

**A TYPO-
GRAPHIC**
dialogue

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How and Why

Frank Chimero

**How Can We Sometimes Keep Reading,
But Not Understand Anything We Read?**

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A TYPOGRAPHIC DIALOGUE

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How Can We
Sometimes Keep Reading,
But Not
Understand

Anything

If in the spring of 2003 a nightwalker found himself passing by North Spaulding Road, and — despite the hour — had the presence of mind to look up, he would find a light ablaze on the second floor. He would see me in profile, seated at my drafting table, kneading my face like a thick pile of dough. As I looked out the window, we would nod knowingly at one another, as if to say, “Yes, four in the morning is both too early and too late. Anyone awake must be up to no good, so let’s not ask any questions.” The nightwalker would continue down the street, weaving between the rows of parked cars and the sweetgum trees that bordered the sidewalk. I’d go back to kneading my face.

We Read?

Perhaps you are reading something for a **school assignment**, a novel, or a technical summary of the country's current economic situation when you suddenly realize that you are only reading the words, but you are not really absorbing anything.

In other words, you do not understand the content *in front of your eyes*.

I remember one specific night where I found myself on the tail end of a long, fruitless stretch. I took to gazing out the window to search for inspiration, to rest my eyes, to devise a plan to fake my death for forty-eight hours while my deadline whooshed past. I looked at the tree before my window and heard a sound rise from the leaves. It seemed misplaced, more likely to come from the cars than one of the trees next to them.

"Weee-oooh, wooop, wwwrrrrlll. Weee-oooh, wooop!"

You have probably
experienced this yourself

COUNTLESS

TIMES,

but have you ever thought about

You don't expect to hear the din of the city coming from the leaves of a sweetgum tree, but there it was. I scoured the leaves, and found myself trading glances with a mockingbird, each of us sizing the other up from our perches. He was plump in stature, clothed in brown and white feathers with black eyes that jumped from place to place. He had an almost indistinguishable neck to separate his head from his body, which I took as a reminder of the potential effects of my own poor posture. The leaves on the branch rustled as he leaned back to belt his chirps and chimes. Burrs fell from the tree, thwapped the ground, and rolled downhill on the sidewalk, eventually getting caught in the tiny crevasse between two blocks of cement, lining themselves up neatly like little spiked soldiers. Then, a suspenseful pause. We both held our breath.

Finally, his call:

"Weee-oooh, wooop, wwwrrrrlll. Weee-oooh, wooop!"

Here's a funny fact: You may have certain beliefs that sound pretty intuitive, which might make you think you know why your brain acts the way it does.

However, it is just one of the known flaws in human thinking,

which is called
introspective illusion.

This was not the song of a bird, but the sound of a car alarm. He mimicked the medley of sounds with skill, always pausing for just the right amount of time to be in sync with the familiar tempo of the alarms that occasionally sounded on the block. Mockingbirds, as their name would suggest, have a reputation for stealing the songs of other birds, and my feathered friend was doing so quite convincingly, despite his poor choice of source material. But the bird didn't understand the purpose of the sounds he imitated. I remember distinctly saying to myself that a bird's gotta sing, but not like this. And in that moment, a brief little glimmer of insight came to me from the bird's song: his efforts were futile, and to a large extent, mine were too. We were blindly imitating rather than singing a song of our own.

Our mistake was the same as that of the creative person who places too much focus on How to create her work, while ignoring Why she is creating it. Questions about How to do things improves craft and elevates form, but asking Why unearths a purpose and develops a point of view. We need to do more than hit the right note.

Imagine an artist working on a painting in his studio. You probably see him at his easel, maulstick in hand, beret on head, diligently mixing colors on his palette or gingerly applying paint to the canvas, working from dark to light to recreate what is before him. You may see him judging the light, or speaking to his model, or loading his brush with a slated green to block in the leaves in his muse's hair. This is a classical way to imagine a painter at work, and it's fittingly represented by Vermeer in *The Art of Painting*.

Simply put, all this means that we **do not really know why** we end up

reading ON *autopilot*

without understanding any of what we are reading. **So,** this is essentially just logical speculation trying to answer the question.

But if you have ever painted, you know that this image is not a full picture of the process. There is a second part where the artist steps back from the easel to gain a new perspective on the work. Painting is equal parts near and far: when near, the artist works to make his mark; when far, he assesses the work in order to analyze its qualities. He steps back to let the work speak to him. The second part of painting is captured in Robert Rauschenberg's *The Artist in His Studio*.

The creative process in painting is an individual in dialogue with themselves and the work. The painter, when at a distance from the easel, can assess and analyze the whole of the work from this vantage. He scrutinizes and listens, chooses the next stroke to make, then approaches the canvas to do it. Then, he steps back again to see what he's done in relation to the whole. It is a dance of switching contexts, a pitter-patter pacing across the studio floor that produces a tight feedback loop between mark-making and mark-assessing. The artist, when near, is concerned with production; when far, he enters a mode of criticism where he judges the degree of benefit (or detriment) the previous choice has had on the full arrangement.

The
“*keep
read-
ing,
but the
mind
wan-
ders
off*”

effect is
widespread, or
at least **more**
common than you
might think. If you
think that you are
one of the few
who suffer from
this and that most
well-read people
don't, then I have

Only one thing to tell you.....

Painting's near and far states are akin to How and Why: the artist, when close to the canvas, is asking How questions related to craft; when he steps back, he raises Why questions concerned with the whole of the work and its purpose. Near and Far may be rephrased as Craft and Analysis, which describe the kinds of questions the artist asks while in each mode. This relationship can be restated in many different ways, each addressing a necessary balance:

how & why
near & far
making & thinking
execution & strategy
craft & analysis

The relationship between form and purpose – How and Why – is symbiotic. But despite this link, Why is usually neglected, because How is more easily framed. It is easier to recognize failures of technique than those of strategy or purpose, and simpler to ask “How do I paint this tree?” than to answer “Why does this painting need a tree in it?” The How question is about a task, while the Why question regards the objective of the work. If an artist or designer understands the objective, he can move in the right direction, even if there are missteps along the way. But if those objectives are left unaddressed, he may find himself chasing his own tail, even if the craft of the final work is extraordinary.

When you read something,
your brain connects the
contents of your memory in
either a **new** or at least
less frequently used way.

In **neuroscience**,
there is a theory

– HEBBIC THEORY –

that suggests an
explanation for the
adaptation of neurons
in the brain when
learning, specifying a
learning rule that says
that the connection
between two neurons
could be strengthened
if the neurons fire the
same time.

For this to happen, **you must
focus on the subject you are
reading about**.

You should “**do
something**” with
**what you are reading
and think about
how, for example,
to visualize a scene
in your head, create
a mental summary,
etc.** These are
the processes
associated with
working memory
and can help in
the formation
of connections
mentioned above.

How do you work? How do you choose typefaces for each project? How do you use this particular software? These questions may have valuable answers, but their application is stunted, because each project has different objectives. Moreover, every individual is in a different situation. Many “How” questions, much to the frustration of novices, can’t be answered easily. Ask an experienced designer about how they work and you may hear, “It’s more complicated than that,” or “It depends.” Experience is to understand the appropriate context and to know which methods work in which contexts. These contexts are always changing, but because requirements vary from job to job, but also because ability and tendency vary from individual to individual. We each have our own song to sing and similarly, we each have a store of songs we can sing well.

Variation in context implies that it is just as important to discuss why decisions are being made as to how they are executed. If we wish to learn from the experience of others, we should acknowledge that making something is more than how the brush meets the canvas or the fingers sit on the fret. A process includes all of the reasons behind the decisions that are made while the brush or fingers move. We can get closer to the wisdom of other people by having them explain their decisions – not just in how they were executed, but why they were made. This is a higher level of research, one that follows the brush up the hand and to the mind to investigate the motivations and thought processes used so that they can be applied in our own situations.

When you think about something other than reading, your working memory is **overloaded** with other thoughts, such as

DAY-
dreaming.

You may have
read a full page,
but your brain
cannot process
it in a meaningful way.

The finished piece on its own, however, frequently acts as a restrictive screen that distracts us from this higher level of investigation. The nature of the center hides many of the choices (good and bad) that were a part of the construction; the seams are smoothed out and all the lines made smooth. We are tempted by the quality of the work to ask how to reproduce its beauty. And how can you blame us? Beauty is palpable, while intentions and objectives are largely invisible. This leads us to ask How more frequently, as if the tangibility of these characteristics were to somehow make them superior. But asking Why unlocks a new form of beauty by making choices observable so they can be discussed and considered.

The creative process could be said to resemble a ladder, where the bottom rung is the blank page and the top rung the final piece. In between, the artist climbs the ladder by making a series of choices and executing them. Many of our conversations about creative work are made lame because they concern only the top rung of the ladder – the finished piece. We must talk about those middle rungs, understanding that each step up the ladder is equal parts Why and How. To only entertain one is to attempt to climb a ladder with one foot: it may be possible, but it is a precarious task.

If you read but are not fully occupied with the book, you **do not fully understand what you have just read**, as the spotlight focuses on something else.

The brain is **constantly bombarded** with so much information from the outside world that it is surprising that not more people have deadly headaches due to the flood of information.

Fortunately,
the human attentional system of the brain ensures that you only **pay attention to the things you really need to.**

However, an imbalance in the conversation about these middle rungs leads to a transfer of knowledge that can spread past the lines that divide the many creative disciplines. The musician may learn from the actor, who constantly ruminates about the finer details of drama and performance. The actor can learn from the painter about the emotive power of facial expressions. The painter from the designer, about the potential of juxtaposing images and words. And the designer from the poet, who can create warmth through the sparseness of a carefully chosen, well-placed word. We climb our ladders together when we ask Why.

Why questions not only form the bedrock for learning and improving, but are also the foundation for motivating ourselves and others to continue to do so. In 2009, the Public Broadcasting System aired its final episode of Reading Rainbow, a half-hour show devoted to nurturing a love for reading in kids. Each episode of Reading Rainbow highlighted one book, and the story inspired an adventure with the show's host, Levar Burton. Unfortunately, the program met its end because the show's approach opposed the contemporary standard format of children's television: teaching kids how to read, rather than Reading Rainbow's objective, which was to teach kids about why they should read.

According to **Daniel J. Levitin**, a scientist and the author of “**The Organized Mind**”, the human attentional system is divided into 4 parts:

CENTRAL EXECUTIVE, MIND- WANDERING, ATTENTIONAL FILTER AND ATTENTIONAL SWITCH.

Reading Rainbow had a long run, lasting twenty-three years, but its cancellation feels like a symbolic blow. Education, just like climbing the ladder, must be balanced between How and Why. We so quickly forget that people, especially children, will not willingly do what we teach them unless they are shown the joys of doing so. The things we don't do out of necessity or responsibility we do for pleasure or love; if we wish children to read, they must know why. If we wish painters to paint, poets to write, designers to design, they must know why as well. How enables, but Why motivates, and the space between the two could be described by the gap of enthusiasm between simply understanding phonics and reading a book that one identifies with and loves.

Your brain is *designed* to minimize the effort, so it assigns the task of reading to the

mind- WANDERING

mode to minimize effort. The downside, however, is that the mind-wandering mode is **not particularly good** at processing information that is not random.

As a result, you end up reading on *autopilot* without really interpreting most of it.

Creative people commonly lament about being “blocked,” perpetually stuck and unable to produce work when necessary. Blocks spring from the imbalanced relationship of How and Why: either we have an idea, but lack the skills to execute; or we have skills, but lack a message, idea, or purpose for the work. The most despised and common examples of creative blocks are the writer, because the solution to a lack of purpose is elusive. If we are short on skill, the answer is to practice and seek outside guidance from those more able until we improve. But when we are left without something to say, we have no choice but to either go for a walk or continue suffering in front of a blank page. Often in situations like these, we seek relief in the work of others; we look for solace in creations that seem to have both high craft and resounding purpose, because they remind us that there is a way out of the cul-de-sac we have driven into by mistake. We can, by dissecting these pieces, begin to see what gives the work of others their vitality, and better understand the inner methods of what we produce ourselves. If we are attentive, with just a dash of luck, we may even discover where the soul of our own work lies by having it mirrored back to us in the work of others.

But we must be careful not to gaze too long, lest we give up too much of ourselves. Forfeiting our perspective squanders the opportunity to let the work take its own special form and wastes our chance to leave our fingerprints on it. We must remember Why we are working, because craft needs objectives, effort needs purpose, and we need an outlet for our song. If we stay on the surface and do not dig deep by asking Why, we’re not truly designing. We’re just imitating car alarms from sweetgum trees.

Typography Two

Mr. Eaves

Zuzana Licko, 2009

Adobe Jenson Pro

Robert Slimbach, 1996

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