

MODULE 25

HOW TO ENGAGE IN CREATIVE WRITING

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Module Preview

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Objectives of the Module

The objectives of the module are to;

- (a) help students discover and develop their creative instincts;
- (b) equip students with the requisite skills for creative writing; and
- (c) help build and sustain the interest of potential and budding writers.

25.1 Definition of Creative Writing

Every literate person gets involved in one form of writing or the other. However, writings fall under different descriptions and they perform different functions. This means that not all forms of writings can be categorised as creative writing. What then is creative writing? Creative writing can be defined in different ways by different people. For the purpose of this manual, it can be defined as any form of creative or imaginative writing that recreates life with the use of aesthetic language. Hence, creative writing is any form of poetic, fictional or non-fictional

writing outside the domain of academic, technical, and professional writing. Technical and professional writings include textbooks, advertisements, reports, product descriptions, encyclopaedias, dictionaries, letters, and so on. Essentially, unlike creative writing, technical writings are not meant for entertainment.

Creative writings are meant for entertainment. Examples of creative writing include poems, short stories, novels, plays, fables, etc. These are written for entertainment and enlightenment. But apart from these works of imagination, we also have creative works which are products of real life events. These include biographies and autobiographies.

25.2 Common Habits of Creative Writers

Creative writers have their peculiarities in terms of writing preferences and styles. Writers all over the world have however attested to the usefulness of the following habits in their creative writing journeys.

1. Learning from Reading

To be a good writer, you must be a voracious reader. The quality of your writing is determined to a large extent by the depth of your reading. Someone once said "writing without reading is to write in the dark: it might work, but it's an unnecessary handicap." If you are considering making writing a career, then you must be prepared to do a lot of reading. You should not just read, you must also learn from your readings. The following opinions on the importance of reading to writers will help you understand the importance of reading to writers:¹

¹ These writers' opinions are culled from the open courseware of Open University of UK via "Start Writing Fiction" on Future Learn. Available online via:

<https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/start-writing-fiction/9/todo/12396>

Louis de Bernières:

I think that if you don't read, you don't get anything out. You don't get any writing done. It's pointless wanting to be a writer if you're not a reader. I read every day in the bath till the water goes cold; that's just novels, fiction and stuff, and for research I do with my feet up on the kitchen table, you know, that sort of thing. And I do, I do a lot of reading. Through my life I've had crazes for various writers, so an awful long list now. My longest craze was for various Latin American writers which I think is very obvious from my style. Otherwise, I've had my Tolstoy craze and my Henry James craze and my Steinbeck craze and my Hermann Hesse craze you know, when I was a student and everyone was looking for the meaning of life. I had a little Jane Austen craze a couple of years ago and an Iris Murdoch one, well, I read a lot of them, and then stop and go on to something else.

Patricia Duncker:

Read everything, read all the time. Read in as catholic a way as possible. Read fiction if you're a prose fiction writer, read widely in fiction, read a lot of non-fiction, go to the theatre, read everything you can get your hands on. Because, the more you read and the more you absorb, the denser, the richer your own texts will become.

Tim Pears:

Literature is a huge world, and if you can get inside it through writing, somehow you're into the driving seat of something very special, and reading is going to be a far richer experience, and it's something that you're doing as a sort of, as a co-conspirator almost.

How do we learn from reading? You should not just read to make up the number of literary texts you have read. Ability to form opinion about what you read is important. You should have the skills necessary to be more analytical in assessing why you prefer one story, or novel, over another. The following questions should help in your self-analysis:

- How effective is the characterisation in the book I just read?
- Do the books I read make me want to read on – why or why not?
- What makes a book or passage in a book interesting or memorable?

Note that you might enjoy reading a book that in many ways you think does not quite stand out. Or you might dislike a well-written book for personal or sentimental reasons. It is important to reflect on and analyse why you form these opinions. Such reflections can be crucial to how you undertake your own writing.

2. Keeping a Writer's Notebook or Diary

Note keeping or journal keeping has often been associated with great writers all through the ages all over the world. Keeping a record of important events or the things that you have experienced can aid your writing in no small way. When you have your own 'writer's notebook' to record facts and fictions, observations from everyday life, things you find fascinating or amusing, your imaginations, and anything that comes to your mind, you are on course to becoming a writer. This practice might eventually become useful if you are considering writing a diary as a form of novel. Examples of such works as this include Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

3. Be Committed to Self Development

Reflect on what you have written. Most writers spend much time editing and redrafting drafts of their literary works. Once you have a first draft, you can rethink what you've done, improve on it and change whatever

you like. This is where you can rethink what you've done, rephrase expressions, say things differently, or clarify where necessary. This practice helps to improve one's writing. Ask yourself the following critical questions:

- Do the characters come across vividly?
- Is any of your word usage surprising? Does it help the reader to 'see' the characters?
- After looking critically at your work several times, do you think the descriptions are predictable and dull?
- Are any of the words and phrases you have used too familiar?

25.3 Editing your Writing

Editing is an important part of the creative process. A writer is simply a word for a person who writes. That is all it takes to 'qualify' as a 'writer'. However, remember, published poems, stories and novels very seldom emerge fully formed, or perfect, as if by magic. They have undergone many transformations before they reach the shelves. They are rarely, if ever, the raw expression of a writer's output. This is why you have to do much self-editing before sending your work to the publisher.

The short story writer V.S. Pritchett habitually wrote first drafts that are up to ten times the length of his final draft. This underscores the integral role that editing plays in the business of writing. A draft is just that, and can be revised several times until the moment it is ready for publication. To start writing also means to develop your faculty of self-criticism. A great part of writing creatively is knowing how, why and when you should edit your own work. This is just one of the points at which honesty enters the equation of writing. The more ruthless you can be in self-editing your own work, the better it will turn out to be.

Learn through Writing

If you don't start to write you won't write. It sounds like advice which is too obvious to repeat but many people talk a good story or book, but very

few actually begin the act. It takes courage and determination to start writing. Sometimes stories 'keep' until the right time when it is ready to be written, but too often stories can be lost by waiting unduly for the ideal moment to sit down and write them.

Remember, unlike many other kinds of work, writing is your training. A doctor trains for years before qualifying; a writer's training is the writing itself. Without writing, a person can't 'become' a writer. To say that a person has 'a great book inside them' might be true, but it isn't saying anything more than the fact that there are great stories everywhere, in everything, wherever you look, just waiting to be told. The trick is to tell them. Only that way do they ever become 'stories'. To be a good creative writer, you've got to be your own best judge; discover your art and style through persistent writing

25.4 Engaging in Writing Different Genres of Literature

The main genres of literature are poetry, drama and prose.

25.4.1 Poetry

Poetry is the creative use of words to express deep emotions in stanzas or verses.

- Poetry is written in stanzas or verses.
- Poetry makes use of many figurative expressions.
- Poetry is written by compressing words.
- Poetry uses symbols.
- Poetry is written in a metrical structure. This means that the lines of poetry follow a particular sound pattern and rhythm (sound devices like onomatopoeia, assonance, rhyme, consonance, alliteration, rhythm, etc.)
- A poem can be written in the form of a ballad, a lyric, an epic, an ode, or even free verse (see Module 23).

Depending on what your message is, you should adopt a particular mode of poetry that fits the kind of message you want to pass across. Some people adopt the sonnet mode for love poems. If you wish to write a poem of celebration, then you should make it lyrical, that is, you have to employ lots of sound devices that will enhance the musicality of the poem. Let us now examine the following vital considerations in writing a poem. This is just a guide; a writer would eventually make his decisions based on his or her own peculiar nature.

(a) Determine the goal of your poem

We know writers always pride themselves on being free to write whatever they like. It is, however, pertinent for a poet to have a general sense of direction as to the subject of his poem before he starts to write. Even when you are not sure of every word or concept you will use, it is useful to have a clear sense of direction; know what you set out to achieve before you start.

Every poem speaks. Before you put pen to paper, ask yourself what you want your poem to say, to whom you want the poem to speak, and how you want the poem to speak. Dennis G. Jerz suggests: "Do you want your poem to explore a personal experience, protest a social injustice, describe the beauty of nature, or play with language in a certain way? Once you know the goal of your poem, you can conform your writing to that goal. Take each main element in your poem and make it serve the main purpose of the poem".²

(b) Avoid undue sentiment

It is very hard to totally avoid sentimentality in writing poetry but it is possible. For a budding poet, the temptation is always there to excessively try to appeal to the emotions of pity and love. When you artificially push emotions like anger and rage without a substantive

² Dennis G. Jerz Poetry writingtips are available online via <http://jerz.setonhill.edu/writing/creative1/poetry-writing-tips-how-to-write-a-poem/>

reason within the poem itself, your poem might not be taken seriously. It is better when emotions proceed from logical reasoning. Sentimentality is “dominated by a blunt appeal to the emotions of pity and love Popular subjects are puppies, grandparents, and young lovers” (Minot 416). “When readers have the feeling that emotions like rage or indignation have been pushed artificially for their own sake, they will not take the poem seriously” (132).

Minot says that the problem with sentimentality is that it detracts from the literary quality of your work (416). If your poetry is mushy or teary-eyed, your readers may openly rebel against your effort to invoke emotional response in them. If that happens, they will stop thinking about the issues you want to raise, and will instead spend their energy trying to control their own gag reflex.³

(c) Learn to Use Words Creatively

Your ability to deploy words creatively is extremely necessary in poetry. With your words you must be able to appeal to the five senses: sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste. The following examples are culled from Jerz’s poetry prescription:

“Sunlight varnishes magnolia branches crimson” (sight)

“Vacuum cleaner’s whir and hum startles my ferret” (hearing)

“Penguins lumber to their nests” (kinesiology)

Use metaphor and simile to bring imagery and concrete words into your writing.- We have discussed metaphor and simile in the chapter on Literary appreciation , please consult it for a clearer understanding of what is being said here.

Example: “Morayo is completely a pig”

³ Same text as above.

This metaphoric phrase does not mean that that Morayo is literally a pig. Rather, it takes an abstract characteristic of a pig (filthiness) and projects it onto the person. By using metaphor to describe Morayo, the poet creates a much more vivid picture of him/her than if the poet had simply said "Morayo is a very dirty person."

(d) Your poem must communicate a theme

Poetry always has a theme. A theme is much more than a subject. A theme expresses a statement that you are making on the subject matter based on your opinion on the idea or subject..

Topic: "The Nigerian Civil War"

This might look like a theme but unfortunately, it is not. It is only a subject. It is just an event. There are no ideas, opinions, or statements about life or of wisdom contained in this sentence.

Theme: "History shows that wars always leave people worse than they were before they started.."

Herein lies theme. Not just in the event, but in a statement about an event. It reflects the opinion of the poet on the event. The poet strives to show the reader his/her theme during the entire poem, making use of literary techniques.

25.4.2 Drama

Characteristics of Drama

Drama is the imitation of real life events through action and dialogue on stage. Things you need to note when creating a play:

- Drama makes use of action.
- Drama involves the use of dialogue (conversations between characters).

- Drama is acted on stage (a platform where a drama is acted).
- Drama requires the use of costumes (articles, such as clothes, used during dramatic performances).
- Drama is written in acts and scenes (the divisions of a play).

The following are the peculiar aspects of writing drama which you should consider when writing:

(a) Creating your scene

George Abbott, the theatre and film director-producer, reduced the structure to this: "In the first act, your hero gets stuck in a tree. In the second act, you throw stones at him. In the third act, you get him out of the tree." Most dramatic works operate the same way: Somebody - our Hero - wants something - to get out of the tree - and has trouble getting it - but people are throwing rocks at him...

The first act has the task of setting up the story. It is all about our 'Somebody' and the 'Wants Something'. The act introduces most of the basic story elements - setting, period, genre, characters, themes, conflicts - and more importantly, it introduces us to the protagonist, or lead character. In most cases, we'll meet this person in his or her own world, only to soon see them jolted into action. It may be the opportunity of a lifetime - to climb a mountain, woo the person of his/her dreams, start a social network - or it may be a dilemma - escape an advancing army, reverse failing A-levels, or tend a dying spouse. This choice will send the character in pursuit of a clearly identified goal that will ask the 'story question' - the "What's this about?" - that defines the story and drives the rest of the action.

The second act is usually about the 'Has Trouble Getting It'. We follow the protagonist in pursuit of the goal, only to see them thwarted by obstacles at every turn. The effort to overcome these challenges and setbacks will force the character into new situations, ask important questions and forge new relationships. It usually ends with the failure of

the original plan of action, and often leaves the character lower than at the start of the story.

In most cases, by third act, the character has learned from the struggles in the second act, so a changed person will gather their strength for a final confrontation that will answer the story questions and bring the story to a close. It may be a battle with a dragon or a race to stop a wedding. Either way, it will force a conclusion and establish a new, if only temporary, balance in the story's world.

This approach hasn't changed greatly from that of Aristotle's *Poetics*, written close to 2,500 years ago. The Three Act Structure will be the 'scaffolding' that John Irving mentions, but the story's dimensionality will flow from the character changes, subplots and revelations that are produced by this story movement.

In recent decades, we've seen greater emphasis on the personal growth of the lead character, sometimes called 'Conversion Narrative' or 'Restorative Three-Act Structure'. In this format, the development arc of the protagonist is tied closely to the arc of the story action. Some writers liken it to the 'Hero's Journey' described in mythologist Joseph Campbell's influential work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

Others go on to describe a protagonist that must begin the story with a flaw, a defect or 'psychic wound' that needs to be corrected, healed, or redeemed before the story can end. This narrative structure can be a very satisfying aspect of many stories, providing the great emotional catharsis that Aristotle described so long ago.

(Culled from the open courseware of the University of East Anglia via future learn).

25.4.3 Prose

A prose is a story written in plain, ordinary, everyday language and divided into paragraphs and chapters or episodes. A prose may be fiction or **non-fiction**. While fiction is based on imagination, non-fiction is based on real facts. Common works of fiction include: novel, novella, short stories, fables and legends. Common examples of non-fiction include:

essay, newspaper article, biography, autobiography and memoir. The short story subgenre is described below for practical illustration:

A short story is a type of fiction that can be read in one sitting. Only a few characters are developed in a short story. Its setting, plot and actions are limited. Myths, fables, and legends are examples of short stories. In writing a short story, its five elements must come to bear: plot, setting, theme, character, and point of view.

25.5 General Elements of Creative Writing

(a) Plot

Plot is a literary term used to describe the arrangement of the events that make up a story or a play. There are five elements of plot: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution.

- The **exposition** is the part of the plot that introduces the characters and the setting of the story. Sometimes, the exposition may also introduce the conflict (the major problem) of the story.
- The **rising action** refers to the events that build up to the conflict.
- The **climax** is the point at which the conflict gets to its highest point.
- Immediately after the climax comes the **falling action**: the events begin to get resolved.
- The **resolution** is the final part of the plot. It is also known as the conclusion. It is the part where the story ends.

(b) Setting

Setting in literature is not restricted to place or location. Setting refers to the **time** and the **place** of a story. The time could be in the 1980s, 1820s, or the 21 century. The time could also be a known period in history, for instance, a story may be set during the Nigerian Civil War era or during the era of slavery. The other aspect of setting has to do with the place. A

story may be set in Africa, Umuofia, a jungle, or an ocean. Anywhere the action takes place is known as the setting.

You can use setting to achieve a number of things, including reinforcing the theme of your story and your view about life, developing your characters and create mood or atmosphere, etc. The following is an example of how Chinua Achebe creates the setting of his story.

The way into the shrine was a round hole at the side of a hill, just a little bigger than the round opening into a henhouse. Worshippers and those who came to seek knowledge from the god crawled on their belly through the hole and found themselves in a dark, endless space in the presence of Agbala. No one had ever beheld Agbala, except his priestess. But no one who had ever crawled into his awful shrine had come out without the fear of his power. His priestess stood by the sacred fire which she built in the heart of the cave and proclaimed the will of the god. (*Things Fall Apart*)

(c) Character

Character refers to the humans and non-humans that perform in a given work of literature. Animals can be characters in a story. Trees and natural phenomena can be characters in a story.

- The main character in a story or a play is known as the protagonist.
- The character that fights against the protagonist is an antagonist.
- There are types of character: round/dynamic character and flat/static character. A round or dynamic character changes with the events of the story, while a static/flat character does not.

Characterisation is very important in crafting a story. The following are methods of characterisation; you may develop a character by:

- The character's comments
- Your description of the character's actions
- Your comment about the character
- The speeches and actions of other characters

The following excerpt exemplifies how Chinua Achebe uses the third technique to develop Okonkwo's character.

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. He was called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth. It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old men agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights. (*Things Fall Apart*)

(d) Theme

The theme of a literary work is the central message or main idea of the work.

(e) Point of View

Point of view is the angle from which a story is narrated. A narrator could tell a story from the first-person point of view, the third-person point of view and the omniscient point of view. If a story is told using the first-person point of view, the narrator tells the story from his/her own standpoint and uses the first-person pronoun "I". If the third person narrative is used, the narrator is usually one of the participants in the story. The omniscient narrator is sometimes referred to as an all-knowing narrator because he sees what happens to all the characters. He gets into and reveals their thoughts and feelings.

(f) Diction

Diction refers to the choice of words used by a writer. It describes the peculiarity of an author's selection of words, phrases, and sentences. The diction of a work may be simple or complex, formal or informal, technical or ordinary.

25.6 Practical Illustration of Creating Poems and Stories

1. Sample Prose

Title: Friends

Six years ago, I [Point of View] met five friends in a holiday camp on the outskirts of Owerri [Setting]. Teju, Chima, Steve, Kachi, and Aliyu [Characters] made a huge impact in my life: they transformed my perspective about life. Prior to that time, I never attached any importance to friendship. I was careless about who became my friend. But I now know better.

I have grown to appreciate the importance of friends [Theme]. I have experienced the two sides of having friends. I have had friends who have added value to my life as much as I have had those who added nothing to my wellbeing. In times of need, I resorted to my resourceful friends like Chima and Teju. They were ready to point out my crude attitudes. They did this in love and with time I have been refined to what people now admire.

However, there is nothing worth celebrating about some of my friends. Steve, Aliyu and Kachi gloried in talking me down when I needed affirmation the most. They made me feel as though I had nothing to offer humanity. As an adult who has had both good and bad friends, I can only counsel a younger person to avoid the latter.

25.7 Exercises

1. Identify the five elements of the short story in the above passage.
2. What features make the passage prosaic?

When an idea comes to your mind, do not attempt to have a refined form of that idea. If you do, you will be discouraged by how crude your writing could be. The rule is that you first write down that rough form of your creation. Afterwards, you can then refine each word and sentence. The following is an illustration of how you can refine your raw, unprocessed idea into a beautiful piece of literature.

Sample Poem

Title: "Friends"

First draft

My friends are strong
We teach each other
When I am weak, they encourage me
They show me my mistakes

But not all my friends are like this
Some are very discouraging
They do not encourage me
Instead, they let me know how unfit I am for certain tasks
I will not encourage anyone to associate with the last kind of
friends
Which I just described

The Final draft

My friends are like iron:

We sharpen one another.

My friends are like trees:

I lean on them.

My friends are like cattle egrets:

As the egret removes ticks from the cow's body

So do my friends remove my dark spots.

But some friends are ashes:

They could quench your smouldering embers.

Some friends are blunt edges of a two-edged sword:

They never motivate you.

From such friends, flee.

- [simile] My friends are like iron | My friends are like trees |
My friends are like cattle egrets
- [metaphor] But some friends are ashes | Some friends are blunt
edges of a two-edged sword
- [symbolism] iron | cattle egrets | ashes | blunt edges
- [imagery] smouldering ambers | blunt edges of a two-edged
sword
- [biblical allusion] two-edged sword
- [antithesis] The first stanza is the antithesis of the second
stanza.
- [sonnet] It is a poem of 14 lines.

Conclusion

It is true that practice makes perfect. Always write about your experiences or some other person's experiences. It is not uncommon for young writers to underrate their creative works. Do not discard your

creative works. If you don't know what to do with them at the moment, archive them and return to them later.

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