



**STORY DECONSTRUCTION:  
Learning to Write by Taking a Story Apart**  
by Sylvie Kurtz

I'm always amazed at the number of people who want to write, but say they don't read. That makes no sense to me. A big part of learning what makes a story tick is reading what other people have written. And even if you, as a reader, don't enjoy a particular story, taking that story apart gives you a learning opportunity--learning what didn't work.

Read in your genre to understand its conventions. Read out of your genre to learn different techniques. Non-fiction has its place, too, in a reading repertoire. For me picking up a book on a subject that catches my interest can lead to a possible plot seed or twist.

The first time around, read the book for fun. Then read it again, taking it apart to learn.

**Analyze the story's skeleton:**

Can you sum up the story in a sentence?

Can you recognize the basic structures steps? Where did they show up? How did the author illustrate them?

What is the main external conflict?

What is the main character's internal conflict?

What did the main character want? Why did he want it? Why couldn't he get it?

What did the main character learn over the course of the story?

How did the author create purpose, empathy, credibility and complexity in the character?

How did the author use speech, appearance, action, thought and indirect information to show the character?

What made this book memorable for you?

What would you do differently in terms of plot development? Characterization?

**Analyze your emotional reactions to what's on the page:**

Why do I feel like crying here?

Why am I laughing here?

Why am I skipping parts?

Why am I turning the page, even though it's past midnight and I have to get up at six the next morning?

What about the character makes me like her/hate her?

Why is my pulse picking up here?

What's cliché?

What's fresh?

What "rules" did the author break?

You'll learn more from doing that active study than from reading any how-to book or sitting passively through any class.

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