

Summer challenge #5: Get classic

Do you do much reading? I do, but rarely do I read classic novels, instead I spend a lot of time reading Scandinavian detective novels (I've read almost everything by Hakan Nesser, Camilla Lackberg, Stieg Larsson, Arnaldur Indridasson, and on and on.)

But this summer, my book group has given me a chance to read something classic I have always wanted to read: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston. It was published in 1937, and centers around a strong, black female character (Janie Crawford). It was not well received when Hurston published it, but it has become a must-read in American literature. The dialogue is challenging to read, but Hurston's descriptions and how she captures a very specific time and place are a delight.

Some book characters become iconic and often-quoted. Some lines, such as the first line of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* ("It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...") or *Hamlet's* "to be or not to be" become instantly recognizable.

For many of us, we last read classic novels in college or high school. We were all forced to wade through tough books such as *Moby Dick* (and in my case, I had to read it at least twice, once in high school and then in college). But now I am grateful to have read all about Ahab and his search for the great white whale, if only because I know that Starbucks coffee is named after the Pequod's first officer Starbuck.

Without reading the great works, we miss a lot of references. We miss a lot of cultural knowledge. Reading classics exposes us to truly great writing, which stands up to time, in some

cases, centuries (we are still reading Shakespeare after nearly 500 years).

Why not take the dog days of summer to read a classic that you have always wanted to read? That's my summer challenge to you!

If you need some ideas, here are a couple lists to help you choose:

The Modern Library's list of 100 Best Novels

The top classic books everybody should read from Indiana University

Must Reads in Literature

Many thanks to Jay Morris, of Jay Morris Communications, LLC, who gave me the idea to offer a reading challenge.

Let me know what you read and what you thought. Happy reading!

Summer challenge #4: Be more active

Before you think I am going to challenge you to move more, let me clarify that this is a writing challenge, not a fitness challenge. I am talking about **active voice**. Originally, I wanted to name the post "Be less passive," but that sounded a bit too negative.

Most every writing teacher, and probably even your own English teacher in school, makes a point of telling students to avoid the passive voice. And yet, especially in business writing, we see people using passive voice without any measure. "The

company was founded by John Doe,” they write. “The management team will achieve its objectives by implementing long-standing traditions,” they add. And on and on.

Passive voice is dull. It’s boring. You know why? Because it isn’t active! Passive voice is the equivalent of the couch potato, who just sits around, staring mindlessly at the television. The couch potato often feels bored (and boring). The couch potato hasn’t done much lately so he doesn’t have much to say.

Active voice is more like an athlete than a couch potato, and therefore, has far more energy and zest for life. Active voice is the runner while passive voice is the straggler. Active voice gets to the point much faster, while passive voice is busy drawing out its words.

You see why active voice gives your writing more punch. It makes it lively. It makes it more interesting.

So, challenge yourself to use the active voice as often as possible. Because really, do you want your writing to resemble a couch potato?

Summer challenge #2: Be a tourist in your own town

I am fortunate to live right outside Washington, DC. Every summer, the area is invaded by hordes of tourists from across the US and from other countries. As a local, I often find it annoying to have to walk behind a slow group of tourists who

are taking up the entire sidewalk or to have to battle with out-of-towners for elbow room at a new exhibit at the National Gallery. But I need to remind myself that tourists are excited to be here, to see things they've only read about and to get to know our nation's capital. They are a huge source of revenue for the area. And, they are getting to see things I may never get around to seeing.

To be a tourist requires curiosity. It requires advance planning and research but also the ability to grab an opportunity when you see it (free concert today at noon!). It requires learning how to get around. It requires a willingness to try new things.

So you see how being a tourist really requires some important skills to any communicator.

Your challenge for this week is to be a tourist in your own town.

I know that not everybody's hometown is Washington, DC, but every town has something to offer a visitor. If you are in a small town, it will be your challenge to figure out what that is. Why would anyone visit your town? And if they do visit, what do they do?

Here's a few ways to be a tourist in your own town:

Go online or call your local visitor's center or CVB (convention and visitor's bureau). Ask what the **must-see attractions** are. Check out at least one. Or, pick up a tourist guide for your town.

Spend a day walking around your town's downtown or main street. Walking...not driving. Maybe take a side street you've never been on.

Eat a **meal at a new restaurant**, somewhere you've always wanted to try. (You could also go online to see what the top

restaurants in your area are and choose one.)

Go to a **local park**. Bring a picnic. Take a hike if appropriate. Perhaps you live near a river. What about renting a kayak or canoe?

Take a tour led by a tour guide. Perhaps there's a specialized walking tour or an eating tour that you could check out. Don't know if they exist? Look it up!

Visit a **local brewery or winery**. Take the tour, do the tasting.

Take **public transportation**. If you already take public transportation, take a different method (if you always commute by train, take the bus or take a different route).

When we live somewhere, we overlook what is there because we take it for granted. Sometimes, we don't even know what is there! By looking at our surroundings in a new way, we are seeing things differently. It may help boost your creativity or it may spark some new ideas.

Let me know what you do! Tell me what town you played tourist in. Have fun exploring!