

all about writing 
courses for people passionate about writing



Creative Writing

TWENTY ESSENTIAL ASPECTS

The first thing that draws a reader into a story is often the voice – that indefinable something which makes an intimate connection possible between writer and reader.

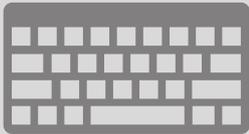
How do you go about developing that unique style and tone which extends your personality on to the page?

read a lot



It seems counter-intuitive but other people's styles help develop your own. Even if you set out to write like your favourite author, your own voice will emerge.

write as much as you can



It doesn't matter what you write, but voice is all about confidence and, as Gary Player said: "The more I practise, the luckier I get."

keep a notebook in your bag



Write when you're angry, write when you're sad. Write when you're happy or when you feel nothing much at all. Write without holding back.

write daily



Write without self-consciousness at least once a day. Time yourself, or set yourself a specific number of pages. Start writing without worrying about the subject. Don't think about spelling or grammar or whether your vocab is good enough.

stop worrying



Stop worrying about who might read what you write. Don't think about audience. Don't be afraid of looking stupid or of showing your vulnerability.

don't be afraid



Don't be afraid of looking stupid or of showing your vulnerability.

talk to the page



Chat to the page as though you're talking your best friend.

Keep a diary – even if you're done with teenage angst.

Diaries are not simply for lovelorn teens seeking catharsis.

Journals, if used properly, can improve your writing appreciably. Not only do they provide the space to grow your confidence, they can enhance your skills. If you use your journal in different ways, it can become more than just a passive page, and more of a writing tutor – even if only you ever see it.

Here are a few approaches to keeping a journal which will improve all aspects of your writing.

it's not just about feelings



Don't use your journal only to express how you feel about things. That might provide psychological release, but it can entrench old patterns of thinking and fail to stretch you.

write freely



Use your journal for free writing. Write without self-consciousness: without thinking or worrying about subject matter, spelling or grammar. Write without pausing.

observe the landscape



Actively observe the landscape – city or country, inside or outside. Notice it as you never have before, with all your senses. Then find the words and images to put that across to your reader.

avoid generic descriptors



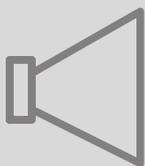
When actively observing and journal writing, ban yourself from all generic descriptors: beautiful, picturesque, awesome, quaint... Force yourself to "show" things to the reader – to allow them to experience it as you do. This will not come easily at first, but keep practising.

observe people



Actively observe people. See how they interact. Watch the subtle markers of body language. Don't simply interpret these. We're used to doing that. Try to describe them exactly so that your reader can interpret what is happening between them.

eavesdrop



Eavesdrop and write down exactly, with every um and ah, what people say to each other. Listen to the cadences and rhythms, and see the way they break off, interrupt each other and almost never speak in complete sentences.

write as someone else



Watch someone – a stranger or someone you know. Then try to place yourself inside that person and write as them. Write an internal monologue about what is happening in their life and their immediate preoccupations.

Ideas seem so ephemeral and sometimes so random, we fear they may cease to come or that we'll lose them.

Where does the idea for a book come from? How do we encourage ideas to flourish? We often think only of fiction when we talk about ideas, but non-fiction ideas have also to be developed.

So where do ideas come from and, if we can't think of one, how can we encourage them?

from real life



If you're setting out to write non-fiction, though, remember that a whole life seldom makes an interesting story. So what parts of that life do? What section has tension and drama, and characters interesting enough to draw us onward to find out what becomes of them?

real life can inspire fiction



Don't get stuck in the trap of "what really happened". Take the basis and enhance it to draw from it the maximum tension and drama.

read



If you're stuck, read newspapers or magazines to spark your imagination.

characters you know



Think about characters you know. What do those characters want or need – even if they don't realise it themselves? What situation could you throw them into which would "put them through hell" (as Kurt Vonnegut said we should) and prevent them getting what they want? How would they react to that stimulus?

day-dream



Don't forget to give yourself time to day-dream; to imagine scenarios and other lives for yourself or others. We all need time simply to be bored, if we are to live creative lives.

Casting about for a book they'd like to write, some people find initial ideas plentiful. But many of their ideas stay right there, stuck in the half-life that exists for concepts which never get developed.

Once you have the thread of an idea, how do you develop it from that point? This process is not the sole preserve of fiction writers, but these tips are for fiction.

Here are a few tips on how to take an idea from a scrap to a viable concept.

an interesting character



If your initial idea concerns an interesting character (real or imagined), consider where you might find a character like this. Does his usual situation create enough tension between what he wants and what holds him back?

out of the comfort zone



If he seems happy enough in his everyday life, not wanting for much, how could you throw him out of his comfort zone? What situation would fling everything he believes up in the air, or all his usual moral constraints into question?

develop your character



Spend time developing your character. The more time you spend building on who and what this character is, the more story ideas will flow out of the process.

a scrap of story



Similarly, if you initially think of a scrap of story, consider what characters might be involved in this type of scenario. Spend time developing these characters. The rest of the story will flow out of the kind of characters you develop and the choices they're likely to make.

Imagination isn't only for fiction. New writers of non-fiction often think they don't have to give any thought to the development of an initial idea – since it's true and “already exists”.

They couldn't be further from the truth. Non-fiction writers must give just as much thought, not just to subject matter, but to the way their subject will be handled, and how their story will be told.

readers care about people



If you are setting out to write about an issue, can you find the people whose lives will illustrate the subject? Readers care about people, not issues.

build the narrative



How will you set about gathering the anecdotes and stories which will build the narrative, which will form the backbone of your issue-driven book?

develop your story



If you are writing about a person, what is the story? A whole life is seldom exciting. Your story will be developed through selection.

choose what to write about



You might choose to write about a period in a life – the time they sailed around the world or went hiking in the Andes. Or it might be a story of dealing with depression or a child with autism.

carry the story forward



What will you include and what can be left out in order to carry this story forward?

including yourself



If you are telling someone else's story, how much of yourself will you draw in? Are you part of the story or would it simply be self-indulgent to include yourself in what is a full and dramatic tale?

6

CHARACTERS ARE PEOPLE TOO

We all remember literary characters who have meant something to us – sometimes as much as the real people in our lives.

I should know. I named my children after two of them.

What kind of characters will we follow, as they beckon us into their worlds?

characters with depth



They must feel like real people, not ciphers.

They must seem to have lives and a reality beyond the page.

characters with flaws



We don't like perfect people in life, and we hate them in books.

We want to feel that these people – who could become our friends – have the same frailties we do.

don't make them hard to forgive



Try not to give your protagonist flaws which are hard to forgive.

Don't make them cruel simply for the sake of cruelty.

Don't make them mean spirited and stingy with their time and money, when they have time and money to spare.

characters with vulnerability



Allow them to have some vulnerability.

We forgive a lot when faced with someone's vulnerable side.

We will only follow a character to the ends of the earth, if that character is a full, rounded person we can believe in.

This isn't as easy as it seems. Before you begin to write the first words, you need to do a great deal of work developing that character. In non-fiction, you will use research and perhaps memory, while fiction characters might also involve retrieving details from life, but will mostly involve an in-depth act of the imagination.

consider every aspect



Consider every aspect of your character.

Write a CV for them, which includes who they are now, their families and how they grew up.

who they are on the inside?



Look at who they are on the inside. What do they never or rarely reveal to others – about their hopes, fears, failures, deepest belief systems?

what has formed them?



What events and people in their lives have helped make them into the people they are now?

What was their influence – good or bad?

write an internal monologue



Write an internal monologue as your character. Allow your character to develop their own voice as they chat about their current preoccupations and concerns.

interview your character



Interview your character about anything you like: on subjects trivial and serious. Note also what your character speaks easily about and what he or she struggles to articulate or admit to.

Tell us a story

Readers will accept a few writing errors and instances of clunky expression, but they will not compromise on two things: they need characters they can get to know, and a story which transports them.

Let's consider what it means to tell a story.

story is not always plot-driven



Not every story is plot-driven, but that doesn't change the fact that the story must carry your readers forward, however subtly.

non-fiction elements



Non-fiction or fiction, a story requires certain elements. In non-fiction, these are developed through selection. What is the story you're telling? What do you need to include or leave out to carry this story forward

fiction elements



In fiction, you might plait together certain elements from your research, a few real-life incidents and fill in the rest with imagination.

transform your character



In every case, a character starts somewhere, faces something which transforms him in some way, and ends up in a different place – sometimes literally, but always metaphorically.

an active character



A completely passive character, who is entirely the victim of other people's devices, does not make for a satisfying story.

stakes for the character



The stakes for the character may vary: he could face financial ruin; the loss of love; his life; the destruction of the world as he knows it; his illusions, or perhaps his peace of mind or moral principles.

Why life doesn't always add up to story.

Sit next to the most boring man at the dinner party, who wants to tell you about his week. Then you'll have a practical illustration of the difference between a series of events – and story.

So how do you construct a narrative that doesn't end up being a series of disconnected events, but hangs together as a coherent story?

consider your character



Consider what your character wants or needs. Without this element, there can be no story.

your character must want



If your character wants for nothing and is living the dream – something breaks it down, or some element of it. Then he will want something again: to regain it, to seek revenge, or perhaps just to be happy again.

a trigger



There's almost always a trigger which sets a story in motion. Something happens which either causes him to want something badly, or throws an obstacle in the way of something he has always wanted.

obstacles and choices



The story consists of a series of choices made by your character in the face of the obstacles he faces.

raise the stakes



The stakes rise for the character with each obstacle faced and choice made (although they need not be objectively high).

final face off



His final face-off could pit him against human or animal, the environment, fate – but always (and sometimes only) his own demons.

a new understanding



In this conflict he could be victorious, or he could fail utterly to live up to what is expected of him, but it will always leave him changed, and with a new understanding about life.

Scenes immerse us in other lives

Studies show that our brains respond to the language of fiction in the same way as they do to the stimuli provided by real life.

This is one of most important reasons we should use scenes to tell our stories.

at the same time



Scenes make our brains light up because they allow us to understand and recognise things at the same time your character does.

show, don't tell



When you explain a series of events, you are “telling” them to us, when you allow us to experience these events, you are “showing” us, which is doubly effective.

remove the barrier



When you use scenes to tell your story, you are removing a barrier between your reader and the events described. When you explain them, readers feel they're learning of them second-hand.

show it in scenes



Tell us the character entered into a dangerous situation, managed to fend off an attacker and only just escaped ... we'll nod and yawn.

Show it in scenes and the reader will experience the situation step-by-step with your character.

keep the drama



If you simply explain what happened in a dramatic situation, you lose most of the drama.

non-fiction



Scenes have transformed non-fiction. They can bring a dull account alive and engage the emotions of the reader.

No scenes required

Writers are urged to show dramatic events through immersive scenes.

But is there an appropriate time not to write in scenes?

Certainly there is.

continuity



Sometimes we need to gloss over less interesting events, necessary for continuity but not for drama.

links



We might need a passage that links two dramatic scenes.

summing up



Several scenes could be followed by a summing up passage which shows that things continued in much the same way.

slow the pace



We might feel the need for a lyrical passage that sets a scene or slows the pace.

We know that scenes can infuse a piece of writing with drama and engage the emotions of our readers, but how do we write the best possible scene?

don't begin with explanation



Don't start by explaining where your characters are and why they're there.

throw the reader in



Throw the reader in where things are happening. We'll discover where they are as the scene moves forward.

don't let it trail away



Don't let the scene trail away with unnecessary sociabilities, like: "Goodbye. Thanks for coming. Come again soon."

close the curtains



When the fat lady has sung, close the curtains.

not solely description



Don't write scenes that consist solely of description. Vary description, action, and dialogue.

character



In every scene, a character must want something, and face something.

bring it to life



Always give us a few details to bring the context and setting to life for us.

Dialogue shows we're human

Someone once asked us whether they could write a book without dialogue.

"I don't like writing dialogue, so I avoid it wherever possible." My short answer was an unequivocal "no".

non-fiction



Even if you're writing non-fiction, a complete lack of dialogue can make for a rather stodgy read.

bring characters to life



Dialogue does so many things. It brings characters to life.

Through the things they say, and the things they don't say, we are able to form an impression of what they are comfortable with, and what they find difficult to express out loud.

character details

The way they speak also tells us a great deal about them.



What kind of images, language, expressions, do they use? What does their speech tell us about where they come from, their world view and their level of education?

narrative pace



Dialogue brightens the page and increases the pace of a narrative. It reads fast and carries us along with it.

not for plot



The worst way you can use dialogue is simply to use it to carry information that takes your plot forward: "I'm going to town right now to confront her."

Are writers of good dialogue born?

Writers who are good at dialogue have an advantage, since it is such an important ingredient for good writing. But... are you born with it, or can you learn?

**eavesdrop**

Eavesdrop – wherever you are. Take notes or record conversations to transcribe later. They will give you a sense of the cadences and rhythms of real speech.

**listen to different people**

Listen to different ages and types of people, to get a sense of the expressions, the images, their reference points.

**listen to use of language**

Listen to the way they use the vernacular, how people sound when they're excited or when they're happy.

How do they speak with a colleague and how does their dialogue change when they're with a close friend?

**read aloud**

Read your dialogue aloud. You will be able to hear whether it sounds authentic. Dialogue is similar to real speech, but differs from it.

**don't repeat yourself**

If you keep repeating yourself, your readers will die of boredom. And if you mimic the circularity of real speech, it'll be a very long book.

**mimic incoherence**

What you do want to mimic is this: people don't talk in perfect, coherent sentences.

* They stop and start again.

* They cut themselves, and each other, off and allow their words to trail away.

Give voice to your characters

A character's voice is one of the first aspects that endears them to us. It reveals something of their personality and draws us into a relationship with them. For this reason, the literary point of view you choose is one of the most important decisions you can make.

This is a complex subject, but here are a few of the most basic principles.

first person

First person (I) is the most intimate of all the points of view. We are closest to the voice and consciousness of the perspective character.

first person - limitations

First person limits you in that you can reveal only what your first person character is aware of. That very limitation makes you write better since you have to be creative in showing the feelings and reactions of other characters.

third person limited

A limited third person (He, she, it), means that, despite using the third person, you are limited, or attached, to the consciousness of one character at a time. This means you can only reveal what your character can see, hear, smell, feel, taste, and think: in short what he is aware of.

third person limited - limitations

The limitations are the same as those for first person, with the same proviso: those very limitations force you to write better.

third person vs first person vs omniscient

Third person point of view is slightly less intimate than first person, but more so than a God-like omniscient view.

It allows greater flexibility in allowing the writer to share the narration space with the character – but without losing our attachment to the character.

omniscient

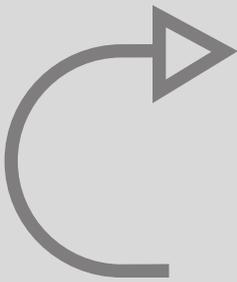
The God-like omniscient point of view, which also uses third person (He, she, it), is the hardest point of view to use well.

Since the narrator is distinct from the main character, you have to work harder to form an attachment with your reader and to reveal something of your character's voice.

Although this point of view provides fewer restrictions in what you can reveal to the reader, the challenge lies in not using that freedom to preempt your reader by explaining, lecturing or interpreting.

Let's start at the very beginning...

Let's start at the very beginning... You know your story, you've developed your characters, now you're ready to begin. But... where?



the very beginning

The "very beginning" is not always the best place to launch into your story.



infused with drama

Choose somewhere infused with drama, where things are happening. This is not always the chronological beginning.



the middle

You can start in the middle, then take us back to the start.



near the end

You can start near the end, but not at the very end. If we know how it all turned out, we have no need to go through the process.

don't explain



Don't start a book by explaining – who your character is, how they got there ... Allow us to glean these things as we go along.

Make sure you bring your readers along

People talk about suspense as though it only applies to action-filled stories and thrillers. They're wrong. Whether you're a writer of fiction or non-fiction writer, and your work is character or plot-driven, you need to draw readers through the narrative, or ... well, you won't have any, will you?



tension

Make sure your story has tension. Your character wants something and is up against something.



high stakes

The stakes must be high – for your character at least. They don't need to be objectively high. We can care as much about a child's loss of a toy dog or a man's disillusion as we do about someone threatened with death.



don't explain

Don't explain. Don't tell us who your character is, how they got there and why.



people

Drop in people's names without telling us who they are. We'll read on to discover.



references

Drop in references that we don't fully understand. It will pique our interest and encourage us to read further.

The art of literary pugilism

We once had a student who said she couldn't possibly use "conflict" in her writing, since she was a pacifist.

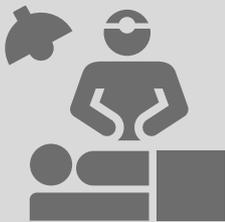
Actually ... you can't avoid conflict if you're a writer, and conflict is not always what it seems.

**what is it?**

Literary conflict is different from human conflict, which implies a fight or an argument.

**what it means**

Literary conflict means that your character is up against something – as he should be. If nothing is at stake and he's perfectly happy, there's no story.

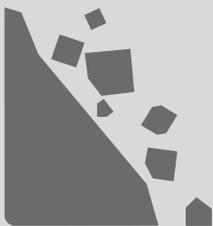
**put them through hell**

As Kurt Vonnegut said, put your character through hell. It doesn't have to be physical hell, though it can be.

obstacles

Something needs to stand in the way of his getting what he wants.

- He could be facing the full wrath of the environment: the sea, perhaps.
- Fate could have dealt him a blow: an illness or the death of a loved one.
- He could be confronting a colleague, a partner or a difficult child.
- He will always be dealing with himself: his weaknesses, frailties and inner cowardice, his inability to believe, his looming disillusion.
- He will probably not be facing them one at a time.



Writing is about telling things to people, right? What is all this fuss about "showing"? What does it mean when you're working with text?

don't begin with explanation



When you tell your reader about events, you're placing a barrier between them and what you're describing. They'll either believe you or not, but they'll want the evidence.

emotion



If you show them, they'll walk your character's path with them and feel every emotion.

drama



Showing will squeeze every drop of drama from every situation.

evidence



They will see the evidence for themselves. They'll see the closed door and draw their own conclusions. It's so much stronger than being told: He was too late.

trust your reader



Don't show your reader, then tell them as well. You don't need the belt and braces. Trust yourself to have shown them what you needed to, and trust them to get it.

scenes



You show things to readers by writing in scenes, which immerse readers in a situation.

bring it to life



You show when you use specific details instead of generic descriptors like "beautiful", "powerful" or "impressive".

character



You show when you allow your character to reveal himself through what he does and fails to do; what he says and fails to say.

dramatic writing



There are certainly times when you can tell rather than show. But the more you show, by using detail and allowing your character to reveal himself, the more dramatic your writing will be.

Description has developed a bad name. People associate it with long swathes of text in which nothing happens and there's no drama.

They are right about the long swathes, but wrong about description which has a job to do. That's why I prefer to talk about detail. I believe that details are what make writing special. How can you use it to enhance your writing?



detail has a job to do

Like everything else, detail has a job to do. Use only what you need and turf what you don't.



specific and accurate

Use specific, accurate details which allow us to enter the world we are reading about and experience it for ourselves.



not generic

Don't use generic descriptors like "shabby". Show us the details which allow us to interpret for ourselves.



we judge through details

In life, we judge people through details, whether we're aware of it or not. We draw conclusions about the kind of people they are, their mood and state of mind, based on their houses, their gardens, their dress and their gestures. You can use this to great effect in your writing.



show change through detail

Your character can notice a change in another character by an alteration in their dress or in the way they keep their house.

never neutral

Detail is never neutral. The things a character notices will also show us the kind of person they are.



revealing character

Instead of explaining to the reader how your character feels, you can use the way they view their surroundings to show us something of their state of mind.

THE JOY OF WRITING

Ray Bradbury once said, "The joy of writing has propelled me from day to day and year to year." Despite how difficult it can often seem, writing – and especially writing well - is one of the most rewarding and pleasurable things a person can do with their life, whether or not they go on to become rich and famous from it. We encourage you to pursue writing like a lover. May you enjoy every embrace.

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