

Ways to Grow as a Writer

Part 1: Critical Writing

by Karen Krossing

I'm finishing my first semester of a two-year Masters in Writing for Children and Young Adults at the fabulous Vermont College of Fine Arts (VCFA). My big-picture goal is to discover new ways to grow as a writer and share that through mentorships and workshops. In this article, I'll chat about one of my many mind-blowing take-aways from this semester: how a process of detailed and individualized critical analysis of children's books has given me insights into my creative writing. In a second article in a later issue, I'll explore how critical discussion has done the same.

First of all, I want to say that you don't need to take an MFA to use critical analysis to improve your creative writing. In fact, we all analyze the kids' books we read all the time. Before my MFA, I thought I was doing that effectively. But this program has taken that process deeper.

I wasn't a fan of critical writing when I first applied to the program. Why did I need to return to my undergrad days of writing English essays? What I didn't recognize at the time was that those essays were about literary theory, not writing craft. After I wrote my first writing-craft essay to apply to

the program, I immediately noticed the benefits. I wrote about how [Caroline Pignat](#) establishes the distinct voices of her five point-of-view characters in her brilliant young-adult novel [Shooter](#), in which a school lockdown forces five students from different social spheres into an unlocked boys' washroom. At the time, I was drafting a novel with three point-of-view characters, so my analysis was directly applicable. Before I wrote the essay, I was having trouble making my characters' voices distinct, but this essay gave me tools to help

resolve that problem. I entered my first semester already committed to feeding my creative writing through critical writing. As the semester progressed, what surprised me is how much I enjoy writing critically, even looking forward to it, and I've come up with more possible topics than I have time to write. Let me explain how this process works at VCFA. Of course, it begins with reading books—in particular, ones that address a challenge I've

been struggling with. Critical writing then has two components: annotations of books read and plenty of critical essays.

Annotations include a brief summary of the book as well as what writing craft element I observed. It's *not* literary analysis. My current faculty advisor, [Liz Garton Scanlon](#), who is a talented writer as well as an insightful and inspirational advisor, says the craft takeaway is the "so what" of the annotation. She suggested I answer questions like: "What have I learned as a



writer that I could apply to my own work or avoid? What specific strategy or technique could be universalized or at least applied to some other writing projects? What element of craft is well-demonstrated here that I could try?" Interestingly, we can learn from poorly written pieces by analyzing why they don't work.

As for critical essays, the program starts with students writing many short essays (about 4 to 6 pages), leading to a critical thesis of about 30 pages in third semester. [Shelley Tanaka](#), who is a much-loved VCFA faculty advisor as well as Groundwood editor and acclaimed author says, "You might wonder how this critical component has anything to do with your creative work, but it's all about holding the reader's attention, seeding and building a narrative. Truth is, if you can't write a logical 4-page critical essay, chances are you can't write a novel. It forces you to ask key narrative questions right at the beginning. Who is your audience? What do you want to say? How can you say it concisely, with voice and conviction?"

My first semester is a [Picture Book Intensive](#), so my essay topics relate to my exploration of this new-to-me genre. For example, I explored how to write dark or difficult topics in picture books. Then I applied the techniques I observed to writing my own manuscripts. I also analyzed original drafts of celebrated picture books compared to the published versions to determine how the authors revised their works, coming up with a list of questions I can ask myself when revising and discovering common trouble-spots and revision techniques.

Imagine repeating that process over and over again with handpicked topics. Let me tell you, it results in insight after insight. I'm stunned by all that I've learned so far. In fact, this process seems somewhat magical. Shelley Tanaka says, "I have seen how critical writing (usually about issues that you are trying to solve in your own creative work), targeted reading (aiming high, seeking out the

very best models and analyzing them from a writer's point of view), alongside creative writing that is responded to by an experienced mentor can result in the perfect storm of creative engagement."

Of course, not every writer has the time, money or inclination to devote to an MFA program. Completing an MFA is just one way to grow as a writer. And after my program is done, I'm going to need to find a way to continue this process of discovery.

So, here's how I think anyone can use critical analysis to feed their creative writing:

- Ask yourself: What writing craft element is challenging you these days?
- Then consider: What mentor texts could you read to explore how others have handled it well, poorly or somewhere in between?
- I suggest you write your analysis. I've found that more insights emerge when I write, rather than just think. You could keep a list of mentor texts with annotations. ([Bookpedia](#) is one tool you can use to organize books read.) You could also write short critical essays or articles. (The bonus is that these could become blog posts.)
- Finally, and most importantly, ask: How can you apply your new insights to your current works-in-progress?

Good luck with it! I hope you find this process as useful as I have.

KAREN KROSSING's recent titles include [Punch Like a Girl](#) (Orca, 2015), which was runner-up for the Kaywell Books Save Lives Award, and [Bog](#), (Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2014), which won the SCBWI Crystal Kite Award. She'll be a workshop leader at CANSCAIP's Packaging Your Imagination 2018 in November.