allows readers to view writing through her unique eyes. Likewise, the way in which Rand breaks down the purpose of every single thing she does is a breath of fresh air. The tenets within this book will make readers ruminate upon a much more precise type of writing, one that functions on a deeper level. Such profound depth and meaning is usually missing from most modern fiction books, which is a shame since much more could be achieved if people employed different skills.

The Art Of Nonfiction is a terrific read in its totality. The book is a veritable treasure trove of insights. Couple this book with such classics such as The Element Of Style by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White, gather a bit of inspiration with The War Of Art by Steven Pressfield, and sprinkle a bit of The Art Of Description by Mark Doty, and one has the veritable seeds for success in writing.

Footnotes:

[1] Ayn Rand, The Art Of Fiction, p. 142.

[2] Ibid., 143.

[3] Ibid., 143.

Kris says

Rand is sure full of herself.

Okay, so she does make some valid points about writing. There is good advice in here. But you have to wade around all of Rand's self-righteousness to find it. I used to think that Rand was just self-confident, but now I realize that she's sort of wacko. There are some claims in here (like how all religion is delusion, or how she

belittles H. G. Wells), that I blatantly disagree with.

So I tuned out a little. Audio-read this really quickly while on subway trains, and didn't care if I missed some words here and there. While it does contain some useful advice for writers, there are much better guides out there. I'm not in love with Rand enough to seek out her advice any more.

Dean says

One of the two most insightful books ever written for readers and writers of fiction. The second is "The Romantic Manifesto," also by Ayn Rand.

Sandy Lender says

Terry Goodkind told me to buy and read this book.
So I did.
Now I recommend other writers do the same.
Period.

Jeff Yoak says

I'm not an aspiring fiction-writer. I imagine that this book would be extremely helpful to someone who is. It provides conceptual frameworks for understanding fiction-writing that were new to me, and useful even in understanding and appreciating fiction. I suspect it will help me to better understand some of my reactions to things I read, and perhaps even to anticipate them. That would be really useful. :-)

Katrina Sark says

p.2 – What is colloquially called “inspiration” – namely, that you write without full knowledge of why you write as you do, yet it comes out well – is actually the subconscious summing-up of the premises and intentions you have set yourself.

p.3 – To describe a sunrise, you must have stored in your mind clear ideas of what you mean by “sunrise,” what elements compose it, what kinds you have seen, what mood you want to project and why, and what kinds of words will project it. ...you have to know what you are storing and what kind of answers you are seeking

p.4 – To master the art of writing you have to be conscious of why you are doing things – but do not edit yourself while writing.

p.7 – if you know where your inspiration really comes from, you will never run out of material. A rational writer can stroke his subconscious just as one puts fuel in a machine.

p.10 – [in Atlas Shrugged, Dagny] “regarded language as a tool of honor, always to be used as if one were

under oath – an oath of allegiance to reality.”

p.13 – When you compose a story, you start with an abstraction, then find the concretes which add up to that abstraction. For the reader, the process is reversed: he first perceives the concretes you present and then adds them to the abstractions with which you started. [? Concretize your abstractions]

[start every chapter with the question:] what abstraction do I want to convey and what concretes will convey it?

“Strong,” “independent” and “rational” are abstractions. In order to leave your reader with those abstractions, you have to provide concretes that will make him conclude: “This man is strong because he did X, independent because he defied Y, rational because he thought Z.”

p.14 – To objectify values is to make them real by presenting them in concrete form. For instance, to say “I think courage is good” is not to objectify a value. To present a man who acts bravely, is.

p.15 – what is important is not the message a writer projects explicitly, but the values and views of life he projects implicitly. [...] By what he chooses to present, and by how he presents it, any author expresses his fundamental, metaphysical values – his view of man’s relationship to reality and of what man can and should seek in life.

p.19 – If a writer’s basic conviction is that man is a determined creature – that he has no choice, but is the plaything of fate or his background or God – that writer will be a Naturalist. The Naturalistic school presents man as helpless... The Romantic school of literature approaches life on the premise that man has free will, the capacity of choice. [...] If man has the capacity of choice, then he can plan the events of his life; he can set himself purposes and achieve them. If so, his life is not a series of accidents. Events do not “just happen” to him; he chooses what he makes happen (and if accidents occur, his purpose is to overcome them). He is the architect of his own life.

p.20 – [Aristotle:] Efficient causation means that an event is determined by an antecedent cause. [cause and effect]

Final causation means that the end result of a certain chain of causes determines those causes.

p.21 – As a writer, you must follow the process of final causation: you decide on the theme of your book (your purpose), then select the events and the sentences that will concretize your theme. The reader, by contrast, follows the process of efficient causation: he goes step by step through your book being moved toward the abstraction you intended.

p.22 – what you rationally want to read is a story about men’s choices, right or wrong – about their decisions and what they should have decided – which means: a free-will, Romantic plot story. [...] To illustrate the achievement of a purpose, you have to show men overcoming obstacles. ...need to dramatize purpose.

Since my purpose is to show that a man of creative independence will achieve his goal regardless of any opposition, a story in which there is no opposition would not dramatize my message. I have to devise the hardest obstacles possible, and those of greatest significance to the hero. ...if the hero has a distant cousin who disapproves of his career, that is not a great obstacle to overcome. But if the woman he loves objects to his career and tempts him to give it up, and he risks losing her, that is real dramatization. Then the hero is in the middle of a clash of two values and has to choose the right one. The more struggle the story involves, the better the plot.

p.23 – The essence of plot structure is: struggle – therefore, conflict – therefore, climax.

For the purpose of dramatizing a man’s struggle and choice, a conflict within his own mind, which is then expressed and resolved in action, is one of the best devices.

p.26 – If you want to hold your readers, give them something to wonder about.

p.36 – If two persons are in love, that is not a conflict; you have to make their love clash with some serious value of theirs.

p.46 – The climax is that stage at which the worst consequences of the plot-theme conflict come into the open and the characters have to make their final choice.

p.48 – you have to know your climax (in dramatized terms) before you start to outline the steps by which to arrive there. It has been said that Broadway is full of first acts. Many people can come up with an intriguing first act but do not know what to do with the play thereafter. By contrast, a good dramatist starts with the third act. He does not necessarily write the third act, or the climax, first – but he keeps it in mind.

p.53 – Train your mind to concretize every abstraction (love, hate, fear, anger, independence or dependence, selfishness or unselfishness)

p.57 – Best stories are those which can be told in one sentence.

p.59 – Characterization is the presentation of motives. We understand a person if we understand what makes him act the way he does.

p.60 – to project a convincing character, you need to have an idea of the basic premises or motives which move his actions – and by means of these actions, the reader will discover what is at the root of the character.

p.146 – Dramatization serves as the emphasis of your story. The key events should be dramatized. The less important material, such as transitions, can be narrated.

p.148 – Exposition is the communication of knowledge which the reader requires in order to understand a scene.

Do not let it show. Make the exposition part of some statement which has a different point – a point necessary for the progress of the scene.

p.154 – Metaphor: (The snow was as white as sugar.) The introduction of another concrete with the same attribute makes the two together give a clear sensuous image – it isolates the attribute by making the reader's mind form an abstraction. The reader's visualization of the whiteness of snow and the whiteness of sugar makes that whiteness stand out in his mind as if he had seen it. When you select a comparison, you must consider not only the exact attribute you want to feature, but also the connotations that will be raised in the reader's mind.

p.176 – I read a novel for the purpose of seeing the kind of people I would want to see in real life and living through the kind of experience I would want to live through.

Laura says

Teaching creative writing again this semester got me in the mood to do more research for my students, so I read this quick one for them before we started our fiction unit. I would not recommend it for anyone who has a weak stomach for Rand's philosophies and her ego, but if you're okay with both then you'll do fine. That's not to say that you won't still get annoyed by her saying that all non-objectivist art isn't really art, comparing

her own writing to Hugo and Tolstoy, and dissing Kafka (among many, many other writers). But if you can swallow that then you'll be open to some interesting things she says about the nature of conflict, plot, concretization (versus abstraction, which was perfect for my students who all seem to only write from the abstract universe), flashback, and symbolism.

And the book's origin is pretty interesting: Rand gave a series of salon-style lectures in her home during the late 1950s and this book is a result of the transcription of tapes of those lectures. The editor's foreword is an interesting description of piecing together the lectures and adding transitions to make for a single smoothly reading book. And it works as such, for sure. In fact, it's probably Rand's unbelievably strong personality that is able to make this work. With a weaker person the variations in mood, tenor, and direction would be much more obvious.

The narrator, Marguerite Gavin, read this seven hour book in a perfectly snooty style of Ayn Rand voice (or of what I imagine her voice to be). It's a quick read, though beware of the audiobook format if you intend to take any notes for yourself (I used my Audible app's "bookmark" feature when I was driving and couldn't easily take notes or pause the book [which I know was unsafe, but it's in the past, so get over it]).

Alex Fontanetta says

This collection of lectures underscores Ayn Rand's brilliance as a writer. It provides insight into her own works as well as those of other authors. The topics discussed are relevant to most types of writing, but particularly to fiction. This book is for anyone interested in Ayn Rand and her works, for anyone seeking writing advice, or for readers who want to become better critics of the books they read.

Cherise says

I believe this may be the most insightful book about writing that I have ever read. Ayn Rand is not about to accept any of the common cop-out explanations for writing: "Well, it just turned out that way." "I felt like doing it like that." "It seemed right." She declares that everything you write is because of some premise you hold in your head, whether you realize it or not, and that the key to good writing is to learn how to identify and shape those premises as you wish.

Her understanding of plot is more distinct and complete than that of any other writer I've heard explain the issue. For Rand, plot is all about definite purpose. This extends even to her descriptions, where every sentence is evaluated for how well it advances the (sometimes many) purposes of its paragraph. Rand draws a distinction between Romantic writing and Naturalistic writing. Romantic writing, she says, examines the underlying motives of human decisions, while Naturalistic writing claims to set down things 'as they are' but makes no value judgments. I found this insight helpful, as it explains why some books called classics are engaging and memorable, while others seem to wander without a point.

Some may find Rand's philosophy hard to get past. She certainly isn't shy about communicating it to you. Some may also find Rand's self-aggrandizing to be a distraction. (As she openly says early in the book, she believed herself to be the best writer of her time.) However, in my opinion, the clear advice she offers is too valuable to pass by. The fundamentals of good fiction are all here in this slender volume.

Note: Because of my own self-censoring, I skipped most of Chapter Eight, which dealt with love scenes. Readers who wish to guard their hearts from such things (and those under 15) will probably want to do the

same.

Christopher says

This book is based on private lectures given by novelist and philosopher Ayn Rand, author of "Atlas Shrugged", "The Fountainhead", "Anthem", and "We the Living". It is an amazing guide to learning the principles of how to write fiction and dispels the arbitrary myths commonly taught about how the mind works when writing. A fascinating read recommended to both readers and writers seeking a better understanding of the books they read or how to become a professional author.

Ilyn Ross says

Ayn Rand is an excellent teacher.

Marco den Ouden says

I had read pretty well everything Ayn Rand had written during her lifetime but there are some of her posthumously published works I had not got around to. This is one of them. It is an edited transcript of a series of informal discussion held with friends and fans in her living room in 1958, finally edited and published in 2000. And it is a terrific addition to her works.

The book is an adjunct to her collection, *The Romantic Manifesto*, and is aimed particularly at those who want to write fiction and those who want to understand the different types of fiction around. In particular she distinguishes between two major schools of literature - romanticism and naturalism. Romanticism focuses on big issues with large than life characters. Naturalism focuses on the average and mundane - the folks next door.

She discusses the importance of writing for the intelligent reader - writing descriptively so the reader can form his own conclusions. Bad writers will use a lot of adjectives but avoid concretes. They'll describe a sunset as beautiful or use other adjectives that describe their personal emotional reaction to what they see. She says a better way is to describe concretes and let the reader form his own emotional reaction. So a good writer might say, the sun's brightness faded and flared out into a deep red covering the horizon from end to end before slowly sinking into the sea and winking out.

Rand touches on many other issues for writers including characterization, plot, climax, description, how to train your subconscious to come up with plot ideas, and style. In the two chapters on style, she includes generous excerpts from other authors' works with commentary on the good and bad points about each.

She concludes with some short discussions on narrative versus dramatization, exposition, flashbacks, transitions, metaphors, dialogue, slang and obscenities, and journalistic references. She also touches on special forms of fiction such as humour, science fiction, symbolism, fantasy, and tragedy.

All in all, this is really an excellent textbook on good writing practices. It will certainly help any future forays I might make into fiction. Now I have to find a copy of the companion book, *The Art of Non-fiction!*

Brett Anderson says

If you are interested in improving your fiction writing and you liked *The Fountainhead* / *Atlas Shrugged*, you should read this book.

Even more than before, I'm looking forward to reading *We the Living* now that I have read Rand's own reflections on the writing of fiction.

Austin Neaves says

It's really hard for me to give Ayn Rand 5 Stars because I really really dislike her. For one thing, I think a lot of the things she says are absolutely off the wall crazy (and that's being nice)... I still question whether or not most of her adoring fans have ever actually read her books. All in all, I find her to be one of the most narrow and overrated authors of the twentieth century. But I'll tell you why I enjoyed this book: It challenged me - And that's what a good book should do.

I found so much to disagree with, that reading this book helped me to strengthen what it is I (personally) believe about writing and what I don't believe.

Ayn Rand has a very black and white personality. She's a very opinionated (which is fine), but writing is such a subjective process that getting a glimpse into another authors creative process is a wonderful thing...

And that's what Ayn Rand does here... she gives you a glimpse into her process for writing fiction. I found pieces of it to be unique, valuable, and insightful (if you can get over her "This is the way everything should be done" type personality).

So if you love Ayn Rand, then read this book... And if you hate Ayn Rand, then take it from me - It's still worth reading.
