

1-1-2024

The Great Literary Marriage: Why All Good Readers Are Also Writers

Olivia Reardon
Messiah University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://mosaic.messiah.edu/peregrinereview>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Permanent URL:

Recommended Citation

Reardon, Olivia (2024) "The Great Literary Marriage: Why All Good Readers Are Also Writers," *The Peregrine Review*. Vol. 37, Article 28.

Available at: <https://mosaic.messiah.edu/peregrinereview/vol37/iss1/28>

Sharpening Intellect | Deepening Christian Faith | Inspiring Action

Messiah University is a Christian university of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society. This content is freely provided to promote scholarship for personal study and not-for-profit educational use.

The Great Literary Marriage: Why All Good Readers are Also Writers

Olivia Reardon, Editor (English 2026)

I once heard a fellow English major say, “I read because I want to; I write because I have to.” In this particular instance, the student was lamenting all the papers she had to write and explaining that writing is simply the chore she must do in order to study literature, her true passion, in college. However, I think her statement inadvertently makes an important claim about the relationship between reading and writing. It is fairly well-acknowledged that good writers are also readers. But what about the opposite: are good readers also writers? In my experience, reading and writing are an old married couple that simply refuse to be separated.

Writing helps readers actively engage the text, deeply understand the text, relate the text to their own life, and join the literary conversation surrounding the text.

Because of this, writing is a necessary activity for all good readers.

Reading can either look like running a marathon or stumbling to the bathroom at 2:00 a.m. because you drank too much water before bed, with few exceptions in between. Thus, readers can either engage with a text passively or actively. Passive reading is the act of receiving the text without actually asking questions or thinking through the ideas presented.

Passive readers simply get from the beginning of the text to the end with little regard for how they do so. In contrast, active reading involves formulating questions and remembering ideas as one encounters the text. When I read actively, I come to a text armed with my pencil, notebook, and colorful sticky notes. With these tools, I can engage the text actively by writing notes in the margins of the text, jotting down plot and idea outlines in my notebook, and tabbing key passages that pertain to different themes with my colored-coded sticky notes. In this way, active readers engage the text in a careful and attentive manner that ultimately enhances their experience of the text.

While it is true that readers can take it upon themselves to actively read the text without the motivation of a looming writing project, active reading is most likely to occur and done most fully when it is paired with writing. If readers aim, or know they must aim, to write about the text after reading it, they are much more likely to encounter the text with an active mindset. The knowledge of a future writing project has the same effect on students’ brains during the reading process as a professor saying during a lecture, “this information makes up a large portion of the upcoming exam.”

Thus, writing after reading requires that readers attend to the text with attention and vigor. Additionally, writing about a text continues active engagement beyond the initial reading of the text. This is because writing about a text entails returning to the text again and again throughout the writing process. In other words, writing requires re-reading, an activity few readers engage in unless they are required to write. Thus, writing puts the readers into the text initially, and then again and again, in a way that encourages deep and meaningful engagement with the text.

Then, through the writing process, readers gain a deeper and often truer understanding of the text. When I tutor at the Writing Center, I often tell students that it is okay and absolutely normal for their thesis statement to change multiple times throughout the writing process. This is because the writing process is an extension of the thinking process. Active reading leaves readers with questions and newfound ideas. And while these thoughts can feel quite developed in one's mind, attempting to put them into coherent sentences never fails to show just how infantile they are. While beneficial, sitting at one's desk thinking or participating in a group discussion will only get one so far. It is ultimately through the act of writing that these thoughts truly develop.

In this way, writing is like doing a puzzle without knowing the end result. Maybe you begin confident that you are putting together a rhinoceros, but despite your effort, the pieces simply do not create a rhinoceros. Nevertheless, you keep at it until eventually, maybe even begrudgingly, you discover that all along you were supposed to be putting together an elephant. Now you realize that it could never have been a rhinoceros because there were always those pieces that created big ears no matter which way you connected them and there never were any pieces with a horn, but you would never have known this with any kind of certainty until you started putting the pieces together. In the same way, you may have an idea about the text that you are confident in, but once you sit down to write about it, to actually put the pieces together, you realize that maybe your idea is a bit more complex or different than you originally thought. But if you keep at it, eventually the words will crawl into place, becoming whole on the page and in your mind. Thus, writing is the means by which readers gain a deeper, often more accurate, understanding of the text itself.

Furthermore, writing urges readers to apply the text to their own life. As I have mentioned, good works of literature plant new ideas and questions in the minds of readers. But this is all a text can do;

it cannot force readers to answer those questions or engage with those ideas. That task is the responsibility of the readers, and writing is often the medium through which readers do just that. As one begins to understand the text via the writing process, he or she naturally begins to ask: how do these ideas inform my understanding of the world, God, or myself? How do they affect the way I live? Although readers can ask themselves these questions while they read, it is not until they are forced to write that they truly grapple with the answers to these questions. Thus, as the answers to these questions begin to form on the page, they also form in the mind of the reader-turned-writer.

In this way, writing solidifies these lessons in the readers' hearts and minds. By practicing reading and writing in tandem, I have discovered the significance of love, sacrifice, honesty, freedom, and humility. I have explored the ways in which old texts teach us how to live better today and how new texts act as a mirror for readers. And all of these personal discoveries were the result of writing about texts that I have read. Because it was not until I wrote that I knew what I thought about the text or what it meant for my life. In this way, writing powerfully shapes readers' perspectives on the text and their relationships to the text.

Finally, writing is the means by which readers enter the literary conversation surrounding the text and offer their respect and appreciation to the author. To read and to write is to participate in the universal conversation about humanity. In my mind, reading is the listening portion of that conversation. When one reads a text, whether that be a novel, poem, essay, or journal article, he or she is hearing the thoughts and ideas of another person. Writing is simply the reader's response. So in many ways, picking up one's pen is one of the most respectful responses the reader can have. Writing says to the author, I hear you, and I value what you have to say so much that I want to add to the conversation you have begun. We've all had the unfortunate experience of being in a one-sided conversation where one person does all the talking with little response from the other party. It is entirely possible that they are listening, intently even, but if they never open their mouth, the speaker ultimately feels as if all he or she has said was a waste. And while a literary conversation is different in that the author of the text may never read the reader's writing, it is still a profound act of respect and appreciation.

Because writing about a text is entering a conversation, writing is also a profound act of bravery. By writing, you are asserting that you have something of value to say,



something no one else can say. And this is true because no one else is you. Every reader has a unique perspective and is impacted by the text in a unique way; thus, every person brings something valuable to the conversation.

And maybe someday a person will read your writing and then write about it, continuing the conversation and bringing it to new places, cultures, and generations. Consequently, writing is the tool by which readers respectfully and bravely join the literary conversation.

It is important to note that the writing I have been referring to need not be a dissertation, research paper, or even a five-paragraph essay, although all of these options hold incredible value. Any kind of writing that one composes with the intention of making sense to another person, even if another person never actually reads it, is beneficial to the reading process. This kind of writing could include journal entries or bulleted writing that answers specific questions or explains ideas from the text. It is the attempt to communicate something about the text, to release a thought from the confines of one's mind and give it new life on the page that is ultimately valuable for developing as a reader and as a person.

Now, none of this is to say that writing is at all easy. Too often people say to me, "I so admire the fact that you love writing." My typical response is to laugh

because the truth is, most of the time I hate writing. Molding mushy thoughts into solid ideas is a difficult task, and more often than not it looks like staring at a blank computer screen, frantically scribbling down thoughts that seem important but often turn out not to be, drafting a thesis only to redraft it six times, and going to bed with thousands of ideas fighting in my head, promising myself that somehow it will come together tomorrow. Every paper that I write makes it clear to me that writing is an arduous process. Yet the reason that writing is hard is the very reason it is so beneficial. It is only by struggling through the writing process that readers are able to deeply understand and learn from the text.

In light of this, my charge to every reader is simple: write. Write well, write badly; write for yourself, write for others. And the next time your professor assigns you a paper, thank them. Because they are simply asking you to read responsibly. They are providing you the opportunity to engage the text actively, discover the text in a deeper manner, consider the text's application to your life, and enter a literary conversation. So stop divorcing reading from writing: they are better together. And by participating in their joyous union, it is my prayer that writing will become a task every reader not only has to do, but loves to do.