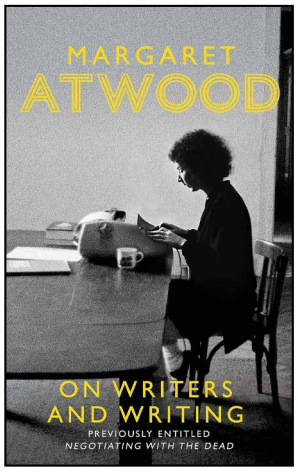
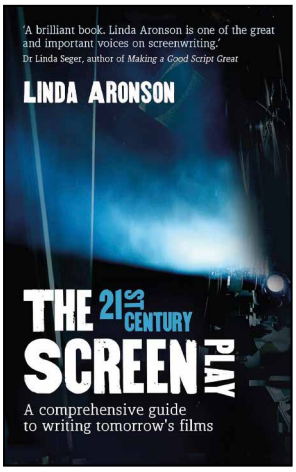
Can the art of writing be learned?

It comes as no surprise to us that people performing in theatre, film or on television – with a few exceptions – are graduates of drama schools. We also take it for granted that someone can study painting and sculpture at an art college or learn an instrument at a music academy. Meanwhile, in the case of another form of artistic activity – creative writing – we do not intuitively associate it with university-level education.









Anyone wishing to learn the art of writing outside the framework of a formal degree programme may wish to consult the following works: Margaret Atwood's *On Writers and Writing*; Olga Tokarczuk's *Czuły narrator* [The Tender Narrator]; Mikołaj Marcela's *Jak pisać, żeby napisać swoją książkę* [How to Write in Order to Write a Book That's Yours]; Katarzyna Bonda's *Maszyna do Pisania* [The Writing Machine]; Linda Aronson's *The 21st-Century Screenplay*; Adam Kulawik's *Poetyka* [Poetics]

And yet, just as an aspiring actor needs good diction, a future painter should be able to distinguish colours, and a future violin virtuoso must have a good ear for music; similarly, anyone with ambitions to write prose, poetry or film scripts will not succeed without a set of certain core competencies – in this case, these are a fluent command of language and a fundamental feel for it. And those can certainly be improved over time.

'It is telling that we even ask whether it is possible to teach someone the art of writing, as we do not pose this question in relation to other forms of artistic education. It makes it seem "unteachable", which I find hard to agree with', says the researcher, poet, and literary critic Grzegorz Olszański, PhD, DLitt, Assoc. Prof. from the Institute of Polish Studies at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Silesia in Katowice.

Prof. Olszański traces the origins of these doubts to the fact that, counterintuitively, the Romantic paradigm still holds sway in Polish culture (even though Maria Janion, an eminent literary historian, has argued that it is now in decline). In this context, the process of creating literature – or, more broadly, writing – is treated as a phenomenon of an almost mystical nature, impossible without divine inspiration or a flash of genius, which the writer experiences at the right moment.

'From antiquity through the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, there were many collections of rules to follow when composing a text within a specific literary genre – we refer to these as "poetics". Mastering these rules was a craft in itself, and writing thus became, as the ancient Greeks would have put it, *techné*, a practical skill. Romanticism, which saw a relaxation of creative rules, marks a turning point in this sense as well, given that poetics have never really returned since then', says the Polish studies expert from the University of Silesia.

It is also noteworthy that the oldest Polish music academy (now the Chopin University of Music in Warsaw) was founded in 1810, and eight years later the country's first academy of fine arts was established in Kraków, which is now named after the painter Jan Matejko. Yet it took nearly two full centuries for Poland to establish its first fully-fledged degree programme dedicated to teaching writing – The Art of Writing, launched in 2014 at the University of Silesia in Katowice. Prof. Grzegorz Olszański has been the director of this programme since its inception.

Regardless of how a student approaches the writing process – whether they are more inclined to break the rules in the spirit of avant-garde practices, or whether they adhere to the classical principles set out in poetics, and nowadays more commonly in the various types of widely available textbooks – their linguistic skills will be of no use unless they are reinforced by writing and reading practice. Therefore, on the one hand, the programme in question emphasises writing from the very beginning, while on the other hand it relies on literary studies, i.e. covering knowledge of literary history, theory, and literary criticism (albeit not at the same level of depth as in 'standard' Polish studies).

'Stanisław Lem's son, Tomasz, once paraphrased one of his father's three laws as follows: "Nobody reads books these days, but everyone writes them", recalls the researcher with a smile. 'I believe that there is no writing without reading, and that the characterisation of writer and reader as opposed is false. Only extensive reading practice – both historical and theoretical, as well as casual, everyday reading for pleasure – can properly shape a writer, not least through a comprehensive knowledge of conventions, that is, the set of predictable elements that govern genre fiction and which the reader knows well'.

Writing the best possible text that fulfils its original aims (genre-related, aesthetic, and functional) is, of course, an end in itself; nevertheless, the head of The Art of Writing programme also emphasises the importance of the very act of writing. Literature, as once stated by Ryszard Koziołek (literary scholar, writer, and Rector of the University of Silesia in Katowice) is ultimately a force that gives shape and order to our reality, allowing us to express our intellect, emotions, mental states, and beliefs more precisely: in short, to express who we are. Viewed this way, writing is not merely a simple tool, but a medium that helps us refine our thinking and the way we engage with the world.

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