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national association of writers in education

Creative Writing
Subject Benchmark
Statement

Creative
Writing
Research
Benchmark Statement

National Association of Writers in Education

Subject Association

As the Subject Association for Creative Writing, NAWE's aim is to further knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of Creative Writing and to support good practice in its teaching and learning at all levels.

NAWE promotes the recognition of Creative Writing as both a distinct discipline and an essential element in education generally.

NAWE fosters the discussion of methods of teaching Creative Writing of all genres, through conferences, publications and online resources.

NAWE was founded in 1987, ahead of the massive expansion of writing courses in Higher Education. Its members have been actively involved not only in that movement but also in establishing a creative agenda in schools.

NAWE describes education in the very broadest sense and its work therefore embraces the many less formal arenas of learning and professional development. Most importantly, NAWE aims to connect all these arenas.

In addition to its role in responding to national issues, NAWE also links the UK with similar associations overseas.

Subject Definition

Creative Writing is the study of writing (including poetry, fiction, drama and creative non-fiction) and its contexts through creative production and reflection on process. By writing, we mean not only books and other printed materials, but also scripted and unscripted performances, oral and recorded outputs, and the variety of forms possible in electronic, digital and other new media. Creative Writing can use any form or genre of writing as an exemplary subject of study, but the productions of Creative Writing tend not to be informational, but imaginative interpretations of the world that invite the complex participation of the audience or reader.

Subject Statements

We are pleased to publish here, in draft form, two new statements that aim to provide useful descriptions of how the subject is taught and researched.

A Subject Benchmark for Creative Writing
National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE)
Higher Education Committee
September 2008

[Note: We have consulted and where appropriate borrowed from the Benchmark statements for Art and Design (AD), Dance, Drama and Performance (DDP), and English (EN), and the AWP (AWP) Hallmarks.(1)]

Introduction

This document provides guidelines for those introducing, developing or revalidating Higher Education programmes consisting of or including Creative Writing. We acknowledge that Creative Writing can occur in a wide variety of contexts for a wide variety of purposes. Our aim is to celebrate this diversity, while at the same time giving a clear indication of the kinds of activity, creativity, knowledge, understanding, skills and methods of learning appropriate to the field of study. It is not our intention to lay down boundaries or prescribe curriculum for the field.

The practice and conceptual bases of Creative Writing are characterized by a body of subject knowledge, interacting with changing social, political and artistic values and practices; it is the dynamic nature of these cultural practices and their frequently contested nature that sustains the vitality of the subject. Those teaching and studying Creative Writing will not only be aware of these practices, but should be prepared to impact upon and change them. [DDP]

Our aim is to provide a benchmark applicable to a Single Honours undergraduate Creative Writing programme. By defining Creative Writing as a self-contained and self-justified subject, we also offer indications as to how it might be introduced or incorporated as a minor, joint or major part of an Honours programme.

1. Defining Principles

1.1 An undergraduate programme should:

- engage students with a culturally and historically broad range of writing styles, forms and genres in order that they become sophisticated readers both of existing texts and of their own work;
- enable students to adopt a wide range of reading strategies, applied to

their own work and the work of others, and to understand the audiences' contribution to the writing process;

- develop students' ability to contextualize their own work within the writing traditions that precede and surround them;
- introduce students to speculative and reflective approaches to writing and reading;
- encourage students to expand their thinking about the possibilities and challenges of writing (for example, aesthetic, cultural, or political);
- support students in the development of their own writing, and develop their confidence through a critical, technical and creative understanding of the subject/craft/art and of their own creative process;
- support students in developing strategies for self-expression which may draw on their own experience;
- develop an understanding of the processes of writing, including a consideration of audiences;
- foster students' creative/artistic ambitions and support them in achieving their aspirations, offering direction and advice where necessary;
- encourage students to recognize the skills they develop through the course, and help them identify career opportunities to use those skills.

1.2 The study of Creative Writing as an academic discipline develops a range of cognitive abilities related to the aesthetic, moral, ethical and social contexts of human experience. The capacity to see the world from different perspectives is intrinsically worthwhile as a personal life skill, and engagement in the study of Creative Writing therefore also involves a commitment to improving the quality of one's own and others' cultural experiences. Creative Writing encourages divergent forms of thinking, where the notion of being 'correct' gives way to broader issues of value. [AD]

2. Nature and Scope of Subject

2.1 The practice of Creative Writing, an endeavour that speculates upon and challenges its own nature and purpose, frequently demands high levels of self-motivation, intellectual curiosity, imagination, and divergent thinking skills. Students learn to recognize the interactive relationship between media and processes, between ideas and issues, and between producer, mediator and audience. A Creative Writing student should be able to position the individual's practice and output within an appropriate critical discourse and contextual framework. [AD]

2.2 While the focus of a Creative Writing degree will usually be the development and production of scripted material, it is not limited to any

particular creative output and can include, for example, film, illustrative, graphic and aural forms.

2.3 For some genres, it is likely that there will be overlap with Literature programmes in the necessary engagement with existing writing. However, the emphasis will be on the development of the student's own writing and reflection upon it in its context, rather than a purely critical/theoretical response to existing writing.

2.4 It is likely that there will also be some overlap with Journalism or Professional Writing programmes, especially in the areas of feature writing, life writing and creative non-fiction. All these subjects share an emphasis on the importance of the technical skills of writing, but it is likely that Creative Writing programmes will attend more closely to imaginative writing practice.

2.5 A Creative Writing degree is not primarily vocational but provides a broad education centred on the study and practice of writing creatively.

2.6 A Creative Writing course does not uncritically privilege one or other genre or style of writing (e.g. 'literary fiction').

2.7 A Creative Writing degree develops:

- robust artistic practices;
- the capacity to be creative;
- an aesthetic sensibility;
- intellectual enquiry;
- the ability to apply the above to the production of the student's own textual material (either written or in other forms);
- skills in team working;
- an appreciation of diversity;
- the ability to conduct research in a variety of modes;
- the ability to reflect on one's own learning and development;
- the capacity to work independently, determining one's own future learning needs. [AD]

3. Subject Knowledge and Skills

3.1 A Creative Writing Course provides students with:

- an understanding of the creative process, and theory relating to it;
- critical awareness – the ability both to contextualize writing within a given

historical/cultural/stylistic framework, and to reflect constructively on the student's own process and product. The student will similarly be able to analyse and discuss the work and process of other writers, including giving (and receiving) constructive feedback;

- technical skill – students need to become proficient in writing, and in managing their writing projects, and develop the ability to write for different audiences, and in different registers, styles, formats and media;
- the ability to be independent and self-motivated, and to collaborate in group work; to develop their own creative material and to work to a given brief; and to be analytical of their own writing and process;
- an awareness of writing and publishing contexts, opportunities and audiences in the wider world;
- the knowledge and confidence to experiment and challenge conventions, but also a full and critical knowledge of those conventions. It should also enable students to approach writing briefs creatively, and provide them with strategies to turn restrictions of length or content to their advantage;
- the ability and confidence, at advanced level, to view themselves as practitioners and to take their work as far as possible towards realization in the world outside the course.

3.2 Typically, holders of an honours degree in Creative Writing will have demonstrated the following:

- artistic engagement – students will have the ability to produce artistically coherent, original and technically sophisticated creative work;
- skills in communication and presentation - students will be able to:
    - articulate complex ideas and information comprehensibly in oral, written and (where appropriate) visual forms;
    - present ideas and work to audiences in a range of situations;
    - use the views of others in the development or enhancement of their work;
- self-management - students will have the ability to:
    - study independently, set goals, manage their own workloads and meet deadlines;
    - anticipate and accommodate change, and work within contexts of ambiguity, uncertainty and unfamiliarity;
- critical engagement - students will have the ability to:
    - analyse information and experiences, formulate independent judgements, and articulate reasoned arguments through reflection, review and evaluation;
    - source and research relevant material, assimilating and articulating relevant findings;

- formulate reasoned responses to the critical judgements of others;
- identify personal strengths and needs, and reflect on personal development;
- group/team working and social skills - students will have the ability to interact effectively with others, for example through collaboration, collective endeavour and negotiation;
- information skills - students will have the ability to:
  - source, navigate, select, retrieve, evaluate, manipulate and manage information from a variety of sources;
  - select and employ communication and information technologies;
- personal qualities - students will have an enthusiasm for enquiry into their discipline and the motivation to sustain it. They will be confident and adaptable. [AD]

3.3 A Creative Writing graduate should:

- understand the creative process and the body of written works that surrounds it;
- have developed strategies to draw upon and record their personal experience and research, and to synthesize these in an imaginative form;
- write creatively with confidence and technical ability, and with an awareness of tone, structure, genre, audience;
- effectively communicate concrete ideas, abstract concepts, and information using the written word, but not excluding other media;
- have developed a deep understanding from their own reading and practice in order to discuss the key elements of different forms of writing, such as issues of genre, narrative structure, point of view, technical features (script formatting, for instance);
- understand the contexts within which creative writing is (and, where appropriate, has been) produced and consumed, including the publishing and bookselling industries, technical innovation in production, marketing and distribution of texts, copyright ownership issues. This should include a sense of the historical and cultural developments of such contexts.

4. Teaching, Learning and Assessment

4.1 Creative Writing is in essence a developmental subject where the successful student is required to be an active participant in their own learning. Fully to achieve the outcomes of a Creative Writing course, techniques and knowledge must be personalized, internalized and re-expressed.

4.2 This developmental nature demands teaching which is informed and authoritative, but which also allows full scope for student participation and expression. Historically, Creative Writing tutors have come from a wide variety of backgrounds, ranging from the academic qualified in another subject, through academics who have qualified by way of a Creative Writing degree programme (at Masters or doctoral level), to practitioners who may not have any formal academic qualifications. While this variety of backgrounds reflects the wide range of Creative Writing as a discipline, and while there is no hard and fast rule about what makes the best Creative Writing tutor, the trend now is towards those who have a higher degree in Creative Writing or cognate subject, or who have experience of Creative Writing as an academic discipline.

4.3 Workshops

4.3.1 The teaching and learning of Creative Writing may involve a wide variety of methods and styles, but will tend to be based primarily around the workshop. The group size for effective workshops is important, the recommended optimum for undergraduate courses being 15. (2) Experience has shown that at postgraduate level the optimum size is considerably smaller.

4.3.2 There are various ways in which workshops operate. In one model students might be asked to write something in a limited time within the workshop, which then might be 'shared' with the group. Or, students might be invited to bring work in, to be read or acted out, and then commented upon. In some cases they may be asked to submit work in advance so that it can be duplicated and distributed before the workshop, and people have time to look at it carefully and make written comments. Other workshops (sometimes termed seminars) might deal with exemplary writing.

4.4 Other teaching strategies

4.4.1 Beyond the workshop, a wide range of teaching methods and styles will be utilized, including:

- formal lectures, covering contextual/historical/cultural material, technical aspects of writing, guest speakers and readings;
- small group work, for close reading and editorial/peer feedback, planning discussions, and project work;
- small group tutorials;
- individual tutorials (the importance of individual attention to creative

writing students should not be underestimated);

- self directed learning;
- mentoring of projects and other work by industry specialists;
- off campus visits – theatre, performance poetry, readings, talks, galleries or festivals.

4.4.2 There will necessarily be an emphasis on revision. Creative writing courses are by definition writing-intensive, and they emphasize revision of successive drafts in response to feedback from peers and comments by tutors. [AWP]

4.4.3 In addition, it is important that students have the opportunity to work and experiment with non-scripted forms, and those with which they may be unfamiliar, including new media.

4.4.4 It is also important that creative writing students are continually encouraged to extend their reading, and this should be reflected in both teaching and individual assessments.

4.5 Assessment

4.5.1 The most common form of assessment is the creative piece (or pieces, in portfolio), produced to a specific brief. With creative work, assessment is based on how far a student has understood the brief (for example, the genre, audience, conventions), defined a task, and then carried out that task. It is therefore normal practice that, in addition to producing a piece or pieces of writing for assessment, students will also write an accompanying critical, reflective or contextualizing piece. Recent research in the UK reveals a wide variety of names and forms for these non-creative elements, including reflection, response, self-assessment, critique, commentary, journal, poetics, critical commentary, self-reflective essay, and critical preface. (3)

4.5.2 Assessment in a CW course should be geared to the intended outcomes of each particular element or module. This will normally indicate a variety of assessment items and tasks, rather than a flat pattern where students are asked to do the same kind of task over and over again (e.g. 'Creative Folder plus Critical Commentary'). Other options might include:

- the formal essay, which may discuss existing writing in terms of textual analysis (for example, close reading, or in terms of structure/technical elements) or contextual issues (audience, or critical responses). Such essays may also look beyond individual texts/genres to consider industry

practice, prizes and festivals, regional writing, literary criticism and theory;
- a response to the creative work, articulating ideas or actions contained in that work, in an alternative discourse;
- research portfolio: including items such as location notes, step outline, character studies;
- sample and treatment as per publisher's submission;
- the writer's journal, which may be an account of the development of the creative work, including sources, influences, revision and editing choices;
- individual and group presentations, either formal or informal;
- the group project, which may result in a single text (writing, or for example film), but which is likely to require the recognition and exploitation of a range of skills and abilities, effective team management and the use of other valuable 'transferable' skills (time management, project management and planning, for example). Such projects might include the publication of a magazine or setting up a website, organizing an event, or carrying out a substantial research project. There may similarly be individual projects requiring a similar skill set. In each case, as with the creative work, a critical reflection would normally accompany any submission.

The authors of this Benchmark note that this document may be revised as appropriate.

NOTES:

(1) Subject benchmark statements can be found as follows:
Art and Design:
<www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/honours/artanddesign.asp>
Dance, drama and performance:
<www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/honours/dance.asp>
English:
<www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/honours/english.asp>
The AWP Hallmarks can be found at
<www.awpwriter.org/membership/dh_2.htm>
(2) Siobhán Holland, *Creative Writing: A Good Practice Guide*, 2003, available at
<www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/archive/publications/reports/cwguide.pdf>
(3) Robert Sheppard and Scott Thurston, *Supplementary Discourses in Creative Writing Teaching at Higher Education Level*, available at
<www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/archive/projects/reports/supdisc_cwrit.doc>

Creative Writing Research Benchmark Statement
National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE)
Higher Education Committee
October 2008

Introduction

This Research Benchmark provides guidelines for what constitutes research in the discipline of Creative Writing (see Subject Definition, p2). It offers a reference point for those who assess research proposals and research outputs in Creative Writing, and it provides a guide for those developing research degrees in Creative Writing.

The most common mode of Creative Writing research is that of creative practice, which is often referred to as 'practice-led research'. Varieties of critical research are also undertaken. Practice-led research in Creative Writing uses creative practice to explore, articulate and investigate. The range of explorations and articulations is as broad as the range of possible subjects, emotions and ideals prevalent in the world. However, the simple definition is: that the creative writer will undertake this research through the act of creating; that they will invest knowledge and understanding into this practice, and that they will develop their knowledge and understanding through their practice. The results of this practice-led research will demonstrate this knowledge and understanding.

Practice-led research is not research without critical understanding. Rather, it is research in which the act of practice is central and in which critical or theoretical understanding is contained within, and/or stimulated by, that practice. Some results of practice-led research can include critical works, and these can be connected to, or stand relatively free from, the practice that informs them.

1. Defining Principles

1.1 The general definition of research in Higher Education is that of an 'original contribution to knowledge'. The same definition applies to research in the discipline of Creative Writing, when located in universities.

1.2 Knowledge in Creative Writing may be thought of as incorporating a practical skill and critical or theoretical knowledge that underpins and supports that Creative Writing practice.

1.3 In some cases in Higher Education, pedagogic knowledge in Creative Writing will also be relevant, because the creative writer may draw on their engagement with environments of learning.

1.4 The process of acquiring knowledge in the discipline of Creative Writing is often synthetic and holistic and highlights an active interrelation between the two.

1.5 The significance of Creative Writing research takes account of the configuration, intention and success of the work as it reaches its audience.

1.6 The process of Creative Writing may be seen as a form of 'speculative' research that is then re-visited and tested through redrafting, reconsideration, and revision as the author explores their own text as its predicted reader.

2. Nature and Scope of Creative Writing Research

2.1 Many aspects of research carried out by creative writers can be seen as formal preparatory work that would be familiar to other academic disciplines.

2.2 Although Creative Writing uses 'factual' knowledge, it is not primarily a vehicle for such knowledge, but a synthesizing process that brings about both knowledge and emotional awareness through imaginative simulation of experience.

2.3 Creative writers often draw upon their tacit knowledge of human experience and writing forms and have the essential liberty to invent what they need to create an aesthetic whole.

2.4 Creative Writing research is often kinetic, the creative writer tapping internal emotional, intellectual or psychological energy to shape their work in ways that may be difficult to predict, but are nevertheless valid as research.

2.5 Creative Writing research is an investigative and exploratory process. Of the various approaches adopted, some may be called 'situated' or action research; some reflexive; some responsive; some may result from an engagement with 'poetics'; some may adapt or adopt the investigative procedures of other disciplines, where useful.

2.6 Creative Writing Research is often tacitly (sometimes explicitly) concerned with the nature of creativity.

3. Research Methodologies

3.1 Investigations in Creative Writing include creative practice, critical or theoretical reflection, and responses to advanced reading (in the broadest sense of the word 'reading').

3.2 Creative Writing is research in its own right. All Creative Writing involves research *in* Creative Writing whereby experience is transmuted into language (and some of that experience may concern language itself).

3.3 Research *for* Creative Writing involves both research *into content* and research *into form*.

3.4 Research into content may include experiential learning, whereby creative writers put themselves in a particular situation or make an experience happen for the sake of Creative Writing, as well as source-based methods, relying upon the use of documentary evidence and artefacts in the support of imaginative writing. These broadly correspond to field work and archival research in other subjects.

3.5 The results of Creative Writing content research will appear – perhaps unobtrusively – in the finished work or works, and will not necessarily be separately part of the resultant research (as either informal working notes or formal academic essays).

3.6 Research into form may involve the search for sufficient models for the creation of a work of Creative Writing, through observing the world as a creative writer, engaging in appropriate fields of aesthetic production, and reading both historical and contemporary texts.

3.7 The various kinds of Creative Writing research are often synthesized in the finished work.

4. Research Degrees in Creative Writing

4.1 Creative Writing Masters level and Doctoral level programmes form the basis of research exchange between staff and students.

4.2 The primary research degrees in the United Kingdom are the Master of Arts (MA) and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degrees. However, other degrees are also offered, including the MRes, MSc, MFA, ArtsD, and professional doctorates in which Creative Writing may play a part.

4.3 On the world scene, the Doctor of Fine Arts (DFA) and Doctor of Creative Arts (DCA) are also noted.

4.4 Research training in Creative Writing may draw upon a range of formal investigative methods as well as awareness of the research context in Creative Writing, writing technologies, and theories of criticism, creativity and literary production.

4.5 A contextualization, reflection on, or response to the creative text forms part of the research and the final thesis. This may be a separate text or it may be an integral part of the creative work.

4.6 The contextualization, reflection or response should also add new knowledge to that area of the discipline (at M level this may be a re-evaluation or re-synthesis of existing knowledge).

4.7 In some cases a creative writer's journal or other form of output related to the process of research and textual composition may be another form of supporting evidence.

5.0 Measuring Creative Writing Research

5.1 In general terms, this involves assessing levels of creativity: in terms of content and form, execution and performance, process and product. More specifically, some of the following are highly relevant:

- the presence, or absence, of an original contribution to Creative Writing as a discipline;
- the level of inventiveness, and the qualities of authenticity and innovation evident in the process and/or results;
- the creative writer's engagement with their subject matter, formal development, and/or with genre or audience awareness;
- the degree of displayed competence with regard to the textual and/or inter-textual strategies employed;
- the fitness of research strategies that have been in place in the undertaking of the work;
- the level of effectiveness of the completed work or works.

5.2 Creative Writing can sometimes employ strategies that subvert expectation and deconstruct criteria relating to excellence; and, in doing so, raise questions about the value or quality of recognized Creative Writing forms, works or methods.

5.3 Creative Writing research is differentiated from undergraduate study, in that research requires the addition of new knowledge and the re-combination of existing knowledge into new perspectives, while undergraduate learning deals mainly with understanding, absorbing and testing the creative work against current knowledge in the discipline. In general Higher Education terms, therefore, undergraduate creative writing is more akin to 'scholarship' (where knowledge is developed and applied but does not necessarily involve new insights) and postgraduate creative writing is more akin to 'research' (where new knowledge, new insights, and new discoveries are the primary focus).

6.0 Resources

6.1 In the UK, resources include information contained on the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE) website <www.nawe.co.uk>. In the USA, evidence of the level of research engagement in the discipline can be found at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs site <www.awpwriter.org>. In Australasia, this can be found at the Australian Association of Writing Programs <www.aawp.org.au>.

6.2 These three organizations also have magazines or journals connected with them: *Writing in Education* (NAWE), *The Writers Chronicle* (AWP) and *TEXT* (AAWP). Publishers Taylor and Francis (Routledge) publish an independent, peer-reviewed, journal *New Writing: the International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*. Other journals (primarily in the Arts or in Education) occasionally publish work that links to research in the discipline of Creative Writing.

6.3 Regular national and international conferences also occur, with each of the subject associations (above) having an annual conference and a number of other conferences (some annual) occurring independently of these organizations, worldwide.

6.4 Different levels of engagement with Creative Writing research are evident, nationally and internationally, and defining the quality of a resource will, to a large extent, depend on individual users having an informed sense of what research is already occurring in the discipline. This links closely with the development, and leadership, of research-degree programmes.

Cover image: detail from Painting 453 by David Platts