



Creative Writing – Yes You Can!

John Munson



Chelsea

I taught a girl called Chelsea for GCSE English. She had very difficult home circumstances, was 'loud' and sometimes unkempt – like many other children she had to face the hard fact that she would get little out of school but eventually secured a job in a supermarket.

Unusually you might think, Chelsea enjoyed creative writing. She viewed it as a challenge that required concentration and imagination one that also stretched her ability in using words to 'paint' word pictures for the reader.

As the course progressed and I came to know her better, she told me that writing stories and poems was also a way of escaping her world and was a source of pride as she realised it was a worthwhile activity. With prompting she came to use her writing to understand a little more about other people.

Why Write?

As Chelsea realised, writing is an inherently good activity that utilises our imagination and language skills – these are not 'fixed' in our minds and writing develops both.

It also causes us to reflect on our own lives and experiences and to empathise with other people. Finally it requires concentration and self discipline - no writer became rich and famous with a blank page! There are numerous studies that show creative activity of all kinds has considerable psychological benefits that cross age, social class and academic ability demographics.

Some Common Excuses ...

- I can't spell...
- and as for grammar..... (!)
- Neither can I describe things
- And I can't rhyme words
- I've nothing interesting to say.
- I was no good at English at school and nothing's changed even though it was 'a years ago'.

Many great writers struggled because they believed one or more of the above – if you accept that writing is an inherently good thing to try then the difficulties that lie behind these excuses can be tackled.

The Writing Process

There are many writing courses available where for a fee, participants receive a manual and plan that can be followed by an aspiring writer regardless of their subject. You may find these useful but I am not a fan. No great works of literature were ever produced in this way.

But following a process helps you to organise both your ideas and time, stopping you from jumping from one aspect of your work to another. Googling 'Writing Processes' brings up several to choose from but this one has always worked for me.

1. Choosing a subject

What to write about? Tolstoy's 'Anna Karenina' was inspired by a newspaper report of only a few lines relating to a brief acquaintance; 'To Kill A Mocking Bird' by the work of Harper Lee's Father.

Keeping a 'Writers Notebook' is essential. Whatever its actual form use it to record anything that you have found interesting and that you think could provide the basis for a piece of writing. These could include: people; snippets of overheard conversations ; TV Drama storylines (could you do better?); news reports ; events from your own life - I spent lock down writing my biography for my son.

2. Thinking it through.

Choose an idea or subject that interests you and where you think that you can create believable characters and an interesting plot or relate real incidents realistically and vividly – make the reader feel as if she was there with you!

Then consider:

- The purpose of this piece of writing? Is it to entertain through telling a story; will the emphasis be on description e.g. of a favourite holiday or reflection on a happy or difficult time in your life? Do you want inform your reader as I did when writing my biography or do you want to persuade the reader of a certain course of action? Perhaps you feel strongly about something and want to write an argument.
- And who will be the audience? If it just you then you will want to be satisfied that you have done your best. Perhaps it will be friends or family who will inevitably comment on your work.
- And is the short story / piece of writing the best form to use to do justice to your subject? You may decide to write a poem or short play.

Make sure you are clear on subject, purpose and audience then.....take a leap of faith and begin!

3. Plan

This is the stage where you consider each aspect of your work carefully. How will the content be developed; is research needed; is special language required e.g. one character may use slang, another formal English.

What happens can be plotted by flow chart, spider diagram, notes – Apps for planning are now available on I phones and laptops. Personally I use bullet points with block capitals for each important point. Some writers also prepare mini biographies for each character to make them more real.

Whatever method you use has to work for you.

4. Draft

Think of this as writing your story in rough. Follow your plan but be prepared to branch out in new directions – these might be suggested by your sub conscious; a news report or a comment from family or friends.

Keep to a pattern of writing a section at a time (you determine what the section is) then reading, checking, making obvious alterations and flagging up possible future issues before moving on to the next section and repeating the pattern.

If you are physically writing, leave space on the page for notes and buy a good stock of Post Its. If you are word processing use a different colour type, capitals or bold for your notes; if you are experienced with word processing you can use the in system notes.

5. Revise

When you can honestly say that your draft is finished leave it for a week and think about something else totally different.

Then dust off your draft for revision. This is where you make it better so that you are confident it is your best work. Revision means:

- Rearranging or replacing words, sentences, paragraphs or deleting them altogether.
- Not sure about a word? Use a Dictionary or Thesaurus – these may be part of your word processing programme.
- Ask yourself: does this note in the margin or idea on a Post It from the drafting process actually improve my piece? If you can honestly say 'Yes' then include it!

When you have finished read it through several times. Does it sound as it should or are there still wrong words or sentences that don't make sense?

6. Edit

This used to be called proof reading – before IT the proofs of newspapers (large metal plates) would be read to ensure that what would appear in the newspaper actually made sense. It was a job that took concentration and that is what you must have when you edit your piece.

- Read it again, does it sound as it should?
- Are there words that jar or still seem not quite right?

When you are confident it is your best work it is finished.

Audiences.

It is up to you whether you show your piece to anyone or keep it as your private achievement. If you decide to share it with family or friends you are inviting one of two things...

- Criticism. This is easy for those who have never attempted the subject of their criticism. To misquote Shaw: 'Those who can, do; those who can't, criticise.' Don't take it to heart!
- Feedback. This is far more balanced – in the U3A Writing Group we feedback on what a member has achieved in their piece ; what we particularly enjoyed and what we felt could be improved.

Feedback or criticism – it is your decision whether you accept it as a valid comment on your piece. Be honest with yourself – do they have a point or are they wrong? If you go for the former consider how your piece can be changed; if it is the latter stand your ground!

A final word on technical issues....

I firmly believe that the act of creating something has an intrinsic value in itself. Any one who is a poor speller can still create lively and interesting writing. Any doubters should read 'South Riding', Chapter 5 where Lydia's essay is returned by her teacher Miss Masters. A lovely classroom scene!!!

However, technical issues can and should be worked at to bring about improvement. There are many web sites that suggest strategies to improve spelling and grammar – find the one that works for you.

Final advice and further reading.

The best thing that any aspiring writer can do is to read good books by good authors and engage with their ideas as well as the plot, characters and language. 'South Riding' by Winifred Holtby had such an impact on me it was partially responsible for me arriving aged 18 at Hull University!

Two books offer both good advice and a wide variety of exercises for those beginning writing to attempt. They are:

'The Creative Writing Coursebook' ed. Bell and Magrs

'The Ode Less travelled' by Stephen Fry

If anyone wants me to read their work or to discuss the above contact me on john_munson@hotmail.co.uk