

The Practice and Possibilities of Creative Writing



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WRITING AS PRACTICE

Influences are everywhere, inviting us to write, inspiring us to create something which has not been here before. It might be something from our memory, experience or imagination, something from the deepest parts of ourselves. Perhaps it will be like, or unlike, many other things already written. Perhaps it will be something which will remain.

I am not I.

*I am this one
walking beside me whom I do not see,
whom at times I manage to visit,
and whom at other times I forget;
who remains calm and silent while I talk,
and forgives, gently, when I hate,
who walks where I am not,
who will remain standing when I die.*

Juan Ramón Jiménez
translated from the Spanish by Robert Bly)

Creative writing offers freedom, an opportunity for authenticity and to break out of cliché. To find freedom, however, is first to break away from the mundane, to cut through false sentiment, to move beyond the facts.

Keeping a journal is a good practice to help you do this.



POSSIBILITIES OF THE JOURNAL

A journal is a tool for reflection, a repository for ideas, for recording experience, for holding and letting go of pain. It is wholly yours and will always be there waiting for you to begin, or to start again.

Suggestions for journal writing:

- Get down on paper - or screen - as soon as you can, all your worries - anxious thoughts which sabotage your night's sleep and ruin your days. Don't censor yourself or try to 'work it out', just record the thoughts – get them down. You don't have to keep your journal or even reread it – it is a keeper, it will hold all of this, and when you are ready, if you wish, you can let it go.
- Keep writing. Once you have recorded all the random thoughts as they surface, keep on writing, even if you think you have nothing left to say. This is the time when insights can come through, when solutions can emerge. This is the magic of writing a

journal. Your journal can be your touchstone and your daily practice.

- You don't have to have just one journal. You can have many. Use a journal to chart your writing development, plans, interests, thoughts, ideas, quotes, anecdotes, drafts.



USES OF OBSERVATION

*Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of
up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and
complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly
washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
From: *The Summer Day* (Mary Oliver)*

There are many reasons why we might feel the compulsion to write. We may have something specific in mind – a poem, a novel. Or we may write in the hope of gaining clarity or understanding. One way to find this is through observation. We might not find answers to the great questions, but we may observe some truths about the nature of things and why they are as they are.

Observe what is happening here and now, the way your body and mind respond to the everyday world. Through observation you will come to understand more about yourself and your experience.

We can observe through the senses. Through using the senses we can connect with the world around us. Observation using the senses reconnects us with our true experience, and ultimately with each other.



COME BACK TO THE SENSES

*The beauty of the trees, the softness of the air,
the fragrance of the grass, speaks to me.
The summit of the mountain, the thunder of the
sky,
the rhythm of the sea, speaks to me.
The faintness of the stars, the freshness of the
morning,
the dewdrop on the flower, speaks to me.
The strength of the fire, the taste of salmon, the
trail of the sun, and the life that never goes
away, they speak to me
And my heart soars.*

Chief Dan George (1899-1981)

We experience the world through our senses. Writing about them is a way to reconnect with the world around us. It is a way to break out of the shell of our existence and really feel again, to be authentic, to wake up.

- Make headings SEE, HEAR, TOUCH, TASTE, SMELL.
- Write a list under each heading of as many of the things as you can think of which you love to see (e.g. rainbows), hear (e.g. the wind in the trees) and so on, which are powerful or hold meaning for you. Be specific (i.e. not just 'music').
- Use this to work up an instant list poem which will provide comfort or pleasure whenever you read it.
- If a specific memory or experience comes to mind, make notes and this up later into a longer piece.
- Do this exercise often.



WRITING THE HERE AND NOW

*Lightning flashes
Sparks shower
In the blink of an eye
You have missed seeing*

Zen poem

This is the only moment we have – this is where we are, like it or not. And yet we miss so much because we are preoccupied, stressed or bored.

- Make notes on your observations of the here and now
- Remember to use all the senses and to be as specific as possible
- Record how you feel at the time you are doing this

However mundane your setting, you will have created something which will live beyond itself; you will have captured a moment in time.

- Go outside and observe the natural world in the same way.
- Take a little time to relax, breathe, meditate.
- If you like, make sketches, take photographs, collect shells or leaves, press flowers.

This is an opportunity to experience your place in nature, and to be fully aware of being alive.



SPECIAL PLACES

*I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the
shore;*

*While I stand on the roadway, or on the
pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.*

From *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, Y B Yeats (1865-1939)

This is a beautiful thing to write about and a way to make a special place live in the imagination. It will become a sanctuary, a retreat, where you will always have a 'home'.

- Imagine being in a place you love, a place where you feel happy and at peace with yourself.
- It does not need to be a 'real' place. If you are having trouble imagining, skim through a magazine or browse images online to find such a place.

- Use all the senses to describe this place, as vividly as possible, really feel it and imaginatively experience it.
- You may feel emotional if it is linked to a strong memory or a happier time. Just concentrate on the description and your feelings will come through naturally and spontaneously; there is no need to overwork them.
- Wander through a marketplace somewhere in the world, somewhere in time. Imagine the rich sensory experience.
- Find a writing place for yourself, perhaps a café. Observe what is going on around you.



JOURNEYS

Creative writing offers opportunities for journeys, real, imaginary or deeply symbolic. You can take a journey and watch the changing scenery. You can follow a river on its journey from a tiny spring to the open sea.

- Be the river
- Write in the first person
- Let the river take you on its journey

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln

went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy

bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

*I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.*

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

Langston Hughes (1901-67)



POETRY MEDICINE

When we are 'moved' by music, by art, by poetry, we realise we are not alone. Deeper even than the emotional response to a poem, is the connection with what has moved us, a recognition, perhaps, that others have felt as we do.

Through finding poetry, in good and bad times, we can find a way to interpret our experience, or to connect with another soul, and this can make all the difference.

Poetry can inspire and heal. It is a medium through which we can bring our memories and deepest feelings into form and perhaps, if we wish, to share them with others.

Deeply felt and crafted poetry, read and written, has the potential to actually change our lives, to shift us and move us forward.

*Try to keep them, poet,
those erotic visions of yours,
however few of them there are that can be stilled.*

*Put them, half-hidden, in your lines.
Try to hold them, poet,
when they come alive in your mind
at night or in the brightness of noon.*

C P Cavafy (1863-1933)



EBB AND FLOW

We may not always be happy with what we write, and what we write may not always be 'good writing'. We may feel ourselves unable to get beyond the derivative and mundane, or be able to write as well as we want to. Somehow we can't tap into the source and write insightfully, even for ourselves. We criticise ourselves and many times we give up. This is the ebb, and it can last for a long time. We may forget we ever wrote anything worth keeping, or disregard what we have written. We might question why, with social media devouring and spewing forth words with little craft or wisdom, we bother to work creatively on our writing at all?

And if we have stalled in our writing, we can look to other writers for the inspiration to continue:

*Come, come, whoever you are
Wonderer, worshipper, lover of leaving.
It doesn't matter.*

*Ours is not a caravan of despair.
Come, even if you have broken your vow
a thousand times
Come, yet again, come, come.*

Rumi (1207-73)

Like other art forms, our creative writing can live on beyond ourselves. It is memory, experience and imagination made tangible. It is a reminder. It gives back something of the life we have lived. Carefully honed and crafted, it can be our contribution, something which was not here before, something of value.

