

MFA Reading List

The MFA Reading List is a loose and idiosyncratic collection of reading recommendations for MFA students. It consists of useful reference works; exemplary works of literature; and books on craft, the writing life, and the creative process. The first section of the list is grouped into genre categories (Fiction, Poetry, Creative Nonfiction). The second section is made up of individual faculty recommendations. For the most part, there is little overlap between these two sections, so be sure to take a look at both.

The function of the list is twofold. First, it offers students a collection of titles to help them prepare for the MFA exam, which comes at the end of the second year and requires a command of secondary sources. Second, it presents a broader life list that students might continue to explore after graduation.

The list is optional, a point of departure rather than arrival; we expect you to explore it selectively, and to read above and beyond and off to the side in the ways that best feed your own work. The overall goal is to stress the link between reading and writing, and to introduce the idea of reading like a writer, by which we mean reading with an eye toward enriching your understanding of craft and deepening your individual practice.

Section One: The List

Fiction

Auerbach, Erich *MIMESIS*

Barth, John *THE FRIDAY BOOK*

Baxter, Charles *BURNING DOWN THE HOUSE*

Bly, Carol *THE PASSIONATE, ACCURATE STORY*

Booth, Wayne *THE RHETORIC OF FICTION*

Brooks, Cleanth & Robert Penn Warren *UNDERSTANDING FICTION*

Brooks, Cleanth & Robert Penn Warren *THE SCOPE OF FICTION*

Busch, Frederick, ed. *LETTERS TO A FICTION WRITER*

Checkoway, Julie, ed. *CREATING FICTION*

Forster, E.M. *ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL*

Gardner, John *THE ART OF FICTION*

Gardner, John *ON BECOMING A NOVELIST*

Gilchrist, Ellen *FALLING THROUGH SPACE: Journals*

Henri, Robert *THE ART SPIRIT*

Hills, L. Rust *WRITING IN GENERAL: AND THE SHORT STORY IN PARTICULAR*

Hoffman, Michael & Patrick Murphy *ESSENTIALS OF THE THEORY OF FICTION*

James, Henry *THE ART OF FICTION*

Kundera, Milan *THE ART OF THE NOVEL*

Lubbock, Percy *THE CRAFT OF FICTION*

Macauley, Robie & George Lanning *TECHNIQUE IN FICTION*

O'Connor, Flannery *MYSTERY AND MANNERS*

O'Connor, Flannery *THE HABIT OF BEING*

Olsen, Tillie *SILENCES*

Scholes and Kellogg *THE NATURE OF NARRATIVE*

Smartt Bell, Madison *NARRATIVE DESIGN*

Welty, Eudora *ONE WRITER'S BEGINNINGS*

Welty, Eudora *THE EYE OF THE STORY*

Various writers "The Writers at Work Series," in *THE PARIS REVIEW*

Creative Nonfiction

Dillard, Annie *THE WRITING LIFE*

Gerard, Philip *CREATIVE NONFICTION*

Gornick, Vivian *THE SITUATION AND THE STORY: THE ART OF PERSONAL NARRATIVE*

Kerrane, Kevin & Ben Yagoda, eds. *THE ART OF FACT*

Knightly, Philip *THE FIRST CASUALTY*

Lopate, Phillip, ed. *THE ART OF THE PERSONAL ESSAY*

McLanahan, Rebecca *WORD PAINTING, A GUIDE TO WRITING MORE DESCRIPTIVELY*

Sims, Norma, ed. *LITERARY JOURNALISM IN THE 20th CENTURY*

Zinsser, William *INVENTING THE TRUTH: THE ART AND CRAFT OF MEMOIR*

Zinsser, William *ON WRITING WELL*

Zinsser, William *THEY WENT: THE ART AND CRAFT OF TRAVEL WRITING*

Zinsser, William *EXTRAORDINARY LIVES: THE ART AND CRAFT OF AMERICAN BIOGRAPHY*

Poetry

Allen, Gay Wilson *AMERICAN PROSODY*

Allen, Donald & Warren Tallman, eds. *THE POETICS OF THE NEW AMERICAN POETRY*

Aristotle *POETICS*

Auden, W.H. *THE DYER'S HAND*

Auerbach, Erich *MIMESIS*

Bachelard, Gaston *THE POETICS OF SPACE*

Bachelard, Gaston *THE POETICS OF REVERIE*

Buber, Martin *I AND THOU*

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor "On Poesy or Art" and *SEVEN LECTURES ON SHAKESPEARE AND MILTON*

Dryden, John *ESSAY OF DRAMATIC POESY*

Eliot, T.S. "The Music of Poetry"

Emerson, Ralph Waldo "The Poet"

Emerson, Ralph Waldo "The American Scholar"

Emerson, Ralph Waldo "Nature"

Frank, Robert & Henry Sayre *THE LINE IN POSTMODERN POETRY*

Frost, Robert *PROSE AND POETRY: SELECTED PROSE*

Fulton, Alice *FEELING AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE*

Fussell, Paul *POETIC METER AND POETIC FORM*

Gallagher, Tess *A CONCERT OF TENSES*

Gibbons, Reginald *THE POET'S WORK: 29 MASTERS OF 20TH CENTURY POETRY*

Glück, Louise *PROOFS AND THEORIES*

Gross, Harvey *THE STRUCTURE OF VERSE*

Gross, Harvey & Robert MacDowell *SOUND AND FORM IN MODERN POETRY*

Heidegger, Martin *POETRY, LANGUAGE, THOUGHT*

Hall, Donald *CLAIMS FOR POETRY*

Hartman, Charles O. *FREE VERSE: AN ESSAY ON PROSODY*

Hass, Robert *20TH CENTURY PLEASURES*

Hirsch, Edward *HOW TO READ A POEM*

Hirschfield, Jane *NINE GATES: ENTERING THE MIND OF POETRY*

Holden, Jonathan *THE RHETORIC OF THE CONTEMPORARY LYRIC*

Holden, Jonathan *STYLE AND AUTHENTICITY IN POSTMODERN POETRY*

Hollander, John *VISION AND RESONANCE*

Hugo, Richard *THE TRIGGERING TOWN*

Jarrell, Randall *POETRY AND THE AGE*

Justice, Donald *PLATONIC SCRIPTS*

Keats, John *SELECTED LETTERS*

Kirby-Smith, H.T. *THE ORIGINS OF FREE VERSE*

Lehman, David *ECSTATIC OCCASIONS, EXPEDIENT FORMS*

Longinus *ON THE SUBLIME*

McCorkle, James *CONVERSANT ESSAYS*

McHugh, Heather *BROKEN ENGLISH: POETRY AND PARTIALITY*

Myers, Jack, *DICTIONARY OF POETIC TERMS*

Myers, Jack & David Wojahn *A PROFILE OF 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN POETRY*

Nietzsche, Friedrich *THE BIRTH OF TRAGEDY*

Pascal, Blaise *PENSEES*

Perkins, David *A HISTORY OF MODERN POETRY, 2 Vols.*

Perloff, Majorie *THE POETICS OF INDETERMINANCY: RIMBAUD TO CAGE*

Pinsky, Robert "The Situation of Poetry"

Pinsky, Robert "Poetry and the World"

Plumly, Stanley "Sentimental Forms"

Plumly, Stanley "Chapter and Verse"

Poe, Edgar Allen "The Poetic Principle"

Poe, Edgar Allen "The Philosophy of Composition"

Pound, Ezra *ABC OF READING*

Preming, Alex & T. V. F. Brogan, eds. *PRINCETON ENCYCLOPEDIA OF POETRY AND POETICS*

Ostriker, Alicia *STEALING THE LANGUAGE: THE EMERGENCE OF WOMEN'S...*

Rich, Adrienne *ON LIES, SECRETS AND SILENCE*

Rich, Adrienne *BLOOD, BREAD AND POETRY*

Rilke, Rainier Maria *LETTERS TO A YOUNG POET*

Scully, James *MODERN POETICS*

Scully, James *LINE BREAKS*

Shelley, Percy Bysshe *DEFENCE OF POETRY*

Sidney, Sir Phillip & Forrest Robinson *AN APOLOGY FOR POETRY*

Simic, Charles *THE UNCERTAIN CERTAINTY*

Smith, Barbara *POETIC CLOSURE*

Steele, Timothy *MISSING MEASURES*

Stewart, Susan *POETRY AND THE FATE OF THE SENSES*

Turco, Lewis *THE NEW BOOK OF FORMS*

Whitman, Walt "Preface" *LEAVES OF GRASS*

Wordsworth, William "Preface" *LYRICAL BALLADS*, 2nd Edition

Section Two: Faculty Recommendations

Lavonne Adams

Poetry

After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography, by Kate Sontag and David Graham.

-A collection of essays that address the social and political implications of confessional and personal poetry, as well as the craft.

Weather of Words: Poetic Inventions, by Mark Strand.

-The Library Journal describes this as an "eclectic selection of short critical essays, reminiscences, occasional pieces, and prose poems." Very thoughtful and engaging essays.

Life Studies, by Robert Lowell.

-Technically a poetry collection. This work begins with a long prose section that is essentially memoir, then moves to poetry. A seminal collection that illustrates the historical move from personal writing to confessional poetry.

The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises From Poets Who Teach, by Robin Behn.

-This should be on every poet's bookshelf, both as a way to trigger our own work, and as a teaching resource.

Art, Creativity, and the Writing Life

The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It for Life, by Twyla Tharp and Mark Reiter.

-An informed and fascinating look at the creative process, with references to all of the arts.

Wendy Brenner

Falling Through Space: Journals, by Ellen Gilchrist

The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor, by Flannery O'Connor

Mystery and Manners, by Flannery O'Connor

Push Comes to Shove: An Autobiography, by Twyla Tharp

The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It for Life, by Twyla Tharp and Mark Reiter.

Mark Cox

Conversant Essays, by James McCorkle.

-Hefty and helpful collection of essays in practical criticism.

A History of Modern American Poetry (two volumes), by David Perkins.

-Well-written and clear overviews of Anglo-American poetry.

Dictionary of Poetic Terms, by Jack Myers.

-Dictionary of terminology with helpful mini-essays on free verse prosody.

A Concert of Tenses, by Tess Gallagher.

-Essays, including some on memory, time, and narrative in poetry.

Argument and Song, by Stanley Plumly.

-Seminal essays on contemporary poetry.

20th Century Pleasures, by Robert Hass.

-Essays on form, meter, imagery and more.

The Poetics of Indeterminacy, by Marjorie Perloff.

-Helpful in understanding L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E and disjunctive poetics.

Real Sofistikashun: Essays on Poetry and Craft, by Tony Hoagland.

-Very current and covers a lot of territory.

Claims for Poetry, by Donald Hall.

-Well-known stand-by anthology of essays on poetry.

New Expansive Poetry, by R.S. Gwynn

-Essays on Neo-Formalism, et al.

Clyde Edgerton

Understanding Fiction, by Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks

-A study for readers that speaks to writers.

The Scope of Fiction, by Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks

-An abbreviated version of *Understanding Fiction*.

Mystery and Manners, by Flannery O'Connor.

-A blunt and helpful guide for young writers.

Elements of Style, by Strunk and White

-The elementary guide for putting down words.

The Habit of Being, edited by Sally Fitzgerald.

-The letters of Flannery O'Connor, many to young writers.

Phil Furia

A writer's handbook of style, grammar, and usage, such as Leonard Rosen's *Decisions: A Writer's Handbook*.

-This is not a frivolous suggestion. I have too many MFA students (not to add BFA students) who don't know the difference between "its" and "it's," don't know how to use a comma (let alone a semi-colon), and don't know the difference between a clause and a phrase. I use Rosen's handbook, but he is soft on omitting the comma before the next-to-last item in a series (before "and")—just says be consistent. Damn his eyes! If people stop putting the comma before "and," it will ruin one of the greatest lines in 20th-century poetry. When Frost wrote "The woods are lovely, dark and deep," he was counting on readers to notice that he was not omitting the comma before "and" in the line "The woods are lovely, dark, and deep," but he was using "dark and deep" as an appositive phrase to modify "The woods are lovely"—so that, disturbingly, the loveliness of woods inheres in their (normally unlovely) darkness and depth.

On Writing Well, by William Zinsser.

-An excellent guide to writing of all kinds, though geared primarily to creative nonfiction. A hugely successful writer shows how he's learned to focus, prune, and do a lot of other things all writers need to learn to do. He also took me to lunch at the Waldorf—where he ordered a cheeseburger (his only failure of taste).

Since I teach workshop courses in creative nonfiction and forms courses in poetry, fiction, and drama, here are three more suggestions:

Creative Nonfiction, by Philip Gerard

-The book is an excellent example of what it teaches--how to write engaging, well-researched, imaginative nonfiction that clearly sets the genre apart from journalism.

The Nature of Narrative, by Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg

-Fiction students often have little sense of the historical background of their genre. Scholes was the best teacher I had in grad school at Iowa (and the most widely read). This book traces the historical development and stylistic range of narrative from Homer and the Icelandic “Eddas” to the twentieth century. I like the books on fiction by Auerbach, Booth, and Forster, but this one covers the genre most fully.

Poetic Meter and Poetic Form, by Paul Fussell

-Whenever I teach “Forms of Poetry,” at the grad or undergrad level, I’m astounded at the number of students who write poetry but can’t tell an anapest from an iamb. They don’t have to write metrical poetry, but they should at least know how it works. Most poetry handbooks treat the subject of prosody drily, but Fussell shows how lively, to quote Ira Gershwin, “fascinating rhythm” can be.

Philip Gerard

The Nick Adams Stories, by Hemingway

-Still a touchstone for short fiction.

Aspects of the Novel, by E.M. Forster

-A subversive, sly, and funny book that shows why Forster had such a large audience but doesn't explain why he never wrote another novel!

The Friday Book, by John Barth

-Has some great discussion about how narrative works.

United States, essay collection by Gore Vidal

-Watching a really keen mind at work.

Middle Passage, by Charles Johnson

-How you can write humorously about a serious subject.

The Collected works of Mark Twain, in 23 volumes.

-If I had to pick one that inspired me, it would be *Life on the Mississippi*, which I think is as much about craft and vision as about rivers.

The Writing Life, by Annie Dillard

Malena Morling

Poetry

In Search of Duende, by Federico Garcia Lorca Edited by Christopher Maurer

This Craft of Verse (Charles Eliot Norton Lectures), by Jorge Luis Borges

The Necessary Angel, Essays On Reality and The Imagination, by Wallace Stevens

Less Than One, Essays by Joseph Brodsky

Other

Testaments Betrayed, An Essay in Nine Parts, by Milan Kundera

The Curtain, An Essay in Seven Parts, by Milan Kundera

Sculpting In Time, Tarkovsky The Great Russian Filmmaker Discusses His Art, by Andrey

Tarkovsky & Kitty Hunter-Balir
Six Memos For the Next Millennium (Charles Eliot Norton Lectures), by Italo Calvino

Robert Siegel

The Chicago Manual of Style.

-Just knowing it's there, with the definitive statement on semicolon usage, helps me sleep at night.

Fowler's Modern English Usage.

-Wonderfully cranky, but also very clear and commonsensical. Read from cover to cover, or dip in as needed.

The Oxford English Dictionary.

-The historical citations make it completely fascinating.

Paris Review Writers at Work Series.

-Over fifty years of interviews on the writing life. The complete archive is available for free on the web.

The Curtain.

-One of a series of essay collections by Milan Kundera sketching out an alternative history of the novel, which he traces from Rabelais through Cervantes to Diderot and Sterne. The series begins with *The Art of the Novel* and currently runs through *Encounter*.

The Complete Stories of John Cheever.

-There's something about the emotion in a really good Cheever story—the way it never completely resolves toward one single point of feeling. A model of emotional complexity.

Jesus' Son, by Denis Johnson.

-How to subvert expectations and still hold the reader close: fragmentation, concision, radical jumps in time, highly intuitive narrative structure.

Confessions of Zeno, by Italo Svevo.

-Svevo's narrator always says one thing and does another, like a real person. A model of how text and subtext can talk to each other.

The Postman Always Rings Twice, by James M. Cain.

-A great example of how plot can reveal character and world with a force that feels intuitive, rather than intellectual. This novel is all plot, but reads like a poem.

Emily Smith

The Art of Literary Publishing, edited by Bill Henderson

-No matter how many times I reread this collection of essays by small press and literary magazine trailblazers including John Farrar, Jonathan Galassi, Cleanth Brooks, Joyce Carol Oates, Gordon Lish, and Maxwell Perkins, I'm always astonished by how little has changed since its first publication in 1980, by the familiar challenges and resonant anecdotes. It inspires me still.

The Artful Edit, by Susan Bell

-The section about the rewarding editor-author collaboration between Max Perkins and F. Scott Fitzgerald alone is worth the read. Bell thoughtfully excerpts

sections of *The Great Gatsby* before and after Perkins's suggested edits. You'll appreciate the book we all read in high school in a whole new way.

On Book Design, by Richard Hendell

-More than any other, this book has informed my approach to book design. As Hendell writes, "Book design doesn't delight in its own cleverness; it is done in the service of words." Hendell and eight other book designers articulate their approaches to the "invisible art" and thoughts on the effective visual presentation of words. Excellent examples illustrate their choices.

Mike White

My Mortal Enemy, by Willa Cather

-One of those rare perfect works of art.

To the Lighthouse, by Virginia Woolf

-Ditto

The Bear, by William Faulkner

-Got me thru the 11th grade.

Remembrance of Things Past, by Marcel Proust

-Got me thru the navy.

Speak, Memory, by Vladimir Nabokov

-A memoir almost as great as his novels.

The Prelude (primarily the 1805 edition), by William Wordsworth

-The never-ending poem.

Ovid/Virgil/Dante

-How to rewrite history.