

Creative Writing Fundamentals

Creative Writing is a very subjective discipline and mode of writing. However, there are some universal elements to consider and strengthen, no matter what genre you wish to write in. This guide will briefly go over images, voice, setting and story, which are central to any kind of Creative Writing you wish to pursue.

Images

Have you ever wondered how an author was able to make you feel as though you were stepping into a dark room, or experiencing a first kiss? They do it through images, by appealing to our five senses: sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. Much of your creative writing should appeal to images. By telling the reader what you or your character saw, heard, smelled, tasted and touched, you will make the reader feel as though they are there with you or your character.

Images help you create a world your reader can enter. Readers want to experience emotion through images. They do not just want to be told how a character feels.

Avoid abstract words and concepts like cleverness, love, irritation. Avoid generalisations and vague references like thing, beings, equipment. Avoid judgements or stated opinions such as beautiful, suspicious.

Instead, use concrete details that describe something that can be seen, heard, smelled, tasted or touched. Details are focused and specific. Significant details are specific and also suggests an abstraction, generalisation or judgment.

Let's begin with a large general category, such as "food," or "place." Then we'll narrow it down step by step, becoming more and more specific until we have a single detailed image, trying to make the final image suggest a larger, more general idea.

General category: A creature

An animal

A four-legged animal

A domestic animal

A dog

A mixed-breed Shepard

old Sammy asleep on the rug, his haunches twitching in his dream

In the final try, we can SEE this creature, and are given an idea of his age and uneasy sleep.

Ideally, your images will not only describe, but describe something significant about the scene or character.

Voice

You have a unique writing voice, just like your speaking voice is singular to you. Your word choice, arrangement of words, imagery and rhythm are unique to you and will be recognizable to others over time. The language that comes naturally to you is your voice, and there's no need to change it. Yet try to be flexible and expand your vocabulary and range of style.

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But there are other ways to think about voice, such as point of view. Let's say you want to write a short story. First, you have to consider:

Who is telling the story? Who is the narrator?

There are three points of view to choose from:

1. "I"—spoken directly from you or from a character's direct point of view.

You use 1st person when writing a nonfiction personal essay about your experience. Or when you are writing about a character and using their perspective to tell the story. 1st person allows you to express deep understanding of that character, since you are inside their thoughts. That character presents their thoughts, feelings, and judgements to the reader.

2. "You"—direct address to the reader.

Second person point of view directly addresses the reader and puts the reader into the story / poem. It's not used very often and is employed more for a special effect.

3. "she" or "he"—spoken by a narrator about a character.

Third person is the most common point of view for fiction / short story writing. This voice has the greatest range, from total objectivity to great intimacy:

--All-knowing narrator—knows everything

--Limited narrator—only goes into the mind of one character

--Objective narrator—only presenting the observable facts of an event or scene

Limited 3rd person is the most common today, taking the reader inside one character's mind and presenting action and thoughts through her / his eyes.

Character

Think about how the people you know show their 'character' to you. How can you tell when your friend is excited, nervous, unhappy, hiding a secret? You know through your senses. Let your reader get to know your character through sense details, as in life.

You can present a character (and this character can be yourself) to the reader through: image (appearance), voice (speech), action, thought, and telling (telling the reader directly how a character feels). Use concrete, significant detail: How does she walk? What does he wear? What does she carry in her purse? What does he eat and drink? What is the style of her hair? The shape of her nose?

The most important aspect of creating a character is knowing and showing what that character WANTS. Characters must not be passive observers—they must want, and they must act. What is your character's deepest desire? What can't she / he live without? What makes your character smile, worried, upset, embarrassed, sympathetic?

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Characters must be able to change throughout the course of a story, poem or essay. The action may be small, but it can signal for the reader that change has occurred. The characters who interest us are the ones who change. Think of your favourite character from a story. How did he /she change at the end?

The quickest and best way to know someone is for that person to make a significant decision. A character has the opportunity to start a job he is unqualified for. Does she take the job? A character finds out that his wife is cheating on him. Does he end the marriage? A character discovers that her boss has stolen money from the company. Does she tell the police, steal some money herself, or something else? Through a series of discovery and decision, the character reveals herself / himself.

Authors also reveal what their central character is thinking. In the moments between discovering and deciding, characters can think, and reveal aspects of themselves. As an author, you can also tell us your character's family history, intentions, beliefs, and virtues.

Setting

Setting often propels the wish to write. It shows a writer's relationship to place and time, and creates a particular place and period that is necessary to imaginative writing. Setting is part of the story, not merely scenery. Setting tells the reader about legacy and customs, identity and exclusion. The writer's choice of detail directs our understanding and experience of setting. Readers cannot experience a story unless it is set within a particular place and time. Like your voice, your take on your home, its history, climate, politics and culture, is unique and inseparable from you. Create the world you think of as familiar.

Setting involves everything that supports and affects your characters. It is the props of the world that create and sustain a character's identity. Like image and voice, create place by selecting concrete details. The reader needs to take in the setting fairly early on in a piece of writing. You can think of it as a camera, giving the reader a wide and increasingly narrower view of the scene. Begin with a wide angle, and move closer.

Example from *Abu Dhabi Days, Dubai Nights* by Jillian Schedneck

Squinting up and down Al Salam Street, I peered at the sand-coloured towers and silhouettes of cranes heat-shimmering in the distance. The architecture was mostly bland—concrete and cinder—dotted with the occasional shiny glass building. I saw nothing to mark this place as intrinsically Arabian, raised from the windswept dunes; I detected no hint of the Middle East as it existed in my imagination. Nor coral stone houses or distant domes, only Citibank and scaffolding, a Porsche dealership on the corner. I could be in any modern city.

Here, the camera angle zooms up and down the street. We can both feel as though we are there with the narrator, and also sense her disappointment, as she reveals elements of the setting alongside her own emotions.

Setting creates the mood or atmosphere of the story. Mood will contain some element of time and weather—rainy or dry, shadowy or light, winter or spring, peaceful or stormy. With colours, smells,

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and shapes—all these can frame the mood for unique action and meaning to emerge. Our relation to place is charged with emotion and judgement. Nothing happens nowhere.

There may be harmony or conflict between character and setting. Your characters may be at ease in the world around them, or uncomfortable. When the character is comfortable, the action and setting are usually static. When the character is uneasy in a setting, that is when discovery and decision can take place.

Story

Stories are about journeys—encountering the new and unfamiliar. When worlds (cultures, generations, genders, neighbourhoods) encounter each other, conflict will occur in many different ways. Conflict is the fundamental of a story. When it occurs, characters experience connection and disconnection. Characters change. By the end of a story, you will want your character to have gone through a change. Thus change occurs because the character confronts a challenging situation; their beliefs are shaken. Usually the change is small—the character widens their understanding, gains wisdom, compassion or understanding. By the end of a successful story, readers will always have their empathy enlarged.

What is an example of a story you read where characters changed by the end?

Where does your character desire?

What obstacles are in the way?

What does he /she do to defeat these hurdles? What decisions does your character make?

Does your character get what she wants?

(Sometimes the goal is reached and proves not worth it; sometimes the goal is not reached but the alternative leads to satisfaction.)

Another way to look at a story is through conflict, crisis and resolution (beginning, middle and end). Plot involves action, conflict, trouble. Writing about a wonderful time with no conflict, while a pleasant experience, would make for dull reading. Plots also involve protagonist (central character) and antagonist (character or some other force that stands in the way of the protagonist's desires). The antagonist could be the wicked stepmother or the impending tornado or a species of aliens about to take over Earth. The opposing forces of the protagonist and antagonist keep us reading. The power shifts back and forth throughout a story, leaving us wondering what will happen next, raising the stakes and intensity. Until we reach the crisis moment, when one force wins over the other.

Stories have patterns of connection and disconnection between characters. This is the source of meaning and significance in the story. For example: boy meets girl (connection), boy loses girl (disconnection), boy wins girl back (connection).

Keep these four crucial elements in mind throughout all of your Creative Writing endeavours. Best of luck!