

JUST FOR READERS

**An easy to understand guide to help you
get the most from your reading time**



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Everybody likes to read. We all love a good book don't we?

There isn't a child that hasn't ever looked at a book even in this sedentary digital age, but do we actually tune in to the real purpose of reading and what it can do for us in our lives today?

When you employ the skill of reading it becomes a tool of access for you. Whether your aim is to gain knowledge by reading non-fiction, or opening the door of your mind to worlds of fantasy, when you read you are looking at words on a page. You are not staring at an action-packed screen or frantically running your fingers over a control pad in order to get your entertainment 'fix'. Those words on the page need interpreting, your brain has to engage in a particular way to do so, and with a different focus than is required for watching a screen. It *isn't* for everyone.

What reading will give you is a completely different experience from watching, listening, or playing games, and I would say, in most cases, a far richer one. Yes, it's different and there are things that you can't get from a book, but the people of this world have learned much of what they know from reading. Other ways of accessing knowledge or experiences are just extensions of the core. If we were to lose the skill of reading we might very quickly find ourselves lost in the ether, unable to appreciate the purest form of intellectual communication.

This is why I will always encourage everyone to read whenever they can and to give books the time and respect they deserve. I expect if you are reading this you already do that.

This is a short and to the point guide about how to get the best from your reading experience. I don't pretend to tell you what you should or shouldn't like or enjoy:

This is just my take on it.

Clearly a lot of people who buy books from major online stores get a lot from their reading experiences and leave some engaging reviews that give great insight. Conversely, many don't always enjoy what they buy (judging by the reviews they leave), and sometimes it is fairly obvious from reading these reviews that they *haven't* actually *read* the book . . . although they may have turned all the pages! The point when

reading fiction is to be able to open your mind to possibilities - to things you might miss or not get first time round.

Overall, I hope the words I leave here may in some small way enhance your reading experiences.

So how do you like to read?

We live in an age where almost anything is possible. The technology available to use is enormous and developing all the time. Almost monthly, a new way to access or integrate with something is revealed to us, and reading to that end is no exception.

The first thing to get clear is that it's not one size fits all. In spite of what you might have heard elsewhere, people do still like to read in many different ways.

Printed books are now far less popular than e-formats perhaps, but there is still a strong market for them. Printing is not what it used to be, the industry has moved with the times.

As a trade printer with experience spanning many years, I can testify that prices have dropped dramatically in recent times. There are many POD (print on demand) services available for prospective publishers to utilise and there are dynamic differences in the specific services offered.

As for digital formats, it doesn't just stop at the Kindle, Nook or any other e-reader. A couple of beta readers for my latest first draft actually requested a PDF format because they wanted to be able to look at it on more than one device, and at different times and didn't want to be tied to their regular e-reading device.

The methods available for producing material for people to read are endless, and it is down to the reader to be discerning in how he or she gets the most from their reading.

Are you the person that likes to have your whole library on your e-reader and takes it with you everywhere? Do you sit and read while your kids are at their sports club or an evening? Do you take it with you to the Spa and utilise that extra thirty minutes when you would otherwise be just relaxing? Or, do you 'collect' ebooks? -

you've got them in many different formats on your computer - your favourites are on cloud drives as well so you can get them up on your mobile whenever you want. Maybe you are more the 'curl up on the sofa with a good book' type? You probably want a physical printed copy - you like to pick it up and feel the pages, gaze at the cover and smell the print; a book for you is a possession of comfort. Or, you're a paperback addict and you feel satisfied as you know you've devoured another chapter and can see the thickness level of pages read increasing by the hour: For a few days this book goes with you everywhere!

We are all very different in our habits. Here is an observation I have made at first hand over the last couple of years:

Twice a week I run my daughter down to the local athletics club, I tend to socialise with a few other parents while we watch our offspring train but a good proportion, between 25% and 35%, sit and read. What do they read? Virtually always fiction. How do they read it? 60% / 40% split favouring e-reader devices over print books. Who reads? 99% are women. (These are from the parents present, men and women in equal numbers).

Getting the best from your reading experience

I've talked to a lot of people about how and what they like to read and it's clear that we all have a different take on what we find in front of us. Some of us read fast, some read slow, some of us focus better under pressure while some struggle.

To get the best experience from reading anything requires two things: knowing what it is you want/need to read, and then applying effective skills to carry out the process. This may sound a bit of a clumsy way of putting it . . . did I just say you need a certain skill set to read? Yes, reading is as much a skill as the writing is in the first place. Think about this for a moment, we can all read and write to a greater or lesser degree, but the outcome, experience, or knowledge gained by any individual is going to differ greatly. It's *not* just because of *what* is written on the page in front of you, it's about what you *understand* from what's written on that page in front of you.

Reading is the most important skill

Of course, reading objectives are going to vary greatly in accordance with requirement; if you are reading non-fiction you might scan through a section to get to the bit of information you require, there may be no need to have known what comes before or after. The ability to concentrate, focus, and often re-read a small part over and over are necessary skills in this case. An example would be an instruction manual.

If you are reading to find out about a broader subject presented as a whole and that points to a particular theory or philosophy, then you can take the dip in and out approach. However, you will get the best experience by reading from start to finish, then re-reading parts relevant to your requirements. This book and thousands of others like it are examples. This is probably the most common mindset with which people approach reading in general.

If you are reading fiction you need to read it all . . . nothing is ever gained by guessing the ending or skipping the middle. But here lies the real crux of the matter:

You need the right mindset for whatever is in front of you

The human brain works in a way that naturally adapts to its environment. If you want to find something out you will concentrate when reading that important instruction. If you don't really want to be bothered with the story you are reading then your mind will drift off and scream 'boring, boring' however good the writing or content in front of you might actually be.

So once you've decided you are going to read something you need to quite simply keep an open mind, start on a level playing field and kill off any preconceptions you may have at the back of your mind as to what you might already be thinking about the story. It's only too easy to see from Amazon reviews when readers had already made up their mind that they were expecting something else from the story. Too often a low rating review contains revealing information that tells a discerning observer that perhaps the reader hadn't really accepted the story at face value in the first place. Some of these reviews are actually just plain comical.

As a real 'live' experiment I just broke off for an hour whilst writing this to randomly pick out such an example from the amazon store. I didn't sift through, I just went three pages in and looked for the first novella that caught my eye that had a handful of reviews that ranged from low to high. The results back up what I am saying perhaps even more than I expected! Here is what I found:

Now I'm not going to reveal exact details of the story, it's not necessary. I will just tell you that it was a simple mystery story with an easy to understand but slightly unusual plot. It was also a debut novella to be the first in a series. I have changed the exact wording of the review comments to protect any obvious identity.

One reviewer gave it a low rating saying simply that they found it very unusual and after reading a quarter of it they gave up because it showed no signs of improvement!

So . . . 'unusual' - is that not a good thing in the mystery genre? If anyone read only a quarter of any of my stories and then gave up, I would not have expected them to be able to give a considered opinion about it. We know that first page has to grab the reader's attention, and surely in this case it must have done or else the reader wouldn't have followed through with the read. So, logically, it's worth giving it more than ten minutes to if you are going to bother to leave a review at all!

Another said, 'I skipped to the last page to see how it ended up as I gave up in the middle. It wasn't my type of book and would have suited a teenager rather than an adult.'

(The sales page states a reading age of 7 - 11 years!)

I gave it a higher rating review, and the book thankfully has received some good reviews but you can see from this how easily many readers find themselves getting sucked into that 'preconception' state of mind whereby they are already expecting a very specific result from the experience of reading a particular book.

***Reading doesn't work best this way. Keep an open mind;
always prepare to be taken on a slightly different journey each time.***

Of course, everyone is entitled to their own opinion and must be allowed the platform to give it. You expect any book to be as described, and, there are some shockers out there that fall well short of the mark. The book I chose randomly here however, was certainly not one of them. It was well written and the review criticisms were in my opinion somewhat unjust.

What to look for in a good story

So what should we look for in a good story?

All good stories contain certain ingredients. Whatever the genre there are specific things that need to go into the mix, and yet it will never be quite the same balance for any two pieces of writing. A good and experienced author will be careful to ensure the following points are soundly built into the core structure of their story but as a reader you must judge the effect for yourself. Sometimes things are obvious, sometimes you need to look deeper, and sometimes certain aspects will not be as relevant as others.

Here is a breakdown of the main literary mechanisms that generally go towards making a well written piece of fiction.

Opening: The first few pages or chapters (depending on the story's length) Do the first few sentences or paragraphs of the story grab your attention? Do they present the protagonist's main problem? Remember how you judge a book or story when you first see it in a bookstore. First impressions count, so does this author grab your attention fast enough? A word of caution: books have something called 'blurb' which, when well written tells you enough about the type of story it is so don't expect to get the full impression just from the opening.

Conflict: The deliberate divisions created within the story. These can occur at different levels but most stories will need to contain some form of conflict.

"The mental or moral struggle caused by incompatible desires and aims. That is the kind of conflict that makes stories vitally alive."

(* Ben Bova in *The Craft of Writing Science Fiction That Sells*.)

Look for emotional conflict *within* the main character. Also, between the main characters? For example; love vs. loyalty; greed vs. duty; fear vs. desire. Conflict should be ongoing; you don't want the writer to have raised a problem on one page and then solved it for you on the next. At the end, of course, all the conflicts should be resolved in some way or other.

Is there enough conflict between the characters? Is it expressed through action, dialogue, attitudes, or values? Part of this will be resolved through characterisation; there should be enough contrast between characters to make any conflict believable.

Plot: The 'A' to 'B' to 'C' order of events. The framework from which everything else is hung. The plot in most stories needs to be clear and believable but it might

not always appear so from the outset. In a good story, the main character will have a clearly defined problem and you should feel by the end of the piece that this problem was solved or at least arrived at some resolution.

Are you able to determine the time and place of the story quickly?

Does the story start and end at the right place?

Are there scenes which do not seem to further the plot? If so, be sure they don't have some secondary relevance, a good writer will always eliminate totally irrelevant material.

As the story unfolds is there clear level of tension - either building throughout or at various points?

A good plot always has more than one thing going on although some very good stories seem to just move along in a line. The argument here is '*linear versus layer*', and as a reader it should become clear to you whether the story's plot is moving from one point to another (linear) or whether there are important secondary sub-plots taking shape in and around the main theme (layered).

If a story seems very predictable look for possible hidden meanings - maybe there is a subtle sub-plot going on that you haven't picked up on yet? Conversely, if a story seems to be very complex try to see if there are perhaps more layers to it than you were first expecting or realise. Use of aspects such as change of time zone and flashbacks are good indications of this - authors don't generally do this without good reason.

Pacing and resolution will often help you judge if a story is going to be right on the money. A linear plot usually has a faster pace to keep the reader interested whereas a layered story may appear to jump around a bit and will generally require a sound resolution to all the twists and turns.

There may be some level of explanation required at the end of the story but often things are left hanging for the reader to form their own viewpoint. The author may be planning on answering some of the unresolved points in the next story, in which case there should be clear clues to this.

Overall, of course, you, the reader have to understand the plot and judge it on merit for its levels of complexity or simplicity, its use of pace and tension, resolution, layers and sub-plots.

Setting: Where and when the story is taking place. There must be enough description of the background to paint a picture that seems real enough to the reader. 'Background' can also mean information about the time period, relevant events that may have recently occurred, or other specific facts that the reader might need to know. Too much description can become boring.

Did you feel that you were transported to that time or place? Names of people and locations should be realistic and believable (unless the story is obviously of comical nature).

Did the author use good names for people, places, and things? Names help set the tone for a story. Were there too many to keep track of?

Another important point here is that the characters behave in a natural way; for example, would Danielle really have made that journey alone in the dark just at that point in time?

Does it fit with events that were supposed to occur before and after?

This one is important and is a common occurring flaw in many an otherwise sound story.

Characterisation: The understanding you acquire of a character from the information about her the author has revealed.

It goes without saying that the story's characters simply have to come across as real. One-dimensional cardboard cut-out type characters are usually a no, no. As the reader you are the judge.

Character facts must be correct. Most writers will have done their research so if you find yourself questioning something about the believability of a character, alarm bells should start to ring.

Things about the main protagonist that the reader should be able to get a good idea of include their family and friends, their job, worries, ambitions, relationships with other characters, any unusual habits or patterns, lifestyle preferences, abilities or talents. You also need to be able to get inside the character's head - at least, the

main character/protagonist. This will mean that the author should certainly have given some attention to their emotions, attitudes and values.

Stereotype characters seldom work in serious fiction. In real life they don't exist as such. Be aware if the protagonist comes across as too squeaky - clean, or any villain (antagonist) seems so evil without any redeeming qualities or substance to their characterisation whatsoever.

In a good piece of fiction writing, character information should be carefully released. Beware of long blocks of text that seem to be there just to fill out with information. A far better experience for the reader is when you are only given the what you need to know and at the time it is required. This can be done through the other techniques already mentioned; events, setting, the plot, or a situation of conflict. So if you do find the narrative seems to be steering off at a tangent, be aware that it could be because there is a key point that needs to be made:

An example might be a seemingly at first unnecessary descriptive section which culminates with the protagonist reflecting back on a related situation in his or her own life that has shaped a crucial part of their character.

Example: Our protagonist is sitting in a car watching the rain fall fast, there is plenty of descriptive tension emphasising the point and setting the scene. He then reflects back on the last occasion he found himself in a similar situation, which had resulted in catastrophe whereby he was caught in a flood and unable to save a small child nearby. This engrained experience is why he is both determined not to let the current situation get dangerously out of hand but is also very fearful that it might do so if he does not take the right action. Thus, we learn of an important part of his characterisation through understanding his conflict of emotions and the use of descriptive writing; we are not simply told the detail.

Dialogue: The direct speech between characters written as the precise words they speak.

This is an area where writers seem to have very varied opinions about what can and can't be done to good effect on the page. The first consideration is always how much? Too much dialogue often sticks out like a sore thumb as being a somewhat cumbersome and a potentially uninteresting mechanism by which to push the story

forward. Many writers will err on the side of caution and often not include enough, particularly between the characters.

The important sense to get when reading is that the dialogue should always be part of the narrative and that we never find ourselves listening in on background chat without there being a point to it. Therefore the most relevant question you should ask as a reader of any fiction is:

‘Did the words from the mouths of the people in the story seem consistent with their personalities?’

This is really the key point; dialogue is one of the tools through which the story is told, therefore it’s all about relevance and balance.

You should be able to sense the conflict, attitudes, and the intentions of each character in their dialogue without the author telling you of these directly. Can you hear that character saying those words in your head? In an exchange of conversation, is it clear to you who is speaking?

A sign of a poor writing style is to use too much ‘he said, she said’ after individual lines of speech. It is quite possible for the experienced author to have eliminated these almost entirely. If he has made his characters strong and believable, the reader will most often know who is talking. However, some very successful and well-known authors still use a lot of dialogue tags – they get away with it perhaps because everything else is so good. However, it is true to say that in the cold light of day dialogue tags can only add to any narrative when their use is limited for the effect.

Unless a book has been very poorly formatted and edited, each new entry of speech from an individual will start a new paragraph on a fresh line. This aids the clarity of the way in which dialogue is presented on the written page.

Has the author used dialect that is too heavy, making it difficult to read?

Beware of monologues or long passages of speech. These can be a sign of weak writing as it is generally far better to naturally break up speech into sections, but there might be an important point to it - a crucial reason why this character needs to tell it all at this time perhaps? We don’t have to look any further than Shakespeare to know this!

Point of View: The way the story is presented to the reader through the character's eyes. This is of paramount importance. The reader needs to get it, and the point of view, (POV), from which it is written must be clear.

Does the story skip around between the first person or third person point of view?

Are any changes in POV signalled clearly?

There is nothing inherently wrong in the author changing POV as long as it is not done too often, these are questions you should be asking yourself if you don't understand who is holding the narrative at any particular point.

Most stories are written in the third person POV and will use limited POV from other characters. Clues are often in the actions and it is not always necessary to hop around from one POV to the other, this can be a confusing experience for the reader. In many stories however, changing POV is a necessary tool. Don't be surprised to find powerful switches of POV in the narrative when it transverses different eras, locations, or contain flashbacks. It may not make sense at all to be seeing everything from the main protagonist's point of view.

Understanding good use of POV is best summed up by Trevor Lawrence:

"The key point is to get the reader to engage in a contract in which the writer offers: I'm not going to show you everything in the character's head because that would spoil the story for you. Instead, I will reveal things as we go along but I promise that I won't cheat."

Show versus tell: The skilful revelation employed by the author to make us *think* what he might mean. This is the skill of writing any work of fiction in a way which the author gives you just the right amount of information for the story to move along in the reader's head.

Showing the reader and allowing them to fill in the blanks is far more effective than simply telling the story.

Do we get this chance to interpret what the characters are feeling or does the author just tell us directly?

If other aspects already discussed are soundly in place then a good writer will already have gone a long way towards taking care of this. It also applies through

dialogue - we don't want to be given every explanation of why characters are behaving the way they are just because the author can do so.

Telling is only sometimes necessary, *showing* - revealing gradually, is a far better way.

Grammar, spelling and format: As a rule this should be something that is taken care of before the publication gets into your hands . . . but we all know that isn't always the case!

Is the book easy to read? Are paragraphs too long? Would it help to put blank lines between paragraphs? Is the English readable? Are there grammatical errors, misuse of punctuation, poor sentence syntax etc.?

This may seem like a lot of questions, but there is a point to be made here: Fiction works are published the world over and different linguistic styles have evolved - and some are now poles apart from each other. As a reader you must appreciate the story's roots . . . if it is written in English by an English author and is set in England then the written language is going to be consistent with the use of traditional British grammar and spelling. Books by American authors are most likely going to use American-English. Not only are some words spelt differently, but also there are different uses of grammar.

Style: A sound execution of all of the above. Getting all the other points solidly in place goes towards forming the style in which the story is written. Author styles vary but you will soon home in on those whose style resonates with you.

Certain things should always be avoided as they clutter writing style and add nothing to the narrative; I'm talking about traits such as repeated words in the same paragraph or even on the same page! Most authors are very aware of this and editors pick up on it very quickly, so if you find a passage where a word has clearly been repeated there might be some hidden reason as to why.

Signs of poor style include overuse of exclamation marks, abbreviations, and cliches, all these should be kept to a minimum so when the author does use them there is an obvious deliberate point to doing so. Wordy sentences and lengthy unclear descriptions are other common weaknesses, but beware before casting judgement as an author maybe using this deliberately as a 'style' of writing to convey another point within the text.

Finally, always bear in mind that the story itself has a genre that it pertains to and that sometimes in respect of that there is a weighted direction in which an author's style of writing will naturally flow.

The Writer's World

Every artist, whether they are a writer, storyteller painter, sculptor, musician, rapper, poet, dancer . . . whatever, is striving to show their world to an audience. It is the art that speaks and tells of what they are doing, why they are doing it and what it means to them. To do this successfully the artist must strike a bond that resonates with his audience, stirring emotions and creating an imaginary world, however small the experience may be, that this audience can relate to and become part of - even if only for that brief moment. All art forms stir emotions.

Great artists will always leave a legacy. Sometimes it comes in the form of an explosion that we all remember; like when someone becomes a household name and is in the public eye for a year or so and leaves a mark that will not be forgotten. Other times we appreciate good art because, quite simply it stands the test of time. Many people may not like the music of Mozart but very few have never heard of him, and fewer still would seriously argue that he was not in any way of significant importance in the history of the music.

Every artist creates their own unique world; a painter will usually become known for a certain type and style of paintings, if a band gets together and starts to write their own ballads then that is ultimately what they are likely to be remembered for. Nobody's world is exactly the same in real life, we emerge from different cultures, we arrive at our place of work from different backgrounds. Children come together at school emerging from vastly different home environments. Consequently, everybody's world is slightly different. Every writer must create their own world for their audience to be invited into. I can't replicate yours and you can't create mine. But you *can* enter in.

So why is all this so important?

Well, because, we humans need to experience emotions that satisfy our needs. At one extreme, endorphins, hormonally produced chemicals, block out negative receptors throughout our nervous system, leaving us with a feeling of euphoria over whatever the task in hand . . . we get a 'buzz'. At the other end of the spectrum we may simply muster a mild passing interest in something that does just enough to encourage a strain of emotion. Whatever level it is, to be believable it must be experienced, and I mean that in two ways: The reader of a story must be given an experience - taken on a journey . . . convinced, hooked - call it what you like, while the writer of the story must have some real life experience and knowledge to be able to successfully deliver this. If it is non-fiction then it is information the reader craves, but there's also interest . . . nobody really wants to spend much time reading about what they already know!

When I write books it's usually because I want to pass on a message. This might be something I can accomplish by simply putting it together in a non-fiction format (you are reading an example of that model right here and now!) Also, and to be frank, often more importantly, I like to do it through my fiction writing. Let me explain:

Now, remember I said that anything you do really has to stem from an experience you've had however direct or completely relevant it may or may not be . . . you can't truly write from the heart without something tangible to start with in the first place. For instance, I don't believe that if you wanted to become an author of romance you could do so without ever having had some sort of substantial relationship somewhere in your own life. You could try, but it wouldn't be convincing because important pieces of the jigsaw would inevitably be missing through the sheer lack of real life experience. On the other hand, you wouldn't necessarily have had to have been in a full blown starlight 'cinema-type' romance yourself to understand how it all works and to convincingly write in the genre. You may have got a lot of additional experience simply by reading and by observing real life situations.

I write my fiction based on experiences that are dear to my heart. That doesn't mean everything I include has happened to me and it doesn't mean the words on the page are gospel, but what it does mean is that I have something to say - I have a voice . . . and it is *uniquely mine*.

For me the most effective and perhaps strongest way to project my ideas and what I want to say, is through writing fiction.

How many stories from our childhood contained morals and metaphors? The point of them was to convey a meaning; to make you think, and possibly to question a particular moral issue. For the most part I feel a good story should at least have more than one layer, by that I mean that there is something other going on than what's actually happening in terms of the plot action. A 'layered' story has more depth, will ask more questions and contain the answers if the reader is alert and alive to look for them. This may be in the form of a very simple twist, such as in the piece of flash fiction I wrote called *[Back with the Boys](#)* (see below) which makes an unexpected point. Or it might be something that goes a little deeper. *[The Life of Ryan](#)* is a short story that explores just this very point.

It might even be the case that the plot contains more than one story element and that you, the reader, have the job of deciphering the various clues enabling you to understand a resolution to the story.

The stories in *[The Spirit of Peterborough](#)* series are good examples of this. (*You may need to read them twice!*)

Now, as a demonstration of point, let's take a look at a very short example to show you what I mean about getting an idea from your own experiences. Here is a story I wrote a while back. I got the idea from being in the situation myself one otherwise uneventful summer afternoon just a few years ago:

BACK WITH THE BOYS:

His body ached as he lumbered towards the tree line that lay thirty metres in front of him. He strained almost every sinew in his body desperately trying to get to the safety of cover. He didn't dare look back, nor even over his shoulder. All his experience, and all his past training instinctively told him, this was now a race against time . . . he had to be out of sight in the next five seconds or else, surely, they would find him and he would face an immediate state of impending doom!

It all happened so quickly, one man's fortune is another man's fate. As he'd scrambled for the trees he'd realised he'd drawn their attention, but at that same

moment there had been a distant scuffle to the west - in the heavily scrubbed quarry dip . . . someone was caught!

His heart sank to the pit of his stomach. His emotions were mixed, he was the lucky one but one of the boys was surely taken.

He crouched, motionless. The only sound was that of the wind rippling through the dry birch leaves through which he peered. He waited. Still silence! Where were they? He couldn't remain here much longer.

His left foot suddenly slipped and sent a cascading slither of slate and stone into the small hollow below. The noise echoed across the open quarry. Now, somehow he had to get back with the boys.

Creeping carefully on to his haunches he made his way to the top of the dip, camouflaged only by the dangling branches. This was his moment, just fifty metres to cover . . . he rose, his heart pounding, and with a final heroic effort he surged forward breaking into an emphatic run.

Suddenly, a shout forced him to look across, he knew immediately the game was up. He stopped, now horribly exposed and out in the open.

"OOo you got me" he laughed to his little son as the six year old sprinted out in front of him. "If I'd made it past you I would never have got round James without being caught! Did I hear you catching Uncle Billy a few moments ago as well?"

It's a simple piece of flash fiction with an obvious twist, you don't find out what's really going on until the last paragraph.

The opening paragraph is exactly how I felt when playing this very game with my own family. I have a large family, my children range vastly in age, and many a time we have been out to a remote quarry to play these realistic type of hide and seek games. (We always take it seriously!) At first glance you are of course meant to think the description is of a fugitive or soldier escaping from the enemy.

Everything I say *is* how I felt on this occasion when playing this game; my body did ache, (I am getting on a bit now and the arthritis is there to stay), I'd played this game before, I knew I only had a few seconds before the boys came looking and I

knew they would find me unless I got in amongst the undergrowth pretty darn quick! . . . the whole idea came to me from a real life experience.

The phrase '*face an immediate state of impending doom!*' is an open one; it could apply to lots of situations so I give nothing away other than just that slightest hint that I might have used some more direct and relevant language to clarify the specific situation; (*first clue*).

The language I use in the second paragraph *does* give you a specific taste of what the story is about but it is still designed to lead you off the scent:

'One man's fortune is another man's fate' might well make the reader think 'war' rather than 'war game', but if not, to cement this I talk about a scuffle to the west, a quarry dip, and that someone was caught!. Again, this bit was real - we were in a quarry where you can hear every echo bouncing across the dips and hollows. (*Experience*).

Then there is a line or two conveying emotions before the paragraph that builds tension: (*description of surroundings, questioning and desperation, critical event – his foot slipping*).

By now you should have been completely drawn in . . . be honest . . . at this point did you guess anything other than desperate fugitive/soldier/runaway/law breaker desperately trying to avoid capture?

Then comes the beginning of the ending, a sudden change of mood and the phrase '*The game was up*' that sums up the actual point of the whole story before you've realised it, but it could equally apply to what you might be thinking the outcome is going to be anyway. (*Second clue*).

The last paragraph is obvious - the game really is over. The father is caught and a brief explanation of events of the last few moments is given revealing the twist.

This is a very simple piece of writing that I couldn't have done successfully without having had the experience of playing a game like that and been in that exact position myself. I could have guessed and I might have brought it off but it's always better to write about what you know. Extra spice to the dish is that I have an adult son that has served in the army and has had some incredible experiences that he has naturally told me about. He was there taking part in the game that day as well.

So you see, I find that even the shortest simplest creations are the most effective way to make a point when they are presented as fiction. I don't feel it would have been half as interesting if I'd just written a paragraph or two in journalistic form about the time I played a realistic wide army game with my kids and ended up getting caught!

Appreciating what you read

So you know what you like and you've chosen the book you want to read. You may be someone who always has a very clear reading list planned ahead of you or you may be a little stuck on which to read next.

Well, some advice if you are starting from point zero would be to start with a classic, there's a reason why they are classics, it's because they've stood the test of time.

The important thing is not to get bogged down with it all. Just start somewhere.

Winston Churchill put it very well;

“If you cannot read all your books . . . fondle them . . . peer into them, let them fall open where they will, read from the first sentence that arrests the eye, set them back on the shelves with your own hands, arrange them on your own plan so that you at least know where they are. Let them be your friends; let them, at any rate, be your acquaintances.”

If it's a book you've never heard of before and it hasn't been recommended then do the obvious things . . . read any reviews, find out about the author, get to grips with the details of the story. For example it would be good to do a bit of research about Victorian London if you are reading a thriller/murder/mystery set in the 1880's.

This might all sound obvious but many people don't bother and take it all 'as read' (excuse the literal pun!).

The following can be treated as a sort of checklist, not all these aspects will apply to every book on the planet but they are a good place to start, whatever the genre:

Plan your reading time: Everybody's time is limited. If you know exactly how long you can actually spend reading, you can plan how much time to devote. There is often little point in starting a book one week and then not finding the time to pick it up again for three months!

Purpose: You will always get more from a book if you know what your reason is for reading it. Define this early on.

Read actively and with focus: You shouldn't rely one hundred percent on the structure given by the author, you may well understand the meaning of the story in more depth if you move around the text. Focus on certain patches - re-reading as you go - even on the first read through.

Read the entire book: This may sound obvious, but while it's okay to *skim read* certain sections at certain times, you must commit to reading the entire manuscript of any work of fiction otherwise you are not going to get the full experience intended by the author.

Read the story three times: Why three? Three is a good number. If you are serious and the book has grabbed you the first read of any good fiction is seldom going to be enough. You'll need a second read through for detail and understanding. However, if it *hasn't* grabbed you then you probably won't want to bother! A third read should be for mental note-taking; what have you learned? How has it broadened your knowledge or understanding of a subject?

Allow your mind to do its job: A book is read most effectively when you do it in manageable chunks. This will always depend on the size but it is rare for anyone to get the best results by reading anything longer than about 25,000 words in one session. Let your mind do its work in between sessions, allow processing time where you think through what you've read so that the next reading session starts with you in a good place.

Know the context: Having gained a broad understanding of the genre before you read the book will eliminate any negative points of view that might otherwise creep in. For example, if you are reading a thriller that contains a gruesome murder you naively weren't expecting in the hope or misconception that it might turn out to be a

flowery romance in the end, you are probably going to be both disappointed and offended by its content.

Don't limit your experience of the book to just reading: Talk about it. Take any opportunities you can to discuss with others through any conversational form or through writing about it.

Now, let me take just one point and explain in detail something that is not understood by everyone; why we should read a book three times

'I can't imagine a man really enjoying a book and reading it only once.'
(C.S. Lewis).

This is the key technique. You need to get into the mindset that each reading is for a different purpose and the time taken should be allocated very differently for each read through:

The first should take no more than 15% of your total time spent on the book. . . yes, I did say 15%! However, people have very different reading abilities so this figure is going to vary. Some will read very much faster than others the first time round but may not do so when they are reading for detail and from a more analytical point of view.

The second time you read through a work you should be looking for the detail and making sure you understand the themes. Try and get a careful, critical and thoughtful grasp of the key points. What is the book *really* about? It might not just be the story you thought it was. Could you understand and evaluate the author's evidence for the key points made in the book? This should be a much slower read - and not necessarily in strict order. It depends on the nature of the work itself but this should make up 70% - 75% of the total time you spend on the read.

The purpose of the third read is for you to commit to memory the key elements the book contains - the plot, the points it makes, the relevance of various themes or arguments. Aim to make notes in whatever form works best for you. You need to have a voice - something you can say about this book and what it has done for you. this last 10% - 15% of your time on the subject will be well spent, it will help you get the overview - something that is important to anything you are ever going to do in life. It will stand you in good stead for your next book, or will help you remember if you ever choose to come back and read this one again some time in the future.

Okay, a hands up on that last point: realistically not many people are going to manage that third read through, but it has many guises; Reviewers, this is checklist time. You probably spend a bit of time writing your review so use this third read-through to make sure you've grasped it

What next?

We are all readers to one degree or another and it's a given to say that the more you read the more you learn and the wiser you are likely to become as a result, whether you are seven or seventy. Life itself is like a good book, the further you go, the more opportunities you find, and the more it all begins to make sense.

The obvious next step is always to read another book. Read what you enjoy reading and do it in the way you most enjoy doing it. The advice I have given is just that . . . purely structured advice, the next step along the literary road is always determined by where you actually decide to plant your foot.

But is there something more?

Do you feel inspired yourself? Many people do and a lot of serious readers are, or do become writers of one sort or another. It's good practice to comment on what you have read. This doesn't have to be at the level of a serious literary review, just your own personal thoughts are enough. I am a strong believer in committing things to record whether it be pen on paper or words stored digitally and therefore, all serious readers should become writers to a point.

Plan your reading around your life style. How much time have you got? What are your reading targets? Are these realistic? And *why* are you reading? Do you read just to learn, or to take yourself into another world - immersed in the story? Or, do you read as part of your way to discovering how better to write?

You see, as I said at the top, there is no one size that fits all.

Whatever you decide is your next step I hope you have found this information useful.

If you are hungry to read and feeling inspired to write, then just do it. Everybody starts somewhere.

If you would like to find out more about what I write and why I write it, then please visit:

www.tomgoymour.com

