Creative Writing Guide

Creative Writing is a subjective discipline and covers many forms. This guide is a (very) brief introduction to some key elements that are often addressed in fiction writing courses. Links to references about particular topics and creative writing as a whole are provided throughout so you can extend your learning.

As with your other academic/formal writing, it is good to try and get what you need down first: unfiltered, unhindered, imperfect. There will always be drafts and no one has to see these, so don't be afraid. You can edit! But first you need something to polish.

> In the early drafts of a piece, you are still working out what you are trying to say to yourself, and too much mental trafficking with an audience at that stage can inhibit the flow of your imagination (Clarke 488)

> The first draft is the child's draft, where you let it all pour out and then let it romp all over the place, knowing that no one is going to see it and that you can shape it later. (Lamott 528)

Elements covered in this guide include:

- Character
- Point of View
- Setting
- Showing vs Telling
- Narrative Structure

Whilst each element is addressed individually, they work in conjunction with each other and, as you will see, are often inseparable. For instance, character often drives plot, but also what you throw at your character plot-wise will show something about character.

There are excerpts from different texts throughout demonstrating specific techniques/elements. You may like to look at the different excerpts and consider how the other elements are used; for instance, looking at the examples for setting and seeing how character is also demonstrated.

Character

Character is often considered the most important aspect of creative prose writing, though this is, of course, debatable. Well-crafted characters draw a reader in and keep them engaged with the story. Readers may grow to care about them, or, alternatively, become repulsed yet keep reading because they are fascinated and keen to see the outcome. Remember, characters don't have to be likeable to be memorable or successful.

Another reason why understanding character is so important, is that character drives plot. Knowing your characters, particularly your protagonist, and how they will respond to events, interactions, and adversity is integral to engaging readers. As Heather Leach and Robert Graham suggest, 'A narrative where the characters have been squeezed into a carefully constructed plot may not be credible or satisfying for the reader, but one that is character-led has the authenticity of inevitability' (26).

When presenting a character, you might consider:

- How they speak/what they say
- How do they move? Are they comfortable in their own skin?
- What's their background/personal history? What about their family?
- What do they look like? Consider what they wear, how they style themselves – is this even a consideration for your character?
- What they do – do their actions align with what they say?
- What are their interests/occupation/goals/beliefs?
- What are their weaknesses/strengths/idiosyncrasies/habits?

Aim to use specific details rather than vague abstractions when creating your characters. This will give them credibility and help you avoid cliches and stereotypes. **Consider** the list above and think about the people you know and perhaps you can draw inspiration from them.

Main vs minor characters

Depending on the scope of your narrative, you may have a whole array of different characters, or you may only have a few. In both instances, it is likely that you will have main characters and supporting characters. Some characters will be more complex than others, some will change, and some may only play a brief but significant role in the drama; but, even with the most minor of characters you should always try to avoid stereotypes.

Main/primary characters

Your primary/main characters include your protagonist/s and should be complex and multidimensional. These characters often, though not always, develop as the plot progresses. Sometimes, though, their inability to develop or their lack of personal insight is what makes them interesting or recognisable.

Consider the following excerpt in which the protagonist and narrator is introduced to the reader in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015):

> I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces. Perhaps not surprisingly, I am also a man of two minds. I am not some misunderstood mutant from a comic book or a horror movie, although some have treated me as such. I am simply able to see any issue from both sides. Sometimes I flatter myself that this is a talent, and although it is admittedly one of a minor nature, it is perhaps also the sole talent I possess. At other times, when I reflect on how I cannot help but observe the world in such a fashion, I wonder if what I have should even be called talent. After all, a talent is something you use, not something that uses you. The talent you cannot *not* use, the talent that possesses you – that is a hazard, I must confess. But in the month when this confession begins, my way of seeing the world still seemed more of a virtue than a danger, which is how some dangers first appear. (1)

What does this short excerpt show you already about the main character?

Can you think of a main character who overall remains fairly static in their development throughout the narrative? What is the impact? Why do you think the author has done this – what are they trying to show?

Consider Anthony Burgess' infamous *A Clockwork Orange.* Compare the ending of the novel with Stanley Kubrick's film adaption and the impact this has on the portrayal of the main character and narrator, Alex. Which do you prefer? Why? What do you think the author/director was trying to say through their treatment of Alex?

Minor/Side/Secondary/Supporting characters

Whatever you call them, your supporting characters still play an important role in your narrative. They may be instrumental in furthering the plot, act as a foil or contrast to your protagonist, or enable character development. Some of these characters will be flat or static, serving as a plot device. For instance, the reader is never privy to Bertha's version of events or thoughts or feelings in *Jane Eyre*. She is used to create mystery and provide a contrast to Jane, the eponymous heroine. In the following excerpt, the reader is finally introduced to Bertha:

> In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell; it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face. (Brönte 352)

Compare this portrayal with that of Viet Thanh Nguyen's anonymous narrator.

In *Great Expectations*, although Miss Havisham appears infrequently, she is a memorable presence in the novel. When Pip, the narrator and protagonist, first meets her, he observes:

> I saw that the bride within the bridal dress had withered like the dress, and like the flowers, and had no brightness left but the brightness of her sunken eyes. I saw that the dress had been put upon the rounded figure of a young woman, and that the figure upon which it now hung loose, had shrunk to skin and bone. Once, I had been taken to see some ghastly waxwork at the Fair, representing I know not what impossible personage lying in state. Once, I had been taken to one of our old marsh churches to see a skeleton in the ashes of a rich dress, that had been dug out of a vault under the church pavement. Now, wax-work and skeleton seemed to have dark eyes that moved and looked at me. I should have cried out, if I could. (53)

Whilst, like Bertha, Miss Havisham is shown as monstrous, both in appearance and action, Dickens also shows her character to be capable of growth when towards the end of the novel she begs Pip to forgive her for her manipulation of his and Estella's relationship:

> Until you spoke to [Estella] the other day, and until I saw in you a looking-glass that showed me what I once felt myself, I did not know what I had done. What have I done! What have I done! (365)

Point of View

Who is telling your story? Is it their story or is your narrator telling the story of another? Are they even involved in the events or an omniscient presence with access to everyone's feelings and thoughts? Perhaps your narrator isn't even human but a personified force such as Death in Marcus Zusak's *The Book Thief*; or an animal like that of Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Heart of a Dog*; or an inanimate object like cocaine in James Hannaham's *Delicious Foods*. Or maybe you don't have a single narrator. For example, Jose Eduardo Agualusa's *A General Theory of Oblivion* is told from the point of view of different characters that in some way connect to the main protagonist.

First person – 'I'

- Creativity with voice
- Ultimate subjectivity
- Unreliability
- Unfiltered access to the character's thoughts/feelings (inner world)

Different narration forms

- Interior monologue
- Dramatic monologue
- Detached autobiography

Examples: James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*; Charlotte Gilman Perkins' *The Yellow Wallpaper*; Otessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*; Vladamir Nabokov's Lolita

Consider the excerpt from Tara June Winch's short story 'After the Carnage' from her collection of the same name:

> I look up and I remember a veer of redstarts and house crows, the birds leaving the slip of clear sky, sky rapidly remodelling itself in ash. I'd wondered if it was the first time I'd seen the birds of Lahore from that angle.
>
> I'm conscious, alert enough to know I'm in a hospital corridor, lying on my back still, which means either I am relatively unharmed according to the order of triage, or worse – and more likely – the hospital is understaffed and too many were hurt. A medic's blues flap past the side of my trolley and I manage to shout my wife in a way that tacks a question mark on the end. (35)

Third person – 'she', 'he', 'they'

- Limited omniscience – inside and outside of character; combines distance (can manipulate/hide aspects) and intimacy (shows the interiority of character); 'free-indirect-style'
- Omniscience – flexible as you can enter any character; authoritative
- Objective point of view – restricted to observer

Examples: Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men;* J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter series;* Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock*

Consider the excerpt from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*:

> The heart of Legolas was running under the stars of a summer night in some northern glade amid the beech-woods; Gimli was fingering gold in his mind, and wondering if it were fit to be wrought into the housing of the Lady's gift. Merry and Pippin in the middle boat were ill at ease, for Boromir sat muttering to himself, sometimes biting his nails, as if some restlessness or doubt consumed him, sometimes seizing a paddle and driving the boat close behind Aragorn's. Then Pippin, who sat in the bow looking back, caught a queer gleam in his eye, as he

> peered forward gazing at Frodo. Sam had long ago made up his mind that, though boats were maybe not as dangerous as he had been brought up to believe, they were far more uncomfortable than even he had imagined. He was cramped and miserable, having nothing to do but stare at the winter-lands crawling by and the grey water on either side of him. Even when the paddles were in use they did not trust Sam with one. (382)

Second person – 'you'

- Can be met with resistance from the reader
- Hard to sustain over a long narrative, more commonly used in shorter forms
- Used to convey universality

Examples: Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler;* James McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City*

Consider the excerpt from Han Kang's *Human Acts:*

> Your childhood visits to her home inevitably included a quiet "follow me" as the elderly woman, her back bent into the shape of the letter ㄱ, led the way to the dark room that was used as a pantry. Then, you knew, she would open the larder door and bring out the cakes that were stored there to use as ceremonial offerings on the anniversary of a relative's death: pastries made from oil and honey, and block-shaped cakes of pounded glutinous rice. You would take an oil-and-honey pastry with a conspiratorial grin, and your grandmother would smile back at you, her eyes creasing into slits. Her death was as quiet and understated as she herself had been. (24)

Multiple perspective

- Switch allegiance
- Can present the same situation differently
- May be more effective in longer narratives where the author has room to develop the different perspectives/nuanced perspective
- Shifting third person/mix of first, third, second

Examples: Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*; Han Kang's *The Vegetarian;* Jackie Kay's *The Trumpet;* Lauren Groff's *Fates and Furies;* Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*

Consider these excerpts from the two main characters in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl:*

Nick Dunne

> When I think of my wife, I always think of her head. The shape of it, to begin with. The very first time I saw her, it was the back of the head I saw, and there was something lovely about it, the angles of it. Like a shiny, hard corn kernel or a riverbed fossil. She had what the Victorians would call a finely shaped head. You could imagine the skull quite easily. (3)

Amy Dunne – Diary entry

> Tra and la! I am smiling a big adopted-orphan smile as I write this. I am embarrassed at how happy I am, like some Technicolor comic of a teenage girl talking on the phone with my hair in a ponytail, the bubble above my head saying: I met a boy! But I did. This is a technical, empirical truth. I met a boy, a great, gorgeous dude, a funny, cool-ass guy. Let me set the scene, because it deserves setting for posterity (no, please, I'm not that far gone, posterity! feh). But still. It's not New Year's, but still very much the new year. It's winter: early dark, freezing cold. (11)

Linda Anderson gives a comprehensive overview of the different types of point of view in her book *Creative Writing: A Workbook with Readings.*

Impact of choosing a specific point of view

Consider and **compare** the following excerpt from Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* depicting the author's reimagining of 'Bertha' with that of Bronte's *Jane Eyre* in the character section:

> In this room I wake early and lie shivering for it is very cold. At last Grace Poole, the woman who looks after me, lights a fire with paper and sticks and lumps of coal. She kneels to blow it with bellows. The paper shrivels, the sticks crackle and spit, the coal smoulders and glowers. In the end flames shoot up and they are beautiful. I get out of bed and go close to watch them and to wonder why I have been brought here. For what reason? There must be a reason. What is it that I must do? When I first came I thought it would be for a day, two days, a week perhaps. I thought that when I saw him and spoke to him I would be wise as serpents, harmless as doves. "I give you all I have freely," I would say, "and I will not trouble you again if you will let me go." But he never came. (Rhys 116)

Setting

Julia Casterton describes setting as the 'spirit of the place' where the writer gives 'life and breath to descriptions of places' (15). Setting is not merely the landscape but the social and cultural details of place (15). When your story is set may play as significant a role as where in the details you include. Is it set in the past? Future? Present? Is the place you are writing about real or invented?

Setting also influences the mood or atmosphere of a story. Mood will contain some element of time and weather—rainy or dry, shadowy or light, winter or spring, peaceful or stormy, night or day, twilight or morning. With colours, smells, 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.

You can also use setting to show character. Where do they live? What do they own? How does your character move through and interact with their surroundings? This interaction can be used to reveal much about the character's emotional state. Perhaps the feel of the setting is in stark contrast with the way your character feels – what impact does that have on what they say, the way they behave, how the plot unfolds?

When developing your setting, **consider**:

- Social context
- Cultural context
- Weather/season
- Geographical setting – e.g., urban, rural, suburban, a particular country or city
- Time: historical context/length of time over which the story unfolds
- Sensory detail: sight, smell, sound, feel
- Mood – how is this impacted by setting?

Beware! Too much detail can overwhelm and what you want to emphasise can get lost. Too vague or too familiar and it can be boring.

Consider the following passages. One is from Philip K Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* The other is from Murata's *Convenience Store Woman*. They both appear at the beginning of the novels and are both about seemingly ordinary experiences. Experiences you have probably had yourself – travelling to work and working – but they tell the reader something significant about the story through setting. Take note of how point of view is used here too – what effect does it have?

1. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*

> The morning air, spilling over with radioactive motes, grey and sun-beclouding, belched about him, haunting his nose; he sniffed involuntarily the taint of death. Well, that was too strong a description for it, he decided as he made his way to the particular plot of sod which he owned along with the unduly large apartment below. The legacy of World War Terminus had diminished in potency; those who could not survive the dust had passed into oblivion years ago, and the dust, weaker now and confronting the strong survivors, only deranged minds and genetic properties. Despite his lead codpiece, the dust – undoubtedly – filtered in and at him, brought him daily, so long as he failed to emigrate, its little load of befouling filth. (Dick 8)

2. *Convenience Store Woman*

> A convenience store is a world of sound. From the tinkle of the door chime to the voices of TV celebrities advertising new products over the in-store cable network, to the calls of the store workers, the beeps of the bar code scanner, the rustle of customers picking up items and placing them in baskets, and the clacking of heels around the store. It all blends into the convenience store sound that ceaselessly caresses my eardrums. (Murata 1)

Showing vs Telling

Despite the phrase 'show don't tell', both showing and telling have their uses, and, as we will see, are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Indeed, as Wayne C. Booth suggests, 'Everything [the author] *shows* serves to *tell*; the line between showing and telling is always to some degree an arbitrary one' (20). But what are the differences between the two?

To put it simply, telling summarises and showing dramatizes. Keep in mind that showing will tend to slow the narrative down. Therefore, carefully detailing how your character opened the door to the kitchen may not be necessary unless there is something or someone significant on the other side of the door and you want to create suspense. Or by describing in minute detail the type of doorknob they are turning you are trying to show something about the character. Perhaps they are a doorknob aficionado, and this is a particularly rare doorknob. Or they are fastidiously clean and notice every smudge and speck of dust and decide to open the door using their jumper sleeve because it's too dirty and thus offend the person who lives in the house who is also the person they are in love with, which results in a huge argument or maybe even murder! Thus, opening the door, in this case, has a huge impact on how the story unfolds, or in other words, the plot/narrative structure.

Don't worry too much about whether you are showing or telling when you are trying to get a draft down. However, when you come to review your work, you may like to ask yourself: 'which is more immediately engaging – to witness an event for yourself or to be told about it afterwards by someone else?' (Clarke 488) And this, of course, depends on the event and on word limit/form. In other words, are you writing an epic novel or a piece of micro-fiction?

Telling – summarises

Consider the excerpt from Izumi Suzuki's **short story** 'Women and Women' (1977), the opening story of her collection *Terminal Boredom* (2021):

> Long ago, the Earth was peopled only by women. They lived in peace until one day a certain woman gave birth to a child unlike any that had come before: its body was misshapen, it was rough and careless in everything it did, and it made a great deal of trouble for everyone before it produced a few offspring and then died. Such was the advent of man. (2)

Showing – dramatizes

Consider the opening excerpt from Tony Birch's **novel** *The White Girl*:

> Odette Brown rose with the sun, as she did each morning. She eased out of the single bed she shared with her twelve-year-old granddaughter, Cecily Anne, who went by the name of Sissy. Wrapping herself in a heavy dressing gown to guard against the cold, Odette closed the bedroom door behind her and went into the kitchen. She put a lit match to the wood chips and strips of old newspaper in the stove. She then fetched the iron kettle and made her way out into the yard, filling it with cold water from the tap above the gully-trap. As she leaned forward Odette felt an unfamiliar twinge above her left hip. She placed the kettle on the ground and clutched at her side, breathing in and out until the pain gradually subsided. (1)

Compare the showing and telling excerpts from Suzuki's and Birch's work. Each excerpt belongs to the opening of the story. How do they differ? What is the impact? Note the form of each.

Consider the excerpt from Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*:

> My name is Mary Katherine Blackwood. I am eighteen years old, and I live with my sister Constance. I have often thought that with any luck at all I could have been born a werewolf, because the two middle fingers on both my hands are the same length, but I have had to be content with what I had. I dislike washing myself, and

> dogs, and noise. I like my sister Constance, and Richard Plantagenet, and Amanita phalloides, the death-cup mushroom. Everyone else in my family is dead. (Jackson 1)

What is this passage doing? On the surface the character is **telling** us (the reader) a series of facts about herself. But through this list is the author **showing** us something about Mary's character?

Narrative structure/ Plot

David Lodge notes, 'The structure of a narrative is like the framework of girders that holds up a modern high-rise building: you can't see it, but it determines the edifice's shape and character' (216). Simply put, the plot is what happens in a story and how those events are organised. A basic plot structure is a straightforward narrative with a beginning, middle and end, tracking the main character's journey and transformation as they face challenges and adversity, and emerge victorious. But 'basic' doesn't have to mean predictable or boring.

Consider the TV show *Breaking Bad* or another book/movie/show that appeals to you and tracks the development of its main character. How does it adhere to this narrative structure? What does it do differently? What was the impact of these choices on your reception of the story?

How you present your story to the reader, the choices you make about elements such as character, style, setting, description all influence the plot and impact the reader's understanding and reception of the narrative. For instance, you might take the 'basic' plot structure, often referred to as 'The Hero's Journey', and subvert it. What does 'victory and transformation' mean for your character? Are the challenges they face physical or emotional or both? After all, as Linda Anderson suggests drama or 'dramatic action' does not necessarily refer to 'high adventure [such as] gunfights or thrilling battles, but to a movement which may be just a transition in time or a change in emotional state' (140).

Keeping in mind the concept of 'dramatic action', **consider** and **compare** these two passages:

The Talented Mr Ripley:

> Tom glanced behind him and saw the man coming out of the Green Cage, heading this way. Tom walked faster. There was no doubt that the man was after him. Tom had noticed him five minutes ago, eyeing him carefully from a table, as if he weren't quite sure, but almost. He had looked sure enough for Tom to down his drink in a hurry, pay and get out. (Highsmith 1)

Self-Portrait in Green:

> Ivan is sitting across the table from her, and Jenny conceals her lostness behind a pathetic smile, all the while thinking: How he's aged. And she knows perfectly well that he's looking at her and thinking: How she's aged. And then, Jenny tells herself, Ivan can look at the boys that surround them, who are the picture of perfectly successful human beings, and muse that it's worth growing older to revel in that perfection, that success; but for Jenny, where can she look to find this delight in growing older? Where can she look? (NDiaye 45)

Aside from the basic plot structure previously mentioned, there are many ways to tell your story. Your story may be set around a theme or a place and split between different characters, such as Rebekah Clarkson's *Barking Dogs* (2017), Berndanie Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) and Carol Lefevre's *Murmurations* (2020). You might avoid a happy or closed ending, leaving your readers to debate the fate of your protagonist, such as that of Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* nameless narrator.

Time is a significant consideration that might impact your structure. When does your story start? When does it end? Is it linear? Or does it chop and change from past to present? Or jump into the future? For instance, Kurt Vonnegurt's *Slaughterhouse 5* uses a non-chronological narrative structure devised of short vignettes to reflect his character's state of mind. This structure is highlighted early on with this passage:

> LISTEN:
> BILLY PILGRIM has come unstuck in time. Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day. He has walked through a door in 1955 and come out another one in 1941. He has gone back through that door to find himself in 1963. He has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all the events in between.
> He says (17).

An excellent resource for learning about different types of plot/narrative structures is Loren Niemi's book *The New Book of Plots: Constructing Engaging Narratives for Oral and Written Storytelling* (2012). He presents 9 different plot types: straight; meta-framed; parallel; regression; list; circular; reversal; digression; and revelation. Exploring the conventions of these narrative structures may be illuminating. Sometimes placing parameters on your work can be helpful – it can take you in new and unexpected directions – or you may wish to challenge or push against them.

But remember, you don't have to follow a particular structure. As Anderson suggests: 'Character + conflict = plot' (84). Some people carefully plan out the structure of their story,

whilst others like to see where their characters take them and how they influence the sequence of events. There is no right way. What works for one person may leave another stuck. Or an approach that worked for one story, may not for another.

The End…

As was mentioned in the introduction, this has been an incredibly brief guide to creative writing. Examples from a variety of authors have been used to demonstrate the techniques discussed and to inspire your own writing/thinking. Reading widely exposes you to different techniques and ideas. It also enables you to work out what you like and dislike. But even if there is something you don't like, it's important to try and critically consider why you have reacted in this way – did the intended effect fail or seem obvious? Or did it make you feel uncomfortable for another reason? That reason might be worth exploring to inform your own writing.

Remember that writing takes practice. And redrafting. And editing. A lot of editing. Good writing doesn't happen on its own or come out perfectly formed. It's often messy and chaotic and frustrating, but when the parts start to come together to make a thing, whatever that may be, it is also incredibly rewarding.

> Talk all you want about planning; the truth is we discover our writing by writing…Out of a process itself chaotic – the thinking of thoughts and the embarkation upon one's sentences – a writer discovers what it is she's really trying to say and how she needs to hang it together. (Tredinnick 224)

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