

Introduction

Aim

Describe elements and forms of creative writing.

WHAT IS CREATIVE WRITING?

The word creative is defined in various ways. The following are just some of the definitions:

“The ability to create”

“Imaginative”

“Productive and imaginative”

“Characterised by expressiveness and originality”

Creative writing is often defined as the writing of fiction, where the author creates events, scenes and characters, sometimes even a world. In reality, aside from instinctive utterances like the yelp of an injured child or a delighted ‘Oh!’ all expressions are creative.

For the purposes of this course, ‘creative writing’ is any writing that expresses events and emotions in an imaginative manner and whose primary intent is to arouse emotions. Creative writing can therefore be fiction, using imaginative narration, or non-fiction, based on facts and events. The common ground of fiction and non-fiction writing is the creativity the writer uses to express his or her thoughts and emotions.

The following examples show that, to some degree, all writing is creative, since it always involves re-creation, ie. the selection of some components, imagined or real, and exclusion of others.

Consider a little boy’s excited announcement to his grandmother about a new puppy:

“He’s got big ears, Nanna, jus’ like mine and he cries and cries. Mummy gave him a sausage and he ate it so fast he’s gonna grow into a giant! He’s the bestest puppy I ever had, Nanna.”

Human beings are natural story tellers, and like all story tellers, this little boy takes some parts of his experience that are meaningful to him, expands on that experience to make it more exciting and unique, and conveys it in language that both conveys information and feeling. He also anticipates a particular kind of response (“Oh, how sweet” ...“That’s so exciting” ...“I am so happy for you”), and communicates in ways that are most likely to elicit it.

Now consider part of a letter written by the boy’s sister:

Did I tell you that our dog, Jacko, died last week? Brennie was really sad, so dad bought him a puppy yesterday, and he couldn’t care less about Jacko any more. Little brat. I had to beg for months to get Jacko, but Brennie gets a puppy just by crying. It’s whiney and ugly, anyway.

Notice this person has a different focus. She selects different information and expresses her own emotional perspective, and thereby creates a different story out of the same events.

Both examples illustrate the selective, creative aspect of communication. They are about reality, which means that to some degree, they re-create the reality they are trying to represent. No two representations will ever be exactly the same and usually differ considerably.

All writing focuses on one thing, and reduces emphasis on another; and in doing so it packages information or a message in ways that reflect the writer’s intent, meaning and priorities.

HOW DOES CREATIVE WRITING DIFFER?

Is creative writing different from other kinds of writing? As stated before all writing involves creativity since it is selective and is written from the writer's perspective.

Like informative writing, expositions (detailed statements or explanations) or instructions, creative writing does convey information, even when we define it so broadly; indeed, information is the basic component of all communication, no matter what kind.

- The overall intent of creative writing is not to inform.
- It is to stir the emotions, to elicit an emotional response.

A storyteller's narrative is designed to express the storyteller's feelings about some aspect of life, and to engage the reader in those feelings. A poet uses events, images and people to deliver concentrated emotion. Dramatists and screen writers convey and stir emotions through action and dialogue. A magazine feature writer comments on real people and real lives to arouse our sympathy, delight, horror or concern.

Information and Creativity

The point is that almost any genre or category of writing can be written to engage the reader emotionally as well as intellectually. What makes a work more creative than informative is its emphasis.

- Informative writing is primarily about imparting knowledge.
- Creative writing is primarily about creating emotional effect and significance.

Differences between creative and informative writing are sometimes quite blurred. Some well-known and esteemed pieces of writing that are primarily informative are also very creative, sensitive and beautiful, while some primarily creative works are also highly informative. To understand this better, read a chapter from A.S. Byatt's novel, *Possession*, Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Dee Brown's history, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, and James Mitchener's epic novel, *Hawaii*. You will also see writing where creativity and information carry equal weight and importance in some newspaper feature articles, often found in the centre pages of the weekend editions, and in many magazine articles.

Good creative writing uses the same kinds of writing that make for good informative writing, or good argument, or good exposition. It is the writer's skill at using these forms of writing that can turn any piece of writing into a creative piece of writing.

Even when we write fiction, we are dealing with reality as we know it. Fictional does not mean false. It takes our reality, or parts of it, and shows it to us in new ways. It makes the familiar unfamiliar, and takes us into parts of reality, making us take the time (because we read much slower than we think or see) to see its complexity, beauty and pain. Even fantasy fiction and science fiction, which give us totally created worlds, are based on elements of reality, and are therefore recognisable and believable, therefore when we write creatively, it doesn't matter whether we are writing fiction or non-fiction. What matters is that we are sharing experiences and emotions with the reader and, for a while at least, leading them towards a particular point of view.

CREATIVE GENRES

Genre is a word often used to describe categories or types of written text. Some of the more familiar genres of creative writing are:

- poetry of all kinds
- short stories
- novels, including westerns, romances, science fiction, detective stories, mysteries, fantasy, etc.
- stage play scripts
- film and television screenplays
- lyrics

Other genres that we may not think of as creative writing are:

- magazine articles
- newspaper feature stories
- essays
- biographies
- advertisements
- card greetings
- books or articles on science, history etc.

FORMS OF WRITING

Writing comes in many forms, all of which can be creatively employed and manipulated by the creative writer, regardless of the genre (novel, poetry, travel guide etc.) in which she or he is writing. One form of writing is rarely used on its own.

Common forms of writing are:

Reflection: an internal process of reviewing and making meaning from one's own experience;

Exposition or Reporting: covers a wide area of writing. Events, thoughts and situations are exposed or shown to the reader, as in textbooks, magazine articles or news stories. The narrator or a character may take an informing role. One very important form of reporting or exposition for writers is description.

Description: the reporting of information to convey an impression or feeling about a place, person, thing or idea, rather than facts. Description can be a small part of a particular narrative or the main part of it. A lot of good travel writing is descriptive, as is a lot of fiction. Consider the heavy overlapping of description and exposition in this description of a circus performer by E.B. White (not in one of her novels, but in a newspaper article):

The richness of the scene was in its plainness, its natural condition - of horse, of ring, of girl, even to the girl's bare feet that gripped the bare back of her proud and ridiculous mount. The enchantment grew not out of anything that happened ... but out of something that seemed to go round and round with the girl, attending her, a steady gleam in the shape of a circle ...

Explanation: A process of leading another person to a particular understanding or perception through information and reason, rather than through persuasive language. It includes instruction, rules and guidelines, argument and analysis.

Argument: Aims to persuade the reader to change their viewpoint or attitude about an idea or situation. It is often quite rhetorical in nature. [Rhetoric is the art of persuading through emotion, but using elements of logic or reason (often quite illogically)]. Most political speeches are rhetorical in nature. Argument typically presents two points of view; then builds a case for one of them, and either refutes or overwhelms the other.

Narration: The most widely used form of human expression, so much so that it is believed that, as a species, we are programmed to tell stories. Narration tells a story of an event or a series of events that take place over time, no matter how brief the time or how short the story. The two short excerpts about a puppy at the very start of this lesson are narrative, as is this sentence:

"Every time she looked at him, she remembered her dead mother, until she could no longer look at him."

This is a narrative sentence because of the sequencing in time suggested by "every time" and "until".

FORM, STRUCTURE AND PURPOSE

The form of a piece of writing is defined by its purpose (what it is intended to do), and the way the writing is organised (structure).

Form, purpose, and structure are virtually inseparable.

Each form of writing has a conventional general structure that relates to its purpose. The purpose of argument, for example, is to present two opposing viewpoints on a topic, and build a case for one of them.

Argument is therefore traditionally structured so that both viewpoints are first acknowledged, the supporting ideas for the favoured viewpoint are introduced, from either weakest to strongest point or vice versa, the weaknesses of the other viewpoint may be noted, followed by a summary of the writer's point of view.

Most writing can be largely defined by its dominant form. An essay built around argument can be called an argument; an essay built around reporting can be called a report or an observation, while an essay that tells a story can be called a narrative. Much writing, however, combines several forms, especially in the creative genres. Consider the various forms of writing in the following piece:

Her long finger moved lightly over the page as she bent over it, reading. How he hated her then! [reporting] How he hated the way her hair fell onto the page and she flicked it back to continue reading. How he despised the flush of irritation on her cheeks. Why do I care what she thinks? He wondered, realising that he hated himself at that moment because he did care. [reflection]

"For two years the siege lasted, during which Charles remained before the city, unable to take it, and unwilling to retreat. The knights and squires were wont to pass much of their time in hunting and in the sports of chivalry. One day Oliver stole forth from the city alone, and without arms or signs of rank, and, passing fearlessly through the king's men, essayed his skill among a band of youths playing at the quintain. All were astonished at the strength and grace of this young stranger, who far surpassed even Roland, the nephew of Charles, at the game in which, hitherto, he had always borne away the prize." [reporting]

"There", she exclaimed, looking up from the book, her eyes wild with victory and delight. [description] "Now you can't deny it. It was in grandma's diary. You saw his picture in the attic, and now this! Ha!" [argument]

The whole excerpt from the book is a narrative which contains another narrative (in this case the story being read by the girl). All the other forms of writing serve the purposes of the author's narrative, the story from which this excerpt is taken. One could say that the dominant form is a narrative, and the other forms of writing have a supporting role.

In another piece of writing, the narrative element might play a supporting role to, perhaps, argument. This interplay of forms is what makes creative writing so enthralling and multi-layered. Through this mechanism, the writer can draw on a whole range of human expressions to say something in a new way.

CREATIVE WRITING RESOURCES

Writers can draw on two levels of support for their writing and writing careers: inner resources, such as creativity, persistence, self-discipline, good skills, experience, knowledge, empathy and a real interest in the world around them; and outer resources, which are the people and environments that constitute the writer's support system.

What's needed for success?

Success as a writer means different things to different people. For some, success is to simply have people read and appreciate what they write; and the readers might be no more than friends and/or family.

For others, the goal may be far more ambitious: to have books or articles published and sold, and read by tens of thousands of people.

Writing is a Business

Writing is only part of the business of being a writer. If your aim is to be published, and be read by the "masses" you need to understand and recognise what is involved in the publishing business as a whole.

You should also aim to recognise from the beginning that success does not always come to those who deserve it; and a certain amount of luck is probably going to be involved no matter how skilled or well educated you are.

Successful writers are not just those who write well; but often they are

- people who happen to be in the right place at the right time.

If you hope to make a complete or partial living from creative writing, or to make it your career, you can improve your prospects by developing good sources of information and support.

These will help you achieve two main goals:

1. to become a better, more effective writer, and
2. to sell and/or publish what you write.

An important aspect of being a writer is the development of a network of relationships, contacts and resources to support your writing and career. Support from family and friends is invaluable, for they can offer nurturing, help create a suitable writing environment, and help you identify your writing strengths and weaknesses by giving honest opinions of your work.

Other resources

Writers' guides, books and articles on writing and publishing

These can be found in most public libraries, in university libraries (where you may read them even if you are not a student there), in writing magazines, in local writing clubs, in the Arts sections of some newspapers, and in the occasional newspaper or magazine article.

Publishing houses and publishers

Writers should conduct their own research to identify publishers who might be interested in their kind of writing. Different publishers will have their own areas of special interest, and their own requirements. Many list their requirements on guide sheets for authors, or even on their web pages. Authors, especially those starting out, should investigate these requirements to find publishers most likely to welcome and publish their kind of writing. Also, publishers can teach authors about writing, including what it takes to get work published and what publishers look for. Many authors owe their careers to the vision and perception of dedicated publishers. This is one reason why writers should work hard to establish relationships with publishers by submitting works, responding positively and productively to their advice, criticism or suggestions, and persisting in the face of many rejections.

Writing clubs, societies, professional or amateur associations

Local writing groups can provide good opportunities to discuss, share and develop your own writing. Check the phone book for writing associations and groups in your area and use them to expand your network of contacts and resources.

Book shows and exhibitions

There are several very important annual book markets and shows held in various countries. Publishers, book sellers and book buyers come from all over the globe to these events, which play a pivotal role in defining the current book market and trends. However, smaller shows and exhibitions are held in many countries, and will give you an idea of what is selling and what is in demand. These are also good places to meet people in the publishing industry.

Trade shows and exhibitions

To research what kinds of specialist publications are produced, and by whom, and also to get ideas for writing projects in fields that interest you, attend trade shows and exhibitions. These can take place in large venues such as exhibition centres and show grounds, or in smaller venues such as shopping centres.

Commercial organisations and businesses

If your skills lie in advertising or persuasive writing, or you have knowledge and skills to share, consider researching businesses and organisations to discover opportunities to write and/or publish and promote your writing

Government departments

Government departments are useful sources of information and can be very useful to writers who are researching topics for articles or fiction writing. Also, governments often offer grants or other support for the arts, and a writer would be wise to keep track of them.

Personal contacts

Networking is a most effective way of letting others know what you can do and that you are looking for writing or publishing opportunities. People with writing or publishing experience are important contacts, well worth nurturing, and will frequently help new writers. To avoid irritating or offending them, observe some basic rules of networking etiquette, such as:

- Establish a variety of contacts so that you are not over-dependent on one or two.
- Be sincere, honourable, and truthful in all your dealings.
- Respect others' privacy and time in your words and actions.
- Look for ways to return favours and be of service – offer to do research or typing.
- Take a real interest in them and their work, not just in what they can do for you.
- Be humble and learn from others, even if you think you know it all.
- Contact busy people by letter or email first to avoid disruption to their schedules.
- Read an author's work or a publisher's products before you contact them.
- Acknowledge and say thank you for all assistance.

GETTING PUBLISHED - IF THAT IS WHAT YOU WANT

New, unpublished writers often find it difficult to get their work accepted. The first published article or book is likely to be the most difficult for you to sell. Well recognised publishers such as MacMillan, Simon and Schuster, and Pearson are always looking for good books to publish, and may consider new writers with good ideas and quality work. The difficulty is getting them to read your manuscript.

Put yourself in the shoes of a publisher: you receive over 50 manuscripts each day that all look similar and only have time to glance over them before selecting three for a closer look. You are more likely to give more consideration to an established writer's work, or to something that matches your particular needs and interests at the moment. Publishers may take a second look if the message and theme of your manuscript can be easily grasped (perhaps from a 100-word summary on the top page) or if it stands out in some way (eg. with illustrations) or is presented in an unusual, innovative or attention-grabbing way, though attention-grabbing methods may irritate the publisher.

Magazines, newspapers and even web sites may also accept freelance submissions. These might be good places to build up some experience before aiming larger works at book publishers. Many famous writers have started out by writing for free or a small fee, or getting articles published in newsletters, local newspapers, or on their own web sites.

Self Publishing

Computer technology has made it more feasible than ever to publish your own books or booklets. Small computer-based publishing businesses do exist that will publish a book or booklet of up to 200 or so pages at a price that is relatively affordable for the average person. This solution can be appropriate for such things as family or local historical books, or a book of poetry or novel with a local flavour (perhaps to distribute through tourist shops).

With the increasing popularity of e-books, producing your own e-book is also a popular (and cost effective) choice for publishing your own work.

Vanity Publishing

Vanity publishers are another group altogether. They work on the basis of making money from the author, irrespective of whether money is made from the book sales. They can provide a valuable opportunity or they might take advantage of your desire to get published and leave you with no profit, or with less funds and a published work that no-one buys. Most other publishers will rarely advertise for manuscripts and are unlikely to ask you to contribute towards publishing costs. Instead, they publish in anticipation of achieving sales through their marketing strategies.

Vanity publishers will ask you to contribute towards the publishing of a book. In essence, you are paying them to edit and print your book. After the book is printed, some might remain involved in selling it, while others will do little or nothing towards marketing and selling your book. If you have money to spend with a vanity publisher, you might achieve your goal to get your writing in print and come away satisfied. Be careful as you could end up with printed books that don't sell, and you will have made a financial loss rather than gain.

Vanity publishers frequently advertise for manuscripts, asking authors to send manuscripts for publishing. They might then ask you to contribute towards or cover the publishing costs. Be careful to check all the conditions and clearly establish your mutual obligations in writing.

TERMINOLOGY

Excerpt: a passage taken out of a book or other piece of writing.

Exposition: a detailed statement or explanation.

Fiction writing: writing in the form of imaginative narration.

Genre: a well-recognised and readily defined category of writing; for example, biography, romance, travel guide.

Narration: a spoken or written account of events, experiences.

Non-fiction writing: writing that deals with facts and events, rather than imaginative narration.

Prose: ordinary form of written or spoken language; not poetry or verse.

SET READING

1. In order to gain a further perspective on the topics covered by this lesson, read the introductory chapters of any creative writing books you have access to.
2. To develop your perspective on creative writing, find two (2) different examples of creative writing (e.g. stories, plays, poems, novel excerpts, feature stories).

Read for no more than 30 minutes for each piece of writing. As you read, identify where the writer has successfully or unsuccessfully applied aspects of what has been covered in this lesson.

SET TASKS

Set Task 1

Start creating a resource file. You will continue to develop this resource file during the course, adding more resources to it in each lesson; and using them as the need arises. Resources may include such things as "Reference books", "Organisations such as writers' groups", "Useful web sites", "Publishers", "Writer Festivals", "Writing Competitions or Awards", "Suppliers of equipment such as computers, printers, internet services", "Libraries" etc.

You may come across these without making any special effort or you may need to undertake some research to find them.

You may choose to put your file together any of the following ways:

1. on individual file cards
2. on pages in a loose-leaf folder
3. as an electronic (computer file)

Record information for this lesson on four specific resources (writing groups, writer festivals, publishers, reference books etc.) that you have located.

For each, record the name of the organisation, the contact person and all contact details, and all relevant information. For example, for a publisher, record the publisher's name, address, phone, the type of material they publish, names of some of their publications, and any other information of interest (such as, how much they paid for a 1000-word article in a particular magazine, or their requirements and guidelines for authors).

Organise the cards alphabetically. For instance, you might file all cards with information on publishers under "P" for publisher, and arrange the publishers in alphabetical order.

Keep your file in a safe place where you can readily refer to it. You never know when you might need to refer to a book, a magazine article, or contact a person you met a few years earlier.

Submit four resource file entries with each of your assignments.

Do not spend more than 2 hours on this in each lesson.

Set Task 2

Complete the following writing exercises on literal and imaginative language. Follow the time limits for each writing task. Set an alarm to help you. Do not change the writing after the 15 minutes is up.

1. Choose an object in your immediate environment, such as a glass of water, a knife, a chair, and describe it in accurate detail, using literal, informative language. Write for 5 minutes and then stop.
2. Examine the object. Set a timer for 15 minutes, and describe the object with feeling. Allow yourself to respond to the object in any way. Try to imbue it with feeling and character, but write realistically - the object is still an object. If a story develops around it, write that, but maintain your focus on the object.
3. Submit this Set Task with your assignments. If you wish, repeat this exercise at different times with different objects, varying your approach each time.