The Death of the Author

Roland Barthes, 1967

A first read — what the essay argues, and the words to watch for

It starts with a question

Barthes quotes a line from a Balzac story describing a woman — then asks: who is actually speaking? The character? Balzac the man? Balzac the professional writer? Or just received cultural wisdom about "women"?

His answer: we can never know — and it doesn't matter. The moment writing exists for its own sake rather than to *do* something in the world, the voice detaches from any single person. For Barthes, writing is where identity gets **lost**, not expressed.



The key term: "the Author"

The **Author** (capital A) isn't just the person who wrote something. It's a whole *way of reading*: the belief that a text has one true meaning, and that meaning is whatever the writer intended — locked inside their biography and psychology.

> ***Picture it as:*** *a sealed letter from artist to viewer. To 'get' the work, you'd have to find out what the artist felt that day. Barthes thinks this is the wrong model.*

He notes it's a fairly *recent* invention, tied to the modern cult of the individual — and the habit of 'explaining' work through the maker's flaws (Van Gogh's painting via his madness, etc.). He wants to break that habit.

Two terms to carry with you

The scriptor

The replacement for the Author. The scriptor doesn't exist *before* the text and pour a soul into it — they are **born at the same moment as the writing**. No inner truth being transmitted; just the writing, happening now.

A "tissue of citations"

A text is woven entirely from bits of other writing and culture. No phrase is truly original; everything echoes something earlier. The writer can only **mix and rearrange** what already exists.

Like sampling in music, or a collage. *Meaning lives in the combination, not a pure hidden source.*



The twist: the reader takes over

If meaning doesn't come from the Author, where does it get assembled? Barthes' answer: in **the reader**. All the scattered threads of a text come together not in the person who wrote it, but in the person reading it.

> ***"The unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination."***

A work isn't finished by its maker — it's completed, again and again, by each person who meets it. Hence the title: the **birth of the reader** comes at the cost of the death of the Author.

Before you read the original

Three things that trip people up on a first read

"Death" is a metaphor

Nobody literally dies, and writers still exist. Barthes is retiring one way of reading — not the person.

He name-drops constantly

Mallarmé, Valéry, Proust, the Surrealists are supporting witnesses. You don't need their work to follow him.

Long sentences, on purpose

When you lose the thread, find the main verb and the word "Author" — the sentence is almost always doing one more thing to that idea.

For discussion

1. If a text's meaning is completed by its reader, what changes about how you talk about your own work in a crit?

2. Can you think of an artwork where knowing the artist's life genuinely changes what it means — and does that count against Barthes?

3. Barthes says nothing is original, only "rearranged." Is that liberating or limiting for a young artist?

4. Where do you sit: is meaning made by the maker, the work itself, or the audience?