

# LESSON 1 SCOPE AND NATURE OF CREATIVE WRITING

Many of us harbour a fantasy about being a creative writer, but what do we really mean by that? If we were to divide writing into two broad categories these would usually be fiction and non-fiction. Most people would consider creative writing to fall under the category of fiction, and indeed it usually does. In recent years however, a new genre of writing known as creative non-fiction has emerged in which the goal is to write a factual account which reads like fiction, but which utilises literary techniques. Creative non-fiction might be regarded as a hybrid between fiction and non-fiction.

Others would argue that many other forms of writing can be creative regardless of whether they are fiction or not. The words chosen and the way they are combined can still be creative even if the writer is simply writing down the facts of a particular incident from a news story, or writing about a new style of dress in a fashion magazine. For the purposes of this book however, our emphasis will be mainly on fiction and creative non-fiction writing.



## DEFINITIONS OF CREATIVE WRITING

It is difficult to offer an absolute definition of creative writing. Perhaps even to attempt to do so would be somewhat paradoxical. A broad definition of creative writing would be something along the lines of “an open and imaginative form of writing in which the author freely expresses their unique thoughts and feelings”. It is the focus on authenticity, imagination, and expression which separates creative writing from other forms.

In an attempt to clarify what creative writing is, Mary Lee Marksbury (Foundation of Creativity, 1963) quotes Witty and LaBrant who stated that creative writing is:

“A composition of any type of writing at any time primarily in the service of such needs as

- The need for keeping records of significant experience,

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### Suggested Tasks

Before leaving this page; write your own one sentence definition of Creative Writing; on a piece of paper. Put this paper away until the end of the course.

- The need for sharing experience with an interested group, and
- The need for free individual expression which contributes to mental and physical health.”

From this we can see that the authors emphasise how creative writing fulfils certain needs in the writer.

Creative writing is any writing that is original. This means it can include anything that did not exist before the writer created it. As such, a writer may construe an original interpretation of a well-known story, and this may still be regarded as creative writing. Although they have not generated the main story line, they have created their own take on it.

History is strewn with examples of stories which have been rewritten over the centuries. If you consider the story of Little Red Riding Hood, there are many versions of the story. It began as a folk tale before being first penned by Charles Perrault in France in the seventeenth century. Later versions include those of the German Brothers Grimm in the nineteenth century which were based upon two German interpretations of the tale. In addition, several different films have been created. Each version portrays the author's unique stance, their own expression of creativity. When re-interpreting a story one must be careful to avoid plagiarism, something which will be reviewed in detail later in this book.

Creative writing also makes use of many literary techniques which may stimulate the reader's imagination, keep them interested, enable them to connect with the characters, and stimulate their emotions. Unlike non-fiction where the emphasis is on conveying facts in a precise and comprehensible fashion,

fiction often employs abstract thoughts and concepts which encourage the reader to apply their own interpretations and make their own conclusions.

## PLOTS IN CREATIVE WRITING

There have been many attempts to classify the plots underlying creative writing. One of the first to do this was a Frenchman named Georges Polti in the nineteenth century. He studied Greek classical literature and compiled a list of thirty-six plots which he referred to as 'situations'. He claimed these situations, which included things like madness, adultery, murder, abduction, disaster, and ambition, underlay all creative writing. These situations were published as a guide for writers and dramatists.

Later, in the early twentieth century, Sir Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch, a writer and literary critic, argued that there were only seven plots based around conflicts which could be used in any story:

- Man against nature
- Man against man
- Man against himself
- Man against God
- Man against society
- Man caught in the middle
- Man and woman

Other have suggested there are ten plots, and yet others reduce these to five or even just three. This doesn't give an awful lot of scope for originality of expression and drastically reduces the

odds of producing something which is not a repeat of someone else's work.

You may question whether all plots can be explained through such simplistic rules as the ones listed above, however if you take these general headings and translocate them into the modern world, you will probably find that you are hard pushed to think of a plot that could not be explained in some way by one of these. For example:

- Avatar – man against nature, man against man, man against himself, man against god, man and woman, man caught in the middle
- 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea (Jules Verne) – man against nature, man against man, man against himself, man against society, man caught in the middle.

Using Quiller-Couch's plots above, 'God' could mean:

- Those in control
- An alien being
- A superior person.

It does not specifically have to be a deity. 'Man and woman' could be about relationships between:

- Men and women
- Men and men
- Women and women
- Family members
- Friends, and so on.

Others have argued that there are more plots than this - that the seven basic plots, or any other specific number, is an oversimplification. Whilst many beginners courses and books on the topic attempt to reduce plots down to a given number, plots are far more complex than this. They are formed on many different levels and may go off on any number of tangents. Therefore, whilst reducing plots down to a particular list of possibilities might be useful in attempting to analyse and understand the story, it does not shed much light on the direction of the plot.

## TO BE OR NOT TO BE - CREATIVE

How much originality does writing need in order to be creative? The heading of this section lends itself from Shakespeare but is it creative to play on his words or is it 'old hat' and clichéd? To some extent our perceptions of creativity are influenced by our own experiences, but they are also influenced by the views and opinions of others.

An advertising slogan that seems to be original would ordinarily be considered creative. A fiction story based upon an old classic (e.g. modern versions of 'Snow White') might also be thought of as creative, but is it as creative as the advertising slogan? Arguably it is not because it is a recreation of a familiar story rather than something entirely new.

If you take a biographical story and change parts of it to protect the names of people involved, or to make events more sensational than they really were - is this creative writing? Based upon what was discussed under definitions of creative writing we would have to conclude that it is, but we might also consider that perhaps the parts that were contrived were more creative than the rest.

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### Suggested Tasks

Think of some books or short stories that you have read and try to decide on the plots that are covered in the story. Do you think seven plots is enough?

## CHARACTERISTICS OF A CREATIVE WRITER

A question which is commonly asked of writers is “Where do they find their inspiration?” Many people are familiar with tales of writers who become hermits, withdraw from the world, and write brilliant fiction. However these are largely urban myths. Whilst some writers may prefer to limit their contact with others when they are deep in the throes of the creative process, many writers need to consistently draw inspiration from the world around them, through listening to and interacting with others, from observing nature, wildlife, and the hustle and bustle of everyday life. Sometimes a minute observation or something which comes up in a conversation can act as a catalyst to spur a writer on towards a new novel or lesson.

Some people have an inherent ability to be creative with their communication, be it written or spoken language. They have a natural talent to put their words together in a beautiful or novel way. Not too many people do though. Often, writers need to work hard at composing sentences in a way which stimulates and holds the attention of the reader. Few writers have the ability to write beautifully the first time.

Many fledgling authors hold the belief that they will be able to write an entire novel straight off without the need for amendments. More experienced authors are familiar with the reworking and perpetual editing which is required to craft a great piece of work. The old cliché of the author sitting at their desk on a typewriter with piles of paper thrown in their bin is probably a more realistic interpretation of how many writers actually work. Whilst computer

files have replaced the reams of paper for most these days, an author may rework a story or poem many times until they feel it is right. Then they may work on it some more.

*“I was working on the proof of one of my poems all the morning, and took out a comma. In the afternoon I put it back again.”*

- Oscar Wilde

With age and experience, coupled with a sense of humour and a degree of irreverence, any person from any culture may gain an inherent capacity to tell a story that will capture and hold the attention of anyone who cares to listen.

## ORAL STORYTELLING

Oral storytelling is also a creative art. There are many different oral storytelling traditions throughout the world. For example, in Australia the Aboriginal people use many stories known as dreaming stories to pass down knowledge and information about a variety of subjects such as customs, creation, and the natural world. These stories vary from region to region. Other indigenous cultures such as those of Alaska, Hawaii, and Native American Indians have their own traditional stories. Understanding narratives is a fundamental skill in literacy, and it is also a universal human activity and one that is essential in telling a good story.

Storytelling is quite simply when a person conveys events to others using images, words and sounds. Narratives and stories are used in every culture as

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### Suggested Tasks

Where do you get your inspiration for stories from?

Think carefully about where you have got your ideas from.

Then think carefully of other ways in which you could get inspiration.

The more ways we can find to give us inspiration, the more ideas we will get, so do not discount certain situations as not being “inspirational”, they may very well be.