

Creative Writing

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Creative writing could be “defined” broadly as the pursuit of artistic ends through the written word. Fiction, non-fiction, poetry, creative non-fiction, prose poem, memoir—the possibilities for the form that your writing, and thus your message, may take are as diverse and numerous as there are writers writing. And as a creative writer, just as important as your final product is the process by which that product comes to be—how you develop your own personal toolbox of skills, strategies, and styles is going to have an impact on the form your final product will take. It could be (and should be) argued that this is all, to some extent, true of writing in any discipline;—however, here we will focus on the tools that may be helpful specifically in a creative writing class. While it is important to be creative in such a class, it is equally important to keep in mind the skills or techniques being practiced in a given assignment. The development and demonstration of these skills is a necessary step; therefore, though you have some room for experimentation, it’s important to follow the assignment. This is where writing as an art form can be truly appreciated. On this page, our tutors have compiled some tips to help you as you learn and practice the tools you have at your disposal in a classroom setting (where there will be, for now, specific, guided expectations and assignments in order to help foster your toolkit).

General Tips

Given its breadth and open nature, creative writing can seem a bit overwhelming to even the most experienced writers. This section contains some tips on [getting started](#), as well as some [general reflections](#) on what makes a good read and [tips for students of creative writing](#).

How Do I Get Started? A Few Tips for Creative Writers

Use ‘the Channels’: One effective technique in terms of 'getting started' writing a piece is to zone into one of the 'creative channels.' While the channels can consist of basically anything, the central ones are:

Feeling: this would be your emotional response to things, what images are evoked when you think about a particular topic or image based on the feelings you get from it.

Thinking: this would be your introspective look at whatever topic you have, from a philosophical or logical perspective.

Observational: this is truly the most objective channel, where you write about something purely in a physical sense.

A five to ten minute 'free write' in one of these channels about an idea or something physical can both be good ways to figure out what to write about. For example, writing about a house through the feeling channel will produce something very different from the observational channel. A lot of material can come through free writing; it can spark an idea for a more focused piece.

Pick a book of poems or collected creative essays/story excerpts:

Go through the book and pick a few with a good opening line and ending line, then a few you feel are weaker.

Ask yourself why the selected are the stronger and weaker.

Usually the stronger will instantly draw the reader in with an intriguing action and conclude with an equally powerful image. The weaker are often predictable or non-unique images. Keep this in mind with your own writing.

After you start, take away what you love the most:

This can be very hard to do once you actually begin the composition process--there is bound to be a sentence, paragraph, or stanza that inevitably becomes your favorite.

However, in order to make the other parts equally as strong, an effective technique is to cut out the 'favorite' bit so that you can examine the remaining parts and see how you can make them as strong as the best one. Afterwards, you can put the removed component back in to see if the piece still flows.

Let it marinate:

Once you have finished a piece, try 'putting it away' for a day or two. Often, new inspiration will come from something that has already been written to produce something even better.

Some General Strategies

With creative writing pieces (be they creative non-fiction, poetry, or short fiction), there are a few useful strategies to remember that can contribute to the success of any given piece:

Every piece should be building toward a specific "moment"

Creative writing pieces become more focused and therefore stronger when the author learns to think of the piece as building toward a specific moment in time, as building toward a specific effect or image that the author wants to leave a reader with.

One very short example of a piece that builds toward a moment is below (as seen in the anthology *New Sudden Fiction*):

His guardian angel whispered to Fabian, behind his shoulder: "Careful, Fabian! It is decreed that you will die the moment you pronounce the word doyen."

"Doyen?" asks Fabian, intrigued.

And he dies.

Though this is an incredibly short example of a story, the elements of a 'moment' are clearly present: The piece builds toward Fabian's death. The death is a surprise and a "moment" because of the irony: It is Fabian's guardian angel who is ultimately responsible for Fabian's death (it is hard to believe Fabian would have ever randomly said "Doyen"); also, when Fabian utters the fatal word he is "intrigued" instead of fearful. This turn in the final section of the piece is what causes it to be effective.

Had the piece been something like:

Fabian was staggering down the street, drunk, the smell of cheap whiskey assaulting the atmosphere around him. He was thinking about all the problems in his life when he stumbled into the street and was hit by a car.

Then the piece would not have been effective because there is no 'turn' here--it is not all that interesting or surprising that a drunk person would accidentally stumble into the street, it is only tragic; however, this tragedy does not constitute a "moment" or the sort of turn that would make a piece interesting and engaging to read because the piece has no complexity.

However, simply because moments are paramount does not mean the author has to know what moment he/she is building toward when he/she begins drafting. In fact, rarely will an author know what this effect will be before he/she sits down to write the piece.

Instead, the purpose and punch of the piece usually reveals itself to the author in the process of writing, and it is on the author to go back and recognize what contributes to building toward that "moment" and what does not.

Below is an example of how a free-write can help lead to a theme and a moment:

"It's a funny thing-that which can cause inanimate objects to take on great meaning. I remember my friend Oliver, with his glasses and his quiet way-the way he'd do everything slowly, the way that there was no rush----excepting of course those moments of spontaneity and levity that seemed to randomly burst from him like juice from one of those gusher fruit snacks from the old days. How is it that a chess board can be such a slice of life? It's plastic and felt that's packaged in Korea by workers getting paid God-doesn't-even-want-to-know how little. And yet in my hands, in my mind, those pieces come alive. It's a delirious transformation, how sixty four checkered squares become relevant. The heads in the hands (which greases up the hair), and that wild look that the players can get-the savagery, the ire, the devil himself looking out from behind the eyes of someone that wouldn't say a goddamn word to you if you cut in front of him at the Starbucks line. The board changes people."

There are many images in this free write: it rambles about the author's experiences at chess tournaments and wanders down various tangents; however, eventually the author finds a theme that he likes and sees has potential to use throughout the piece.

Even though at this point in the writing it may not be clear to the author what his/her moment is, the point of the free write is to find a starting point that the author knows will lead to some sort of moment, even if the author doesn't know what exactly that moment will be.

In the above free write, when the author got to "The board changes people," he subjectively saw this as a strong statement to use to start his piece because of the potential for interesting ultimate effects it offered—he could use interesting images to show how his opening statement is true, or he could focus the piece toward an ending line in which he contradicts the opening statement. Even if you do not know what your moment will be right away, if you find yourself thinking and talking about ultimate effect then you are on the right track.

If you have a piece that doesn't seem to be building toward anything, sometimes it's useful to just chat about the piece. Chatting is easier than free writing for many individuals; having someone to bounce ideas off of can provide you with a creative spark.

If you have a piece that is building toward something but it still seems awkward to you, that is probably because the piece is not taut--that is, not all of what is written contributes to the moment. In this case, ask yourself how different aspects of the piece contribute to the meaning and work from there.

Significant, concrete detail

Precise language is the difference between an engaging story or poem and a boring story or poem. Look for vague language and abstractions (some abstractions include hard-to-grasp concepts like intelligence, criticism, love, and anger which can often be more effectively shown through specific events, actions, or dialogue in a piece).

Though sometimes you may be using this language for some other purpose (like in dialogue to capture the voice of a character), generally speaking the more specific the language is the stronger the piece will be.

Janet Burroway's book *The Elements of Craft* has a terrific discussion of significant, concrete detail which conveys this point well: "The notion of detail is important to the image because it moves away from the generalized notion and toward the particular. For example, creature is a generalized notion, hard to see except in the vaguest way. Animal is still vague...four-legged animal is a little more specific; domestic animal a little more; dog narrows the field; mix-breed Sheppard we can see, old Sammy asleep on the red rug, his haunches twitching in his dreams brings the dog into sharp focus in our minds."

The best way to play with language is to find places where your language is vague. Sometimes, you will have a specific purpose in choosing the language that you did; more often, it might be the case that you go through your piece to find places where the language

could be more precise.

Tips for Students of Creative Writing

Get Feedback. One major thing to keep in mind: While many people feel vulnerable because of their (academic) writing, anyone who expresses a desire to get feedback on their creative writing (either independently or in a class setting) might feel much more so because creative writing is often thought of as an indication of someone's thoughts, feelings, and insights about the world. You are not alone if you feel this way! Feedback is important, so be sure to not let yourself feel as if you can't get your writing out there—and as a student, getting feedback from peers and professors is going to be a major part of the learning process.

Revise According to the Assignment. Misconceptions of creative writing (especially for a class):

"It can't be tutored."

"It's whatever you want it to be."

"No one can say if it's good or bad."

Many people share these views about creative writing. On one level, they're right. When you're writing for yourself and only yourself, no one can judge it. When you take a creative writing class, though, assignments will be very specific and ask students to write in specific manners, using specific techniques.

Consider this prompt for ENGS 119: Advanced Poetry Writing:

Write a short poem (15-25 lines) with a clear descriptive purpose, in which all of the sentences are fairly short and have straightforward syntax: use no colons or semicolons; eschew compound subjects or verbs; avoid dependent or subordinate clauses. Please do not make the poem about childhood or a similarly limited perspective---keep the material in the land of complex thought. Bring this to class on Wednesday. For Friday, rewrite this poem as a single sentence, with subordination and compound sentence parts. Eliminating unnecessary repetition is okay, but try to keep all of the original content. Extend from this sentence into at least three more: double the length of the original poem, at least, after contracting it a bit.

This clearly has set requirements and the professor is obviously expecting certain types of poems to be turned in. So, that's one thing that you, as a student of creative writing, need to recognize and can use as a way to "check your work": understand the complexity of an assignment and, looking at the piece you have created, see if the poem or short story or essay meets the set criteria. Keep in mind that even though the content is (almost) always up to you, the actual writing, like any other writing, can always be improved. Don't panic if all you know is academic writing. Many of the same principles apply even though this discipline is named "creative." It is still writing and can always be improved (here is where feedback is especially important to the

discipline).

Creative Non-fiction

If representing and exploring the “real” by writing in the genre of creative non-fiction is your goal, we hope these tips about **what creative non-fiction is**, as well as some pointers on a few genres that are considered creative non-fiction (**memoir** and the **personal essay**) can help you. We have also included some links to some well-known **examples of creative non-fiction** to give you a sense of what is out there.

An Introduction to Creative Non-Fiction

What “is” creative non-fiction?

Creative nonfiction merges the boundaries between literary art (fiction, poetry) and research nonfiction (statistical, fact-filled, run of the mill journalism). It is writing composed of the real, or of facts, that employs the same literary devices as fiction such as setting, voice/tone, character development, etc. This makes it different (more “creative”) than standard nonfiction writing.

Sometimes called literary journalism or the literature of fact, creative non-fiction merges the boundaries between literary art (fiction, poetry) and research non-fiction (statistical, fact-filled, run of the mill journalism). It is writing composed of the real, or of facts, that employs the same literary devices as fiction, such as setting, voice/tone, character development, etc.

Creative non-fiction should (1) include accurate and well-researched information, (2) hold the interest of the reader, and (3) potentially blur the realms of fact and fiction in a pleasing, literary style (while remaining grounded in fact).

In the end, creative non-fiction can be as experimental as fiction—it just needs to be based in the real.

Content of creative non-fiction:

It's important to clarify that the content of creative non-fiction does not necessarily have to come from the life or the experience of the writer. Say, for instance, the writer is using techniques from literary journalism to create a portrait of a person interviewed. The writer may choose to write a portrait of the interviewee through an omniscient perspective, meaning the writer wouldn't be in the piece at all.

On the other hand, non-fiction writers often choose to write about topics or people close to them (including themselves). As long as the piece deals with something real, or something based on the real, the writer is allowed to take the piece in any direction he or she wishes.

In creative non-fiction, writers attempt to observe, record, and thus shape a moment from real life. Writers thus extract meaning through factual details—they combine the fact of detail with the literary extrapolation necessary in rendering meaning from an observed scene.

At the same time, successful creative non-fiction attempts to overlay fact with traditional conceptions of dramatic structure. While rendering meaning from an observed scene, a piece should suggest a beginning, middle and end that clearly conveys the conflict and the characters, and pushes the action toward some sort of closure.

In effect, creative non-fiction attempts to project a dramatic, literary framework upon everyday existence, rendering it enjoyable, enlightening and potentially meaningful.

While writing creative non-fiction, writers should dwell on sensory details and "*show show show*."

A piece should never just tell the reader something or summarize—this is what research non-fiction does.

Different “types” of creative non-fiction writing:

Due to the fact that creative non-fiction is an ever-evolving genre of writing, it is difficult to define set types:

The Personal Essay:

A piece of writing, usually in the first person, that focuses on a topic or a personal experience that strongly affects the reader vis-à-vis its apparent emotional impact on the narrator. It can be narrative or non-narrative—it can tell a story in a traditional way or improvise a new way for doing so. Ultimately, it should always be based on true, personal experience.

The Memoir:

A memoir is a longer piece of creative non-fiction that delves deep into a writer's personal experience. It typically uses multiple scenes/stories as a way of examining a writer's life (or an important moment in a writer's life). It is usually, but not necessarily, narrative.

The Short Short:

A short/short is a (typically) narrative work that is concise and to the point. It uses imagery and details to relay the meaning, or the main idea of the piece. Typically it's only one or two scenes, and is like a flash of a moment that tells a whole story.

Literary Journalism:

Literary journalism uses the techniques of journalism (such as interviews and reviews) in order to look outside of the straight forward, objective world that journalism creates. It uses literary practices to capture the scene/setting of the assignment or the persona of the person being interviewed. It can often be narrative or heavily imagistic. Another

important aspect of literary journalism is that it often stretches the idea of "objective facts" in order to better reflect real life and real people. In other words, while journalism is about being completely objective, literary journalism says that people can't be objective because they already have their own subjective views about the world. Therefore, by taking the "objectiveness" out of the journalistic process, the writer is being more truthful.

The Lyric Essay:

The lyric essay is similar to the personal essay in that it also deals with a topic that affects the reader. However, the lyric essay relies heavily on descriptions and imagery. Lyrical suggests something poetic, musical, or flowing (in a sense). This type of piece uses a very lyrical, heavily descriptive, flowing tone in order to tell a story.

Memoir: Tips for Writing about Your Life

Memoirs are an often overlooked subdivision of creative writing, and more specifically, creative non-fiction. They have the potential to be incredibly interesting, richly developed, beautifully moving pieces that can sometimes be confused with autobiography. Generally, autobiographies are the life story or history of a person's life written by that person. Though memoirs share some similarities with autobiographies, such as first person narration, they are more than a recounting of one's life events in chronological order. Instead, they can be descriptions of one single event or moment in one's life, rather than that life in its entirety, and tend to be written in a less structured or formal manner. Memoirs have the capacity to be funny, profound, moving, cynical, etc., and may even have resemblances to fiction in their creativity. Memoirs can focus on one specific event, place, person, etc. or they can be expanded to encompass a broader range of events, snapshots, or memories in the author's experience.

Here are some basic things you should know about writing a memoir:

Memoirs can be about nearly anything in your personal experience/life that is significant enough for you to want to retell it, or it can simply be a snapshot of a moment or a description of a person, place, or thing in your life.

Choose a topic that you care about, for this will make your piece more descriptive, emotional, and creative. Even though it is about YOUR life, if you care about your topic then so will the reader.

Seek a deeper or underlying theme within the simple description of an event etc. that the reader can connect to. Use a lot of description and imagery, if you can, to make the reader feel like they know the topic intimately.

There is no specific form or style that it is necessary for a memoir to have- **USE YOUR OWN UNIQUE VOICE!**

Do not confuse memoirs with autobiography, they are NOT the same thing (as noted above).

You may want to find some memoirs in the library or online in order to get a feel for the variety out there and some of the ways you might want to go about writing yours. A few examples I am familiar with are:

- *My Family and Other Animals* by Gerald Durrell
- *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* by Lauren Slater
- *Angela's Ashes, 'Tis, and Teacher Man* by Frank McCourt
- *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be* by Farley Mowat.

Though these are longer books, memoirs can make the form of shorter, more "snapshot" like pieces as well. A memoir does not have to be a long, all-inclusive cataloguing of your life—that could be overwhelming, boring, and read more like a formal autobiography---choose a specific focus. Take creative license.

A memoir, though based on and rooted in truth and fact, does not have to be 100% straight laced non-fiction. Take a new perspective, get creative, find a way to make your piece more interesting, fresh, thought-provoking etc. In other words, just because this is non-fiction, that DOES NOT have to make it boring, dry, straight-forward, and humorless.

- ✓ Though there is some controversy over what can and cannot be called memoir, Lauren Slater's book *Lying* is a good example of how creative you can get with this genre. Hers is specifically labeled a metaphorical memoir in order to avoid this controversy (though it has followed her anyway), and so perhaps saying something to that effect is a way of avoiding complaints of false advertising and fraud. Though you should not claim something to be true that is not, you can choose what you want to leave out of or include in your memoir. You can make it read like fiction, and you can make conscious decisions to surround your work with ambiguity that questions the nature of truth vs. fact (as Slater does). It may sound complicated, but really is quite basic: don't make claims your piece is something it's not, don't outright lie and then say it's fact, but choose your material carefully and you can do many more things with memoirs than you might at first think (see [the limits of the real in creative non-fiction](#) above).
- ✓ Finally, have fun with it! Enjoy it! Memoirs can be very emotionality releasing, fun to play around with, and can reward not only the reader but also you, the writer. Test your limits and try different ways of writing—its all about self-exploration and discovery.

The Personal Essay: A Few Pointers

The personal essay is one of the most popular forms of creative non-fiction writing found in English classes, especially in high school but also, to a certain degree and in a more complex way, college. This kind of writing allows you to explore a topic through the lens of your own, personal experiences, reflections, ideas, and reactions. It can be one of the most powerful kinds of writing you get to do, both in its direct connection to you, the writer, allowing you to engage

with material in class at a very personal, complex, and meaningful level, and also in the amount of latitude that you as a writer are afforded in terms of style, technique, and form. The following are some tips and strategies to help you think as you write and revise a personal essay, or prepare to write this kind of assignment for the first time (the topic of the essay will always vary—we are focused on the genre as a whole here).

Focus. In some ways, the personal essay is similar to memoir and many of the same techniques can be used effectively. It differs in that an essay is focused on one specific topic (and here, it will be explored through your own experiences) whereas the memoir has the capability to trace or illuminate several themes, topics, and ideas via the author’s life (or part(s) of that life) that he/she describes (and how he/she describes it).

Organization. Not to be confused with form (see below). Your essay, like other essays, should have some kind of coherent organization to it. This is not to say that you must use thesis style (in fact, we are confident that powerful personal essays follow that organization scheme less than 5% of the time). No matter how you choose to organize (and what form you use), be sure that your paragraphs and ideas flow from one to the next, connected by a common theme (trying to tackle the topic on which you are writing). It can be scattered or fragmented (if that is a stylistic/form choice you make), but the entire paper should have a relationship, even if it only becomes clear at the end. This allows the reader to follow your experience.

Form. One of the best parts of this kind of writing is the power given to you as the writer. There is no form, no formula, no tried and true method that you must use to be effective. In fact, to copy something that somebody else has done is not only rather boring, but also defeats the purpose of this being a *personal* essay. Choose a form and style that suits you and is fitting for the experience that you are describing. Try to think of the form as a part of the writing itself, not just a framework for it: the form should actually enhance and make more poignant what it is you are taking about. Push the boundaries, but don’t go too far—you are still writing an essay (and be sure that you follow any specific requirements outlined by your professor).

Diction/Language. Like form, in the personal essay (and creative writing generally, perhaps even, to some extent, writing in general) the way in which you say something can “mean” just as much as the form into which you place what it is you are saying. Use language to enhance what you are writing about and not just as a means to say it. Here is where you can get really creative and appropriately use linguistic “play” to explore your topic and your own relation to it in new and complex ways.

Choosing at Topic and Approach

When beginning a personal essay, you should choose a significant event in your life. This can be almost anything, but something about it should matter to you. Many personal essays hinge around a sad experience, but joy is just as strong an emotion, if not more so. As always in creative writing, you should consider why you are writing this piece: what can writing about this experience teach others? What can you learn from revisiting the memory? In a personal essay,

the importance of the word “*personal*” is not to be undervalued. Whatever you choose to write about must be important to you, hinge around your experience, and have some impact on you.

When writing a personal essay, it is important to remember that the main character is you. This is challenging for a lot of people who are used to expressing themselves through a character or through poetry. Personal essays demand more vulnerability than either of these forms. In a personal essay, the writer should never be afraid of the word “I” in fact, it should be used as often as possible. In most situations where you find yourself straying into the first person plural (“we”) or even the third person, using such vague language as “one could” or “one would,” you will almost always find the writing becomes stronger if you replace the subject with “I.” Most of the time, drifting into vague language is a sign that you are trying to convey a message you find “too” personal and are afraid of expressing. However, it is this vulnerability that fuels the personal essay. You cannot learn from the experience unless you are honest with yourself, and readers will not be able to understand why this experience is significant if you hide yourself from view. Your character in the story can only develop if you claim the story as your own.

Revising Tips

While one of the most common kinds of creative non-fiction writing (at least in an academic setting), the personal essay is probably one of the harder assignments to revise. After all, how do you “fix” a paper that is composed of very personal ideas? A personal essay is not like a formal analytical essay-- it doesn't need an explicit thesis-driven format. Therefore, revising a personal essay can be complicated, especially when you feel as though you don't want to tamper with personal thoughts. However, a personal essay often needs someone to tamper with it in order to make it a complete piece. Below we have listed several steps that may be useful when revising or giving feedback on a personal essay (either your own or someone else's).

Voice/Tone: The voice and tone are important in the personal essay because they reflect the attitude the writer is trying to get across. Is the mood happy? Sad? Is it serious? Are we placed inside the writer's head? These are all important questions to ask in order to realize the effect/the emotion the writer wants the piece to convey. Ask yourself (or the writer): Is the writer's voice consistent throughout the piece? Does it reflect the tone of the piece? Does the piece incorporate some experimental ideas? It is not necessary to have a personal essay be “experimental,” but it does need to be unique to the writer (hence the name). Some experimental ideas include: playing with the sentence structure by juxtaposing short sentences with longer, complicated sentences ... playing with word usage by including repetition or alliteration ... or playing with form by including other voices, dialogue, and points of views.

Showing v. Telling: Details and imagery can only help a personal essay; they help to develop a story by making it more real to the reader. A personal essay doesn't necessarily *need* scenes, but it does need a well formed focus or point and imagery can help to establish that.

Character Development: If the personal essay has characters, make sure they're developed clearly and that the relationships between the characters are developed. Dialogue between

characters not only helps the reader to understand the relationships, it helps the reader to understand the individual characters and their actions. Imagery also helps with this and ties back into showing v. telling; by describing a character through details (of their actions or their appearance), we better understand a character.

Original Language: Everything in a piece of creative writing is subject to scrutiny, including word choice. Therefore it's helpful to look closely at language. Is the writing fresh? Are there any obvious clichés that detract from the piece?

Form: How a piece of creative non-fiction writing is put together is extremely important. The form not only needs to be organized well, it also speaks to the piece as a whole. Good questions to ask: Why is it organized in this way? How does this reflect your (or the writer's) experience? It's also helpful to discuss different form techniques such as flashbacks, stream of consciousness, or different scenes that piece together a writer's main idea.

Fiction/Poetry Techniques: Since creative non-fiction writing is such a hybrid and multi-faceted genre, it's often helpful to use/borrow techniques from fiction or poetry. Scenes, dialogue, narrative structure, setting, and an emphasis on language are all important aspects of creative non-fiction as well.

Examples

- [Excerpt from *Holidays on Ice* by David Sedaris](#) A collection of memoir-essays by David Sedaris, this particular excerpt is from the essay entitled *SantaLand Diaries*, where Sedaris recounts his experience working as a holiday elf for Macy's. It is a great example of memoir. As you read, think about the debate going on about the memoir (see handout on memoirs)—where do you see embellishment or possible “stretching of the truth” for artistic purposes? How is this different from a straight autobiography? What kinds of stylistic devices is Sedaris using that would make this a piece of creative non-fiction?
- [Excerpt from Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*](#) This piece is a classic example of Literary Journalism (also called New Journalism). In it, Wolfe is reporting on both the sixties in general as well as Ken Kesey, the author of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, from the period spanning the late fifties to 1965. Considered to be an essential period piece of that decade, this novel is also one of the first examples of Literary Journalism. What about this piece separates it from more traditional journalism? How is it closer to what we would otherwise consider (mistake for??) a novel? From this excerpt, can you see how this kind of journalism is considered a kind of creative non-fiction? What does this type of journalism have to offer us as readers that more traditional journalism doesn't/can't? This piece also demonstrates nicely the concept of “the limits of the real” in creative non-fiction—how so? (see our note on this concept under Creative Non-Fiction)?

Note: To access excerpt, follow the link, click where it says “click to look inside” and then use the arrows to flip the pages.

- [Excerpt from Lars Eighner's *Travels with Lizbeth: Three Years on the Road and on the Streets*](#)
A great example of memoir. What do you see as the “point” or message of this piece to be? How does the author accomplish this? What features make this an example of creative non-fiction? Of memoir?

Fiction

Fiction writing allows human creativity to run limitless, creating stories that probe every facet of life and the human experience. This very openness, however, is what can make it seem so challenging—even if you know what you want to write about, how do you begin? Below you will find some suggestions on [writing short stories](#), as well as [revising](#) your work, that can hopefully guide you along the way.

Writing A Short Story

Writing a short story is different from writing a research paper or persuasive essay and many beginning writers can be daunted by the task. Luckily, writing a short story isn't nearly as difficult as it may seem at first and by remembering some basic tricks you can be well on your way.

What Should I Write About?

Don't try to make the story too far-fetched. Some of the best stories have seemingly mundane settings and plots. The best stories are believable. It will be the characters that truly shape the story.

If you can't think of anything, take a story from your own life. Countless professional authors advocate writing from life. Everyone has told a story aloud. Take that story and expand it. Feel free to change it around as much as you like-it doesn't have to stick to the exact history of what happened.

I've Got a Topic—What Now?

The most important thing to remember is that while you are writing it is ok to change something. Feel free to completely change the story if you get a great idea. Sometimes spontaneous ideas are the best.

Keeping that in mind, decide on a point of view. The most common are singular first person and third person. First person uses a narrator who leads the story by saying "I didn't have enough money" as opposed to third person, which follows a character around by saying "Bob didn't have enough money." They both have pros and cons; first person is more personal with a specific character, but third person is more inclusive and lets the reader know what's going on beyond one character.

Figure out where the story is going to take place. Short stories generally stick to one setting since not much time passes (don't have a line that reads "three days later, for example), so make sure the setting makes sense. The characters should be there for a reason.

So You've Started to Write...:

Remember that you have already done one of the hardest parts; actually writing can be the easier part of the process.

Don't introduce too many characters you will have to account for and develop later on. Small characters can often be combined for simplicity's sake.

Keeping a story "simple" and interesting can be difficult, especially if you are writing from life. There is a tendency to include everything that happened, but in reality not every scene is important. If the scene doesn't drive the plot, don't include it.

By the same token, include plenty of metaphors and imagery to enhance the "point" of the story. What are you trying to say in the story? What do the ' characters learn in the end? Why is this particular story worthy of being told? Whatever answers those questions can be considered the "point." If you don't have a "point" right away, don't worry. Often authors don't find what they are trying to say until they have finished writing, and sometimes they change the ending to convey a different message. Try to enhance the point by using details and imagery without adding pointless scenes, but if you don't have a point at first don't worry--it will come to you.

“Done”? What now?

Read over your story.

Does the story have a beginning, middle, and end? Something should have been set up, happen, and then be over. If not, try revising your story.

Do the characters (or the reader) learn anything? If not, there is no point to your story. There isn't anything that makes it worth telling. Something really interesting could have happened but if doesn't affect the characters then it isn't a really interesting story. Readers connect best with the characters, not necessarily what happens to them.

Check out some of our other suggestions for revising fiction below.

Remember, there are no “rules” to writing (most of the time). Feel free to break any of these if it makes the story better. These are just guidelines, but they should help if you are struggling. Also, remember to revise. The first draft isn't always the best; most first drafts can be improved upon.

One last tip: READ READ READ. Read other authors for inspiration by looking critically at how they are deploying technique. The best writers are also pretty active and critical readers.

Revising Fiction

Some basic questions to get yourself (re)thinking:

Is every **scene** necessary? Are you repeating yourself? Are you missing a scene? List for yourself what your scenes are about. Not just what the action is but what the scene means and how it furthers the story. Remember that a scene moves a story through the use of action, character change and development, and the passage of time. Very rarely do you find a scene that does nothing for the story, no matter how small that something might be.

Have you chosen the right **point of view**? Is the POV best for viewing conflict? Is it the most interesting and intense (i.e. most appropriate for the story you are telling)? Try to think your character's(s') POV out as far as you can, as it can dictate what becomes possible later on...and there may be a part of a character that reveals itself to you via exploring a new POV.

Ask yourself about **plot**—are the scenes and the revelations within scenes arranged to best effect, for intensity and for cause and effect.

Consider the **action** or actions that drive your story. Make sure that for every action there is a reaction. This will help keep your story moving. Consider all the reactions to an action and then decide what will give the best effect (and what is plausible to the extent that you are striving for at least some realism/believability).

Look at your **characters**—are they differentiated enough? Are they individuals? Are there too many for a short story? Is there a character that might have more to say and might make the story stand out if he/she is developed? Is it difficult for the central character to get what he/she wants, or is it too easy? The better you know and understand your characters, the more powerful they become in your writing.

Look at your **settings**—are they evocative enough, are they part of the story or are they just there as fill-ins?

Does your first paragraph hook your reader? Avoid introductory kinds of things.

Look at the last paragraph. Why did you choose to end there?

Have faith in your story: recaps are not usually necessary.

Save your drafts and never be afraid to try something, even if it does not end up working out.

Poetry

Below you will find a brief discussion of **What Makes a Poem Good**, some useful tips on several **poetic forms**, as well as some **general tips** on composing a poem, that you will hopefully find helpful as you use poetry to explore the world and our experiences in it.

What Makes a Good Poem

"The theater of any poem is a collection of decisions about space and time - how are these words to lie on the page, with what pauses, what headlong motion, what phrasing, how can they meet the breath of the someone who comes along to read them?"

- Adrienne Rich

This is a question that has been asked since poetry came into existence. It is a hard question to tackle, and the best way to approach it is by consulting poets.

According to Louis Zukofsky, an important American poet, "The test of poetry is the range of pleasure it affords as sight, sound, and intellect." Poetry should combine these three aspects.

Sight:

This refers to the layout of the poem on the page. Poetry is not just about the use of words. Although the words are of great importance, the use of space is equally important. Frank Bidart is a poet who is noted for his use of the page, as well as his interesting use of capitalization and punctuation. His decisions, no matter how odd, are intentional and contribute to the power of his poetry. One example is his poem "Herbert White," a dramatic monologue in the voice of a necrophiliac child murderer. The topic is powerful enough, but the way his words string down the page is truly remarkable. The layout of a poem is something a writer should keep in mind while composing.

Sound:

Sound refers to the relationships that form between words within your writing. This does not mean that it is necessary to use alliteration or onomatopoeia (unless it is appropriate). It means that as a poem is being composed, the writer should be aware of these relationships. Words will fight against one another, or they will embrace each other, stringing together to form beautiful lines and sentences. A writer can "hold an image within the line by sound..." A writer can make the decision to allow their words to clash. The writer can decide the way in which a reader will move through the lines. Sound not only refers to words, but also to rhythm. The rhythm of a poem will become apparent when it is read aloud.

Intellect:

A writer must be able to present information effectively. The challenge with poetry is figuring out the best way to present the information that needs to be conveyed. Poetry has the ability to suggest meanings that go above and beyond what the poem actually says. This can be done through the use of sight and sound as suggested above. Intellect will allow a poet to contemplate abstract ideas, and convey them through the use of language. Poetry is “an exchange of electrical currents through language.” Controlling the currents and placing them on the page in an effective way will create a good poem.

A GOOD POEM IS A COMBINATION OF THESE THREE ELEMENTS

A Crash Course in Poetic Forms

We would guess it's fair to say that many people are shy when it comes to writing poetry. Or maybe you're one of the lucky few that is glad to get the chance to work on something different than an essay. You may be thinking, "A couple of metaphors, some obscure emotions thrown down on paper, free verse is a piece of cake." But poetry can be (and is) so much more than that...and sometimes there will be very specific forms in which you will have to compose. Here, we will break down some of the major (and more difficult) poetic forms—they are not as scary as they might seem!

Some Terms to Know

Foot -a rhythmic unit of metrical measurement containing a set number and pattern of stressed and/or unstressed syllables.

Meter -the (usually) regular pattern of accented and unaccented syllables in a poem. (For example, in iambic pentameter, “pentameter” refers to five feet and “iambic” refers to the pattern of each foot: one unaccented syllable followed by one accented syllable. Here is an example of iambic pentameter from Alexander Pope’s *An Essay on Criticism: True wit is Nature to advantage dressed: What oft was thought, but ne’er so well expressed*).

Rhyme scheme -the pattern of rhyme in a poem, usually noted by letters representing the rhyme.

Roses are red	A	The rhyme scheme here is very simple.
Violets are blue	B	The first three lines introduce a new rhyme
Sugar is sweet	C	while the fourth matches the rhyme of the
And so are you	B	second line.

Stanza -a section of lines that divide the poem. It's like a paragraph within a poem. The following poem has three stanzas in it:

This is Just to Say
by William Carlos Williams

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox [Stanza 1]

and which
you were probably
saving [Stanza 2]
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious [Stanza 3]
so sweet
and so cold

Well Known Forms

We'll do the top five: **sestina**, **villanelle**, **sonnet**, **haiku**, **Ghazal**, and **ode**.

Sestina

A poem with six six-line stanzas and finished with one three-line. No refrain (A refrain is a stanza or line repeated again and again during a poem. It is similar to the refrain of a song that is sung after each verse.) Usually unrhymed, but uses the same six words in different orders to finish the lines in each stanza.

Here comes the tough part: The order. Let's number the end words 1-6. They should then be aligned in the following order.

Stanza 1	1-2-3-4-5-6
Stanza 2	6-1-5-2-4-3
Stanza 3	3-6-4-1-2-5
Stanza 4	5-3-2-6-1-4
Stanza 5	4-5-1-3-6-2
Stanza 6	2-4-6-5-3-1

And a final '3 liner' should contain all six end words somewhere in the lines.

Example:

The Concord Art Association Regrets

by Pam White

Your entry was not accepted. We regret it wasn't (enough for us), a work of love. We liked many of the colors on the whole but the mass was just something unrelated to the rest of our show. We hope your work will have a bright future in another place.

We remember last year you tried to place another photograph and it was also with regret we turned you down. Though for that particular work we found nothing about it (no one could) to love. It was obscure and a little upsetting in relation to the rest of our show which we look on as a whole.

Now you may think us ungenerous. On the whole you are probably right, but this is our place and we can do what we want whether you relate to it or not. However we don't want you to regret your association with us. We want you to love us, send us money, but please, no more work.

You see right now we need money to work on the building we're in. There's a hole in the roof and one wall needs all the love and attention it can get. Really the place needs so much, which all costs. I regret to remind you we need more space for related

works. We're trying to expand and relate to lots of different kinds of work so different people won't regret their visit with us but will see the whole beauty and tranquility of the place and come with us, a journey of love

where people of all races, colors, and creeds love to look and bask and of course bring relations, friends, and lovers. All are welcome to our place here where all the world's magnificent work can be shown in its entirety, the whole place filled - with your exception, we regret.

We know you'll love the whole work we're doing for this place.

We can't relate enough our regret.

Sonnet

There are two major types of sonnets: the Italian or Petrarchan and the Shakespearean or English.

The Shakespearean is the more common form. It is a fourteen-line poem in iambic pentameter, usually with an ababcdcdefefgg rhyme scheme. A Petrarchan sonnet follows an abbaabbacdecde (or abbaabbadccdc) rhyme scheme.

Example of a Shakespearean Sonnet:

Sir Walter Raleigh to His Son

Three things there be that prosper up apace	a
And flourish, whilst they grow asunder far;	b
But on a day, they meet all in one place,	a
And when they meet, they one another mar.	b
And they be these: the wood, the weed, the wag.	c
The wood is that which makes the gallow tree;	d
The weed is that which strings the hangman's bag;	c
The wag, my pretty knave, betokeneth thee.	d
Mark well, dear boy, whilst these assemble not,	e
Green springs the tree, hemp grows, the wag is wild;	f
But when they meet, it makes the timber rot,	e
It frets the halter, and it chokes the child.	f
Then bless thee, and beware, and let us pray	g
We part not with thee at this meeting day.	g

Haiku

A 17-syllable poem made of three lines following a 5-7-5 syllable pattern.

Example (we made this one up ourselves):

Twilight

Warm summer evening
Sitting by the quiet lake
Pink sun disappears.

Ghazal

(pronounced like "guzzle" with a soft g)

The Ghazal is a poem written in couplets, in which the last word of each couplet is the same. In the first stanza, the repeated word ends both lines. All lines should be similar in length, and the poet will put his or her “signature” (some type of self reference, like his or her name) in the last lines. It is traditionally a form of expressing love and longing, but today it can be used to explore other feelings too.

Example

Twilight

Tonight

by Agha Shahid Ali

Pale hands I loved beside the Shalimar

— *Laurence Hope*

Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell tonight?
Whom else from rapture's road will you expel tonight?

Those “Fabrics of Cashmere-” “to make Me beautiful-”
“Trinket”-to gem-“Me to adorn-How tell”-tonight?

I beg for haven: Prisons, let open your gates-
A refugee from Belief seeks a cell tonight.

God's vintage loneliness has turned to vinegar-
All the archangels-their wings frozen-fell tonight.

Lord, cried out the idols, Don't let us be broken;
Only we can convert the infidel tonight.

Mughal ceilings, let your mirrored convexities
multiply me at once under your spell tonight.

He's freed some fire from ice in pity for Heaven.
He's left open-for God-the doors of Hell tonight.

In the heart's veined temple, all statues have been smashed.
No priest in saffron's left to toll its knell tonight.

God, limit these punishments, there's still Judgment Day-
I'm a mere sinner, I'm no infidel tonight.

Executioners near the woman at the window.
Damn you, Elijah, I'll bless Jezebel tonight.

The hunt is over, and I hear the Call to Prayer
fade into that of the wounded gazelle tonight.

My rivals for your love-you've invited them all?
This is mere insult, this is no farewell tonight.

And I, Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee-
God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight.

Ode

Generally speaking, odes have no specific form and the only requirement on length is that it must be long. Unlike the other poems, in order to be considered a traditional ode the poem must be serious and address a noble subject in a dignified manner. (Previously used topics include "Ode to the Confederate Dead" by Allen Tate and "Ode to Joy" by Frank O'Hara.) Newer odes, however, may present a lighter topic as Pablo Neruda often does.

Example:

Ode to a Lemon

by Pablo Neruda

Out of lemon flowers
loosed
on the moonlight, love's
lashed and insatiable
essences,
sodden with fragrance,
the lemon tree's yellow
emerges,
the lemons
move down
from the tree's planetarium

Delicate merchandise!
The harbors are big with it-
bazaars
for the light and the
barbarous gold.
We open
the halves
of a miracle,
and a clotting of acids
brims

into the starry
divisions:
creation's
original juices,
irreducible, changeless,
alive:
so the freshness lives on
in a lemon,
in the sweet-smelling house of the rind,
the proportions, arcane and acerb.

Cutting the lemon
the knife
leaves a little cathedral:
alcoves unguessed by the eye
that open acidulous glass
to the light; topazes
riding the droplets,
altars,
aromatic facades.

So, while the hand
holds the cut of the lemon,
half a world
on a trencher,
the gold of the universe
wells
to your touch:
a cup yellow
with miracles,
a breast and a nipple
perfuming the earth;
a flashing made fruitage,
the diminutive fire of a planet.

Writing Poetry: Some Strategies

Brainstorm ideas

What has been on your mind lately? Are there any recent personal experiences that stand out in your mind? What about in the past? Are there any topics that you have been meaning to explore in writing? Use personal experience as a starting point, because you can always refer to reality and then change it to fit the purpose of the poem.

Some Poetic Devices

Try using an exercise

Have a friend create an exercise for you. Possible exercises:

- Include a list of words.
Ex: morning, draw, stomp, golden, charred
- Write from a certain persona.
Ex: the bagger at the grocery store
- Use a specific setting.
Ex: under a porch

Change your location - if ideas aren't coming to you, try writing in a café, on a park bench, in the library, anywhere.

Favor concrete images. (things you can see, touch, taste, hear, feel) over abstractions (ideas or concepts that are not experienced directly through the five senses).

Beginning a poem can be the hardest part, so having a list of words or a specific topic can help you to begin. Once you begin, the poem can take many different forms.

Start Writing

Don't worry about form yet, unless that is the purpose of the exercise. Write down words, phrases, and sentences that relate to the topic. Explore different angles; try to capture your idea completely.

Work with the idea

Figure out what you want to say. Ask yourself what you want the reader to experience. What mood do you want to create? What tone best fits the meaning you are trying to convey?

Link the ideas

Once you have a better idea about what you want to say, connect the words and phrases in a logical order. Decide where to begin and then expand until you have a rough first draft, something that resembles a poem. Don't feel obligated to use all of the phrases that you wrote down initially. Rework them if necessary, and always feel free to add or subtract.

Read the first draft out loud

How does the poem make you feel? Ask if the goal of the poem is accomplished. Does it elicit the desired response? Does it have the right effect? Effectiveness of a poem is hard to judge. Basically, it's the "so what?" factor. If the poem creates interest and elicits an emotional response, then it is effective. You want the reader to ponder the poem when they finish reading it. Refer to your goal in "Work with the idea." Was this meaning realized? Did you find new meaning through writing?

Mess around with the poem

Try reordering words to create emphasis. Remember that as a poet you have poetic license and don't have to conform to grammar rules.

Ex: change "the bottle sits silently" to "silently sits the bottle"

The second version emphasizes silently.

Try to condense the poem by taking out unnecessary words.

Ex: change "the dog was barking" to "dog, barking"

Ex: change "the darkness consumed me / And I felt alone" to "consuming darkness, me alone"

The second version emphasizes the action

Contemplate each word

What are the connotations of each word? Do those meanings connect with the meaning of the poem? Is there a better word? Try to capture the idea exactly.

Examples of different connotations:

The ornate spider web: lavish, religious

The complicated spider web: confusing, detailed

The delicate spider web: vulnerable, ladylike

Determine which connotations are appropriate for your poem's meaning.

Try using figurative language.

Metaphor (this = that)

Ex: The spider web, an ornate church

Simile (this is like/as that)

Ex: The spider web, as ornate as a church

The spider web with golden threads

Strands spun meticulously

As ornate as church windows,
The light glistens through.

Contemplate rhythm

Rhythm is affected by the sound and pace of the words and lines. When you read the poem out loud, notice where you pause to take a breath. Are there commas or line breaks there? Mess around with punctuation and line breaks to change the rhythm. The rhythm should enhance the meaning.

Ex: Change:

As I fell the wind rushed around my face

to

I fell
The wind rushed
Round and round my face.

Notice how the second example is more effective because of the line breaks. Use rhythm to emphasize important words and phrases.

Try working with sound as well. Try using alliteration, repetition, and rhyme. The example above uses alliteration (rushed, round) and also repetition of the word round.

Ex. of rhyme:

I fell
The wind rushed
Round and round my face.
I hit the floor and found
A place for my face

Place and face rhyme, as do round and found. Rhymes can occur within the lines, or at the end of the lines.

Read it out loud again

Did revision give you more ideas about the meaning of the poem? Add ideas if you want, and then edit the new lines as explained above.

Look at the beginning

Is it interesting? Effective? Does the reader want to continue? Is there another part of the poem that could work as a better beginning? What if you started from the middle? The end?

Look at the ending

Does it create the effect that you want? Does it leave the reader feeling how you want them to feel? Could the ending be more effective by being either more or less specific?

Read it out loud a final time.

Fire Starters

When it comes to creative writing, sometimes the most difficult part can be discovering what you want to write about. Due to the virtually limitless possibilities, it can seem daunting to choose a topic. Like rubbing two sticks together to start a fire, thinking about a subject for your piece can be a laborious and frustrating process. But once you get that spark, the fire takes off. In order to get those creative sparks flying and help you figure out what kinds of things you would like to write about, here are a few “fire starters” to help kindle memories, emotions, experiences, and observations that will fuel your creative fire:

Think of a unique person you knew/know. How has that person impacted your life? Or, draw a character sketch of that person (if you are thinking of writing a fictional piece, use that character sketch to help you create one of your literary characters).

Write an imagined history of someone you know but whom you do not know very much about. Where is this person coming from? What experiences might this person have gone through to become who he/she is today? Is there something about this person that you always wondered about but were never sure about? Here is your chance to blend the real and the fictitious to satisfy your desire for an answer.

Has something happened to you recently that you feel has affected you in some way? Write about it.

Have you ever seen or experienced something that fundamentally changed you as a person?

Describe in as much detail as possible a particular emotion (this lends itself well to poetry!).

You have eight sentences to recount a childhood memory and use it to get some kind of “point” across. Choose your words carefully!

Use your favorite song as inspiration—what is this song talking about? Can you see any connections to your life? Better yet, just let the song play and close your eyes. What are you thinking about? Write about it.

This link has tons of little “idea sparkers” (some of them more formal and serious, others goofy and for fun). Check them out and see if one leads you in a direction you might want to pursue (or at least gets you thinking about something, even if it is completely unrelated)!

www.creativewritingprompts.com

If you are still stuck, be sure to check out our tips on “How Do I Get Started”.

Professor Tips: Creative Writing

Here are some tips straight from Professor Greg Bottoms!

What is one thing that students must never forget about when doing creative writing?

- Well, to be clear and to have a purpose, to have what you’re doing in mind.

What makes you go "Wow" when reading papers? —in a good way?

- Sophisticated prose, vivid description, an understanding of structure and how drama works. When I see that in what students are doing, I’m always impressed.

In a bad way?

- Imprecise, vague language; common mistakes in grammar usage, punctuation and syntactical construction. I don’t run into it that often, but when I do I definitely go, “Wow, this student needs to quickly correct this.” You pay for having those problems.

What can turn a good paper into a great paper?

- I would say specificity in all kinds of modes, whether that’s in reflection, in anchoring the argument in better examples, in going back through narrative or descriptive parts of writing and really rendering the world in a much clearer fashion. You know, I think the words “specificity” and “precision” apply to persuasive papers, to academic writing, to creative prose. I think the opposite of that is being vague or overly general in your thinking, in your attempt to render a scene or a character.

What is your favorite database for online research?

- I don’t know if I really have a favorite, but I do see that I end up at JSTOR a lot.

Any last advice for writing creative writing, whether for the intro courses or upper levels?

- I think that it’s good for students to do some pre-writing: to clarify what they think they are going to try to do in their paper before they actually write the paper, to write a summary in one paragraph of their basic argument that’s going to be in a 10-

page paper. Or even with stories— I think you should write a simple 150-word or 200-word paragraph that states in summary the basic makeup of what your story will become. I think students sometimes will sit down and start writing and they get to page five and go, “You know, I don’t know what the end is supposed to be.” I think that writing a summary paragraph first can really help.