

Reading as a Writer

Novel Deconstruction Exercise

Novel Deconstruction

This is about studying how great book is written and looking at the mechanics in a way that can help you experiment and make choices to help you improve your own writing.

Use this as it is or as a springboard for your own investigations.

Title and author

Why this book? What aspects of it do you particularly like or want to pay attention to?

What elements of your writing in general or a work in progress would you like to improve? What are you struggling with? Think language, story, structure, grammar or other technical elements like formatting.

Create a skeleton outline of your chosen novel overleaf. Skim read, pausing after each chapter (or scene if you prefer) to write a brief note about the most important thing that happens, plus anything you find particularly effective or striking. You can also choose to take this further and pinpoint chapter arcs or desires in each chapter/scene.

Chapter/ scene	What happens	Other notes

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Write a one-sentence summary of the concept, hook or central question

Write a paragraph summary of the plot, including who the protagonist is, what they want and why, what stands in their way (including who the antagonist is), the major problem/s they face and how it is resolved. Include major decisions, realisations or turning points, such as moments when it looks like the protagonist will reach their goal but then everything changes.

Is what the protagonist wants (in terms of gaining external things situations or internal feelings/knowledge) the same as what they actually need? And do they need to learn anything in order to reach their goal?

What scene or aspect of the book do you like most and why?

Is there anything you dislike or think ineffective? Why?

Who narrates the novel? What is their point-of-view? Do they comment on the action or simply present it? How close are they to the action? Do they have a distinctive tone of this voice and how does this impact the reader's feelings towards the situation or characters?

What about the protagonist draws you in, catches your sympathy, makes you care?

What are the primary ways the writer develops character? Descriptive words and dialogue? Action? The reactions of others? Narrative voice?

What techniques does the writer use to create feelings for or against other characters?

Look at the chapter structure. How many are there? How long? How many scenes per chapter? What impact does this have on pace and feel? Is the writer doing anything with chapter arcs or scene endings that make you want to read on?

What strikes you about the opening chapter? What expectations does it set up? What indicates the genre?

How is the conflict introduced? Does the writing make this feel like an important event, or is there a sense of dawning realisation?

How does the novel end? Is it satisfying? Which questions does it resolve and is anything left unfinished? How do you feel after finishing? Does it work, emotionally and in story terms?

Does the book tell the plot in a linear fashion? If not, how has the writer structured the unfolding of the story, and what is the effect?

Are there any important clues or elements that contribute to the climax that are dropped in earlier? How smoothly is this done?

What techniques does the writer use to regulate the pace of the novel? Is there variation? Where is it created and why?

How important is a sense of place? What do you notice about how the writer creates this?

What elements of the writing style or use of language do you find particularly effective or dislike? Is it simple or complex? Flowery or plain? What is the sentence structure like?

How much dialogue is there? How realistic is it? How long are conversations? What does the writer use dialogue for? Exposition? Sparking action? Character development? To change the pace?

How does the writer create atmosphere? Look particularly about how they use description.

What feelings or lingering impressions are you left with after reading?

Are there any other elements you want to comment on?

What lessons or ideas from this can you take to put into your own writing?