

READING AND WRITING GO HAND IN HAND

BY DANNY HEITMAN



Poet Maya Angelou recites her work at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton in 1993. Her work is included in *Read to Write*, a writing textbook conceived by Donald Murray. Photo courtesy of William J. Clinton Presidential Library.

As a college writing student many years ago, I used a textbook, *Read to Write*, conceived by Donald Murray. An acclaimed journalist before he entered academia, Murray championed the simple idea that learning to write required reading professional writers.

Read to Write included work from many great wordsmiths, including essayist E.B. White and biographer Robert Caro, reporter John McPhee and poet Maya Angelou, author Joan Didion and novelist John Updike.

Each selection invited students to reflect on different aspects of technique and how practiced writers had addressed them. Decades later, *Read to Write* still rests on my shelf, its binding bandaged with tape after years of heavy use. Some of Murray's editorial choices no longer hold up well, which can happen with textbooks. But a number of these *Read to Write* writers, many of whom I first encountered in the classroom, continue to instruct me in my own writing tasks.

The principle that any aspiring writer should also be a frequent reader might seem self-evident, but that doesn't appear to be the case with many writing students.

While teaching a college writing class a few years ago, I asked my students as a bonus question to name the last book they had read outside of their course work.

Most responded by listing one of the *Harry Potter* novels, books that have their most ardent following among middle schoolers. It seemed likely to me that a lot of my students had not read a book for pleasure in years.

In sharing this story, I've heard from many other teachers with similar experiences, which shouldn't be surprising. National surveys routinely report declines in reading for pleasure, particularly among the young.

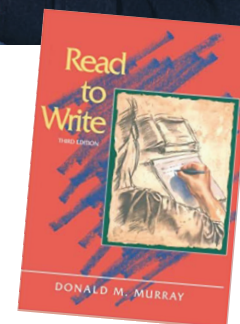
A student-athlete can learn much about football, basketball or golf by watching professional sports contests, even as a spectator seeking nothing but entertainment. In a similar way, all of us build our writing muscles when we read — regardless of whether our aim is instruction or simply to enjoy a beach book.

In reading good literary models, the point for a writer isn't merely to imitate a master's style. The real value comes in gleaning insights from a pro that can be adapted in your own work.

In my college days, I first came

across the essays of 1920s newspaperman H.L. Mencken, whose joyously boisterous style taught me that writing, however important, could also be fun. I wrongly concluded from Mencken's example that all good writing must be noisy. But reading E.B. White, a quietly understated genius of prose, pointed me to the possibility that a writer can persuade without raising his voice. In Virginia Woolf's novels and essays, I discovered how much a writer can reveal on the page by paying close, patient attention to the world at her feet.

I'm still learning from great writers whose talents I'll never match. Books, whatever else they promise, are the best classrooms a writer could want.



Forum editor **DANNY HEITMAN** has written about the writing craft for numerous publications and taught writing to university students. Readers with suggestions or ideas for this regular column about writing can reach him at dheitman@phikappaphi.org.