

Explore Other Genres: Creative Writing

While there may be some educational and professional settings that will encourage creative writing, the purpose of this practice is more about developing your own voice in writing. Creation in your second language is an important part of both establishing your sense of self and extending your language finesse without the pressure of grades or rigid structure of academic writing.

Organization

Creative writing is an excellent opportunity to practice "breaking the rules" of writing. It is a common saying that you have to know the rules in order to know how to effectively ignore or change them for a specific task.

Writing follows a similar pattern. You begin by learning very strict rules about punctuation, organization, appropriate length, etc. However, as you practice and explore and gain skills, you will see that there are many opportunities to break from the rigid structure and expectations to create something that is uniquely designed to fit the task.

This all goes to show that although creative writing is very free and open, there are elements of organization patterns that will be familiar to you from your heavily structured academic writing experiences.

Before beginning the main exercise for this chapter of describing a fictional character, practice describing a classmate using the instructions below.

Introduction to Creative Writing

Creative writing is centered on the idea of expressing original ideas and reflecting on experiences. The most common purpose for creative writing is entertainment. This takes many forms, from novels to poetry to movie scripts to song lyrics to a personal history. In all of those forms (and many others), creative writing serves as a vehicle to share ideas and emotions with the audience.

Creative writing also often has the purpose of description and reflection, which further connect the audience to your ideas by painting a picture with words in such a way that the reader can see or feel that same experience second-hand. Finally, creative writing is often for the purpose of self-expression. In these cases, the potential audience is less important than you as a writer having a space to explore your internal world through your own words.

In other words, the purpose of creative writing is a varied as the product itself. Although there are many types of creative writing, in this chapter you will only practice creative fictional descriptions.

Prewriting

Although some creative writing can be spontaneous, for the purpose of this course, you will be producing planned and drafted creative work.

Genre Selection

The first step is to decide what type of creative writing you will work on. This begins with deciding between fiction (not based on history or fact) and non-fiction (accurately presents true events). For this assignment, this becomes either a short story or a memoir.

A short story is a fictional writing that focuses on an isolated event (or a simplified series of events) and typically has few characters, but it is fully developed and unified.

A memoir is a true (or at least assumed to be true) retelling of a lived experience. A short memoir is focused on an episode (scene, incident, occurrence).

From here, you can decide on a more specific genre such as humor, romance, horror, action, drama, mystery, etc. Because this chapter is focused on *short* creative writing, you will want to choose the genre carefully so that you can fully develop your narrative in that amount of space. For example, you would not want to attempt to tell the whole story from beginning to end of how you and your significant other fell in love. Likewise, you would not want to try to fit the entirety of a complicated magic world into two pages of writing. Thinking of a specific situation (like an episode of a tv show) will help you to narrow down your ideas to a manageable story within your chosen genre.

Character

Once the genre has been decided, brainstorming about character and setting begins. In order for creative writing to effectively connect with the audience, the reader needs to be able to visualize the story and understand the people involved. In a novel, you have plenty of space to describe physical appearance, give examples of personality in different situations, and describe the full, detailed world inhabited by the characters. However, in one paragraph, you can only communicate only the essential details.

Because of this limited space, take time to brainstorm details about the character. When you have a full mind map of everything you *could* include in the character, it will be much faster to identify the *essential* details.

Short Story

From here, you can decide on a type of story to illustrate one of those characteristics. The character you have created may exist in a variety of fictional genres such as humor, romance, horror, action, drama, mystery, etc. Because this chapter is focused on *short* creative writing, you will not have the space to develop a narrative, but you can connect the way you describe the person and the story you include to the tone of the type of story it could exist in.

For example, you would not want to attempt to tell the whole story from beginning to end of how your character fell in love. However, it would be possible to describe a likeable person and demonstrate how pleasant and interesting he is by telling a short story of a first date that emphasizes these qualities. Thinking of a specific situation (like an episode of a tv show) will help you to show the reader important information about the character in a more meaningful way than reading a list of adjectives.

Story Outlining

The importance of the outlining stage of writing becomes more clear when you have limited space. There is no room for extra ideas. You do not have the luxury of anything unnecessary. The shorter the word or page count, the more intentional you need to be about what details you will include.

Plot outlining begins with identifying the problem, conflict, or peak of drama at the center of the episode. This is known as the *story climax*, and it is the most critical part of the story because it answers both the question *what happened* and *why does it matter*. In a humorous story, this would be the *punchline* or the moment that makes you laugh. In a dramatic story, it may be the moment the main character realizes the truth of the situation. You can think of it as a late

thesis statement. It is the sentence, or sometimes paragraph, that is the whole purpose of the story. Everything before it builds up to this moment. The conclusion is the reaction to it.

Once the that point of the story has been established, you can work backward to brainstorm the steps leading up to it and the context of character and setting that create a sense of tension around that main point. Again, it may be easier to first write down all of the facts or minor events prior to the main event and all details from immediately after. Getting all of the ideas down on paper during the prewriting stage will clear your mind and you will be able to sort through the necessary and unnecessary.

Writing

Aside from the usual practice in presenting clear ideas and logically organized connections between those ideas, creative writing is an opportunity to continue practicing descriptive writing. Creative writing should push you to expand your vocabulary and to understand the connotations of synonyms. Finding a more interesting word that conveys an additional meaning (ex. speak vs whisper vs mumble vs rant) can add depth to understanding without using a significant amount of space. This skill transfers very well to academic writing, where you often have strict length limitations and you need to reduce your word count to be more precise.

The first writing skill that gets extra attention in creative writing is word choice. Creative writing should push you to expand your vocabulary and to understand the connotations of synonyms. Finding a more interesting word that conveys an additional meaning (ex. speak vs whisper vs mumble vs rant) can add depth to understanding without using a significant amount of space. This skill transfers very well to academic writing, where you often have strict length limitations and you need to reduce your word count to be more precise.

The other writing skill frequent in creative writing that can benefit you in academic writing as well is the use of literary devices. The main literary devices that often crossover between these two genres of writing are *analogy*, *metaphor*, and *simile*.

An *analogy* is a comparison between two different things that emphasizes the similarities to make a point. This comparison explains important attributes of the first thing by drawing connections with the second object or concept. An analogy is typically longer than a sentence or two because of the purpose of explaining with details.

- "O! be some other name: What's in a name? that which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet; So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd" (*Romeo and Juliet*, William Shakespeare)
- "My mom always said life was like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get." (*Forrest Gump*)

A *metaphor* is a short analogy that does not require explanation, and uses equivalent language that x is y. The comparison is simple and the reader is expected to infer the meaning of the comparison without much difficulty.

- Her anger was a hurricane.
- The truth is a light in the darkness.

A *simile* is a different type of short analogy that also does not require explanation, but uses language for similarity such as x is like y or s is as y. Again, the comparison is simple and the reader is expected to infer the meaning of the comparison without much difficulty.

- He is as strong as an ox.
- The teenager was growing like a weed.

Hook

Just as with an essay, a creative writing draft needs to begin with something that draws your attention. It is often very memorable and connects the reader immediately to the new world they have opened up. Take a little time to open a few

different novels, blog posts, or magazines. You should be able to immediately spot the hook that convinces the reader to continue.

The problem/conflict

The problem or conflict in a story is similar to a thesis statement. Everything in the story centers around a main event, issue, or individual. All of the details surrounding that idea are given only to create a richer description of the world so that the problem/conflict feels real to the reader. The story will arrive at a moment when the problem reaches its peak (climax), such as the reveal of the villain, the moment when the character falls in love, or the point when a major decision is made that changes everything.

The solution

The solution is like the conclusion of an essay. It reminds you of how the characters got to the moment where the main problem was solved. It should feel like a natural end, where all the major points (topic sentences) have been addressed. Sometimes the solution includes a message or a clarifying theme (an implied main idea) that emphasizes to the reader a lesson that should have been learned after the experience.

Exercises

Exercise 1: Artistic Freedom

A great example of this principle can be seen in the artwork of the famous painter Vincent van Gogh. Complete this exercise to learn more about artistic freedom in creative writing.

1. Take a look at some of van Gogh's early work on [this page from the van Gogh Museum](#).
2. Then click through to see his later self-portraits, landscapes, and floral artwork on [this page from the van Gogh Museum](#).
3. Discuss the differences and similarities between his early artwork and the paintings and drawings he created later in life.
4. How does this relate to writing?

Exercise 2: Describe a classmate

Choose a classmate to work with on this assignment. You will write individual sentences using the prompts below. Then revise the paragraph for flow.

1. What does your partner look like? What descriptive words would you use about your partner's appearance that would help a reader identify this person in a crowd?
2. How would you describe your partner's personality?
3. Write a few words about how your partner feels today and why.
4. Check your description to see if there are any words you can replace with more specific synonyms.

Exercise 3: Creative prompt

The first step of the process is to read and understand the prompt.

Prompt: Describe a fictional character for a short story. The first paragraph should be a description of the physical and personality characteristics of the person. The second paragraph should be a short description of an event that highlights one of these characteristics.

Exercise 4: Description brainstorm

Write as many descriptive words as you can within 5 minutes. Check with a thesaurus to change any basic vocabulary for more specific words with more accurate connotations.

Example brainstorm: giant, ugly, angry, greedy, monstrous, scary, lonely, pale skin, dark hair, moustache and beard, dirty/ripped clothes, loud voice, etc

Exercise 5: Description paragraph

Use the brainstorm for your description to start creating a paragraph to describe your character.

Exercise 6: Story brainstorm

Decide how you want to illustrate an important characteristic of your character through a story. This part of the assignment is only a paragraph long, so consider the limits of how much story you can tell in that space.

Example story: Instead of saying that this character is greedy, it would be better to give a simple descriptive story about stealing from the village and hiding the treasure in a cave. This is a fantasy story, so the genre becomes clear in this setting as well.

Exercise 7: Creative Prewriting

1. Write your story climax sentence.
2. Choose about 2 moments that explain how the character arrived to that situation.
3. Decide how to explain the importance or impact of that situation.
4. Practice telling the story to a partner using only the remaining brainstorming details.
5. Add or delete any details based on your spoken draft.

Exercise 8: Adding Detail

Read this example of a character description and story. Add more descriptive language. Don't just focus on adding adjectives and adverbs. Think about how synonyms with more specific connotations can add interest to all of the parts of speech.

Outside of the village lives an ugly giant. He is very tall, and he is so scary that the village people avoid him. His loud voice can be heard miles away. The giant's appearance is so terrible, but his behavior is even worse. There are many stories in the village of his anger and bad manners when he could not be avoided.

One of the stories is about a contest. The village held a contest for the heaviest pig. The farmer who won received a bag of gold. After winning the prize, the farmer returned home. He did not know that the giant was waiting in the dark. The giant stole the bag of gold and the pig too! The prize pig and treasure were taken far away and never seen again. The greed of the giant was never forgotten in the village.

Exercise 9: Literary Devices

1. Add three literary devices (analogy, metaphore, or simile) to your draft.
2. Switch drafts with a partner and evaluate their literary devices.
3. Identify what literary device is used.
4. Give suggestions of how to integrate the phrase more fully into the story.

Exercise 10: Creative Draft

Write a draft of your character description.

- 2 paragraphs (double-spaced)
 - First paragraph description of the character
 - Second paragraph story to highlight an attribute
- fiction
- descriptive language





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