

Course sample

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Creative Writing

Writing Skills



Level HE4 – 40 CATS

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Times are given here as a guideline: you may want to spend a lot more

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Starting to Write

Part one: Getting started



Photo: Sharon Kaplan

Detail is the lifeblood of fiction

John Gardiner

Introduction

Writing is about storytelling. Stories lie at the heart of all human society and fulfil our need to communicate and to be understood. Stories confirm our identity and bind us together as social animals; they carry the characteristics of our culture just as chromosomes carry inherited genetic information.

Written forms of language grew out of verbal storytelling and have the huge advantage of being able to be communicated across time and space. Whether you are writing a poem, a piece of prose or a play, the simple aim is to tell someone else about something that has happened, though that superficial story may carry deeper messages.

Throughout this course you will find images that do not directly relate to the text. They are there to help stimulate your imagination.

You will be asked to make use of several forms of notetaking. These are: a writer's notebook, learning log, commonplace book and reflective commentary. Make sure you understand the difference between these forms of activity and use each notebook appropriately. The first project explains how to use a notebook, and Project 3 focuses on the commonplace book. Refer to the OCA *Student Guide* for information on keeping a *Learning Log*.

Register on OCA's website to use the online forum dedicated to creative writing. Chat to others during this course, and post your work there for others to comment on.

This first project in the Starting to Write course aims to heighten your visual awareness and to encourage observational writing; it will help you to gather material that will be crucial to you as a writer.



Photo: Alan Whetton

Project 1 Keeping a writer's notebook

Notebooks are one of the essential tools of the writer, a place you can start and store writing before you show it to others. The privacy of your notebook is important because the thought of anyone reading your notes may inhibit you from writing them.

As the course moves on, and in the years to come, your collection of notebooks will facilitate the progress of your writing skills.

Firstly, re-read the Student Support Booklet; *Keeping Sketchbooks and Learning Logs*.

The first section, Sketchbooks, may not feel appropriate to a writer, but if you replace the word **sketchbook** with **notebook** and **draw** with **write**, the entire section becomes very relevant indeed.

You should have already planned your learning log, but it's easy at first to confuse this with notebook keeping. Keep the two separate. Use your learning log to record your thoughts on the writing process and your progression through the work you'll do. You can show your tutor sections of it in your reflective commentary.

At the end of each main section the assignment will ask you to send a reflective commentary to your tutor. This is a synthesis of your learning log containing reflections on your progress. Make sure you include a précis or extracts from your learning log and information on the research you've done and books you've read. Keep the commentary to between 1,000 and 1,500 words.

Use your notebooks to record writing. Aim to use your notebooks at least as much as your learning log, that is, fifteen percent of your course hours. The more time you spend with the notebooks, the better the results. Some writers notebook for at least an hour a day. Your notebooks form the basis of most projects and the creative writing assignments you will send your tutor. Use notebooks as a regular routine to get you in the habit of writing daily, and when the mood takes you.

Use them in any of the following ways:

Factual diary

Each day, spend time noting down the last twenty-four hours. If you already keep a special book for that purpose, then do go on using it. Start with the things that are close to the surface of your mind. Sift through your day and jot down what has happened in as much detail as possible, or in a way that will help you to recall it later. Include conversations, or even news items you want to remember.

Creative diary

Have you ever tried recording the facts of your life in a more fictional way? Try embroidering the truth or twisting events so the outcomes satisfy or amuse you. Remember – no one need see these very first drafts, so you can let your thoughts flow freely.

The blank page hurdle

It doesn't matter how disappointed you are with the writing that's going down – it's only in your notebook. If it helps, you can tell yourself that you will never return to these notes. But when you look at them again in a week or so, you will find useful things – even some quite nice images. The things you write may surprise you.

The confessional

Because it's a private document, not for view, you are freed up to pour anything into it. You can let rip with frustration at your boss, or admit your feelings about someone you've just met. These are the times when your writing will flow easily and deeply. These notes may become the basis for further writing, but while you choose to keep them in your notebook, they are your secret.

Aide-memoire

Get those sudden ideas straight down into your notebook. These often occur when a new story or idea is brewing. As a full piece of work develops, subsequent thoughts will come into your mind. If ideas are not recorded quickly, they disappear like soap bubbles.

Polishing up your description

With your notebook in your pocket, you have description at your fingertips. Whatever you see or experience can be instantly recorded by whipping out your notebook. Write in it on journeys, in public places and after new or unusual experiences.

Jotting down information

Whether you heard it on the radio, read it in a waiting room, saw it on a notice board or heard it from a friend, because your notebook is with you, you can document anything you need.

Recording passages

Sometimes, a scene or piece of dialogue from the story you're writing, or a line from a poem will enter your head, often in the most inconvenient place. Dash it down as it comes to you, ready to work on later.

Recording your dreams

Much writing is a dialogue between the conscious and the subconscious; dreams are a bridge between those worlds and can provide a writer with powerful impulses and experiences upon which to draw. You may wish to keep a notebook by your bed ready to write down dreams before they evaporate. Don't try to remember **before** you write, try to remember **through** the act of writing. However, it's difficult for some people to recall dreams, and if this is true of you, try exploring the dreams of your childhood or recurring dreams you can bring to mind. After some initial hesitancy you'll be amazed at what such spontaneous writing can help you to recall. We all have an inbuilt resistance to remembering such deeply buried material – but remember that it's the writer's job to reach down for it.

For example...

If you try to write freely, from your heart, you will be surprised at what comes out. Here is a short passage taken from a contemporary writer's notebook.

A glorious sunset with bursts of light hitting the fells between dark bars of cloud, those sudden rushes of emerald. The stile-post polished by other hands and hollow with rot under my hand. Two large hares and a rabbit lolloped across the fields quite sleepily. Everywhere new lambs crying out from their black faces. A few lapwing skirling over the marsh and gulls hanging steady in the fierce air.

Found the peregrine's nest above a hawthorn on the crag – probably an old jackdaw's nest. The tiercel flew out at once – its moustache bars strikingly visible – and watched me from a pinnacle of limestone having circled back beyond the hill. I lost him watching a young hare. It sat on the scree slope near a hawthorn tree, licking its paws like a praying monk. I could see dark patches on its face as wind ruffled its fur. It sat listening, quite unperturbed, facing into the wind then facing away from it.

Walked back into bitter gusts of westerly air as the light died. A grey shape flitted behind me, returning to the crag. A few lambs still bleated at the coming dark, running to tug at their mothers' udders. The sun was a faint glow to the west, sinking into peach coloured clouds tinged with deeper orange, rimmed with silvery black.

These notes are rapid and semi-grammatical, giving an impression of being written at speed. The writer skates quickly over a long passage of time and concentrates only on certain details – the stile-post under his hand, the hawk's moustache bars, the dark patches of fur on the hare's face, the lambs calling out. A lot of other detail is absent or remains private – like the location or reason for the journey. These notes have been written to prompt the writer's memory upon re-reading. But already they seem to be leading somewhere and later they may form the basis for a poem. Here's a rather more down-to-earth extract:

8.30. Tommy the builder rings – the joiners are coming today. My parents are coming later too. The house is still in a terrible mess, the kitchen covered in plaster dust and rubble.

We get up reluctantly and M drives off to work. I have to push-start the car again. Must ring the garage about a new battery. I think about the

letters I've got to write. I think about the joiners. They're doing a terrible job. The kids go to school, carrying their lunch-bags and trotting along bravely. A red van pulls up outside and the workmen begin to trample through the house.

I start work, ringing LN guiltily. She's out. The school secretary rings later to tell me that D's ill. That note of accusation in her voice, as if I've been a bad father. I walk down for him in the rain.

These notes read like a private shorthand, but the notes could easily become the basis for a story at a later date. Here's a passage from the same notebook, about a dream this time:

Last night dreamed I was in Skipton, walking in a large field with overhanging chestnut trees. A dog was barking somewhere, but I couldn't see him. Then in slow motion an aeroplane curled across the sky, disintegrating like a handful of torn silver foil. I could see the sun glinting on the fuselage.

I was anxious because one of my shoelaces was undone. Then I was tying it, then searching with other people for bodies that might have fallen from the crashed aeroplane. We were looking in all the gardens and the bodies seemed to have been planted there, their flesh cold and bloody.

In one garden there were tall irises and a cardboard box, like the kind you might get from a florist. Inside were the bodies of a Chinese man and woman, carefully packed like small dolls, dead but unmarked.

There's no attempt to explain the meaning of the dream, but it's a powerful experience: set down just as remembered. One day it could add authentic detail to a story, poem or a play. Much better to have a real dream recorded like this than to try to invent one from nowhere.

Difficult memories: *You may find that some of the things your notebook throws up are memories you had previously chosen to forget. They may feel uncomfortable to write about. These memories will provide powerful writing. It may even prove therapeutic to write about them.*

Exercises

Exercise 1

- Once you have managed to record (or remember) one or two dreams, take the notes you've got and re-write them so that each phrase is placed on a new line. If we were to do this with the dream opposite it might look something like this:

Skipton
walking
large field
chestnut trees, overhanging
dog, barking, but I can't see him.

- You can embroider and change what you've got as much as you like – just enjoy the exercise. Now read through what you've got.

This exercise should take you between thirty minutes and an hour.

Students sometimes ask why they should be encouraged to write poetry when what they really want to do is write fiction, plays or creative non-fiction. The answer is that this course is about learning to make language work for us in whatever form we choose. Building an economical and vivid poem will help your prose become leaner and more vivid. To be able to choose the most appropriate way of expressing what you want to say, you need to experiment with the various forms that are available.

Research point

Soon, your notebooks will be providing you with the raw materials you'll use later for more considered work. Almost all writers keep a notebook of this kind and some of them are so private that the authors burn them or ask them to be destroyed after their death, as the poet Philip Larkin did. But others have been published, and you will find it revealing to look at some of these and reflect on the kind of things people thought worth writing down.

Writing Home, Alan Bennett, (Faber)

The Journal of Katherine Mansfield, (Constable)

A Writer's Diary, Virginia Woolf, (The Hogarth Press)

The Note-Books of Samuel Butler, (Jonathan Cape)

Further Extracts from the Note-Books of Samuel Butler, (Jonathan Cape)

The Journal of a Disappointed Man, W N P Barbellion, (Chatto and Windus)

Search for other records of a writer's life and examine the way they made their notebooks work for them. Use as much of your spare coursework time as you can to dip into them.

Exercise 2

- Allow your notebook work to build up for a few days and then read through what you have already written. What you might have thought no good at all as you scribbled it down may prove very readable indeed.
- Choose one passage that particularly attracts or excites your interest. Now move to your screen and keyboard. Take your time, adding or inventing anything that didn't occur to you at the time. Enjoy the experience.
- Clearly name and file this work.

This exercise should take you approximately an hour.

In almost all the writing exercises, you'll be asked to start with freewriting and to improve your work by redrafting it. Continue to save **everything** you redraft in this way.



Photo: Jane Adlem