

Creative Writing 3

Advanced A

Retrospect and Prospect



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Cover image: Vincent van Gogh, *The Novel Reader*, 1888 (oil on canvas)

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Foreword

Welcome to *Retrospect and Prospect*, the first of OCA's two advanced courses in creative writing. The fact that you've got to here means you've already progressed your writing to an impressive level – indeed you may have reached a stage where you don't feel the need for much external guidance. Don't worry, *Retrospect and Prospect* assumes – and seeks to foster – a high degree of literary ability and independence in the writers taking it. It's designed not as a step-by-step approach, with everyone progressing through exactly the same set of topics, exercises, and assignments. Rather, the course seeks to provide a flexible framework that will help support and develop whatever specific writing project each individual student wishes to develop.

Retrospect and Prospect aims to:

- develop your ability to produce substantial independent creative work
- promote advanced research and organisational skills
- foster skills of self-criticism and an ability to reflect on and respond to advice with discernment
- help you to identify and analyse the work of other writers working in your chosen genre.

Take a moment to reflect on the learning outcomes for the course. On successful completion of the course, you'll be able to:

- research, prepare and produce an extended body of creative writing, showing an understanding of your chosen form
- organise your materials and plan realistic schedules for writing and redrafting
- reflect critically on drafts and edit your own work in response to feedback
- demonstrate an understanding of the structure, form, historical context and technical challenges of your chosen genre, as revealed by other writers.

As is appropriate for work at this level, *Retrospect and Prospect* follows a mentoring model. This means that individual students, in discussion with their tutor, are responsible for designing the pathway they wish to plot through the course.

The constituent sections of *Retrospect and Prospect* are not intended to lay down a single route for everyone to follow in the manner of an introductory course. Instead, they consist of a series of pointers, suggestions, reminders, and questions intended to prompt individual reflection. Such reflection – about the processes, procedures, problems and possibilities of writing – should be a helpful adjunct in the various journeys writers are attempting.

Working at this level isn't a case of following the course text slavishly – it's much more a matter of taking on board what you find useful and jettisoning what you don't. The key thing is to take your own writing forward.

We all work in different ways. We all have our own particular interests and emphases. No two writers are going to proceed identically. Everyone taking this course will be working on something individual and unique to them. *Retrospect and Prospect* acknowledges and respects this diversity. Its author has no wish to impose a one-size-fits-all model – that would quickly end up as something that constrained rather than facilitated. Any exercises or strategies suggested are optional. Try them out to see if they're helpful to your practice. If they are, good, make use of them. If they're not, don't waste time on them, move on to something else.

For the purposes of assessment, you must pay due attention to the assignments, reflective commentary and creative reading commentary, because these are the elements that will form the basis for your final summative mark. You'll submit the reflective and creative writing commentaries with your final assignment. Each of these elements counts for 10% of your final mark.

You'll be required to submit:

- three of the five assignments that the course requires (2,500–3,000 words of prose or up to six poems of no more than 40 lines each), making clear where amendments have been made in the light of tutor feedback
- your reflective commentary on the course (1,500–2,000 words)
- your creative writing commentary (3,500 words).

Please ensure that whatever you submit – whether to your tutor as you’re taking the course or for assessment once you’ve completed it – meets the assessment criteria listed below.

The assessment criteria are central to the assessment process for this course, so please make sure you take note of these criteria and consider how each of the assignments you complete demonstrates evidence of each criterion. The criteria are evenly weighted (20% of marks each). On completion of each assignment, and before you send your assignment to your tutor, test yourself against the criteria – in other words, do a self-assessment, and see how you think you would do. Note down your findings for each assignment you’ve completed, noting all your perceived strengths and weaknesses, taking into account the criteria every step of the way. This will be helpful for your tutor to see, as well as helping you prepare for assessment.

The assessment criteria

- **Presentation and technical correctness** – Grammatical accuracy, punctuation, layout, spelling, awareness of literary conventions, and the ability (where appropriate) to play with these conventions and fit them to your needs.
- **Language** – Appropriateness to genre, subject matter, and characters. Avoidance of cliché, employment of a wide vocabulary, awareness of the rhythmic powers of language, and an ability to make appropriate use of imagery.
- **Creativity** – Imagination, experimentation, inventive exploration of subject matter, originality and empathy.
- **Contextual knowledge** – Evidence of reading, research, critical thinking and reflection. Engagement with contemporary thinking and practice in the specific genre in which you are working.
- **Craft of writing** – Technical competence in your chosen genre (e.g. in prose, in areas such as narrative, plotting, setting, voice, tense, characterisation, etc; in poetry, in areas such as phrasing, idiom and rhythm).

The assignments – like the course itself – are designed to accommodate a wide variety of interests and outputs. This course is not about setting precisely defined topics and tasks that everyone has to address, more a case of stipulating some general parameters (word count, number of assignments, timescale for submission, etc.) and asking students to frame what they're working on accordingly. Where one student may submit a series of poems, another may offer the script for a radio play; one might produce a complete short story, another offer the chapter of a novel, another still a piece of creative nonfiction. In other words, *Retrospect and Prospect* isn't a genre-based course; it seeks to foster good writing in whatever form you happen to be working.

The main thrust of both advanced level creative writing courses is the same – to facilitate whatever writing project(s) you wish to develop – but each course has a slightly different emphasis. *Retrospect and Prospect* involves taking stock and looking forward – it tries to prompt a consideration of where you want to go as a writer before focusing on some of the strategies that might help you to get there. *Independent Project* raises for critical exploration some of the rules that have been suggested for good writing and how they might be usefully applied (or disregarded). It also looks at the way in which creative writing inevitably contains surprises. Both courses contain some comment on publication, but neither is intended as a 'How to' guide to getting your work into print.

Given their shared concern to advance your particular writing project, there's inevitably considerable common ground between *Retrospect and Prospect* and *Independent Project*. Both courses contain many comments from writers about writing, for example, because it seemed important to ensure that you hear a range of voices, not just the single voice of the course writer.

Both courses assume that you'll engage in an active programme of reading (see the section on reading below), but whilst reading is assumed and encouraged and various suggestions made, neither course contains a list of 'set reading'. This is deliberate. Such lists would be out of keeping with the courses' aspirations to be flexible – to facilitate rather than constrain and direct. It's no accident that the cover images for both courses feature images of readers – this is a way of stressing from the outset how crucial reading is. In addition to the many suggestions made in the pages that follow, tutors will, naturally, make their own reading recommendations in the course of their feedback on your assignments.

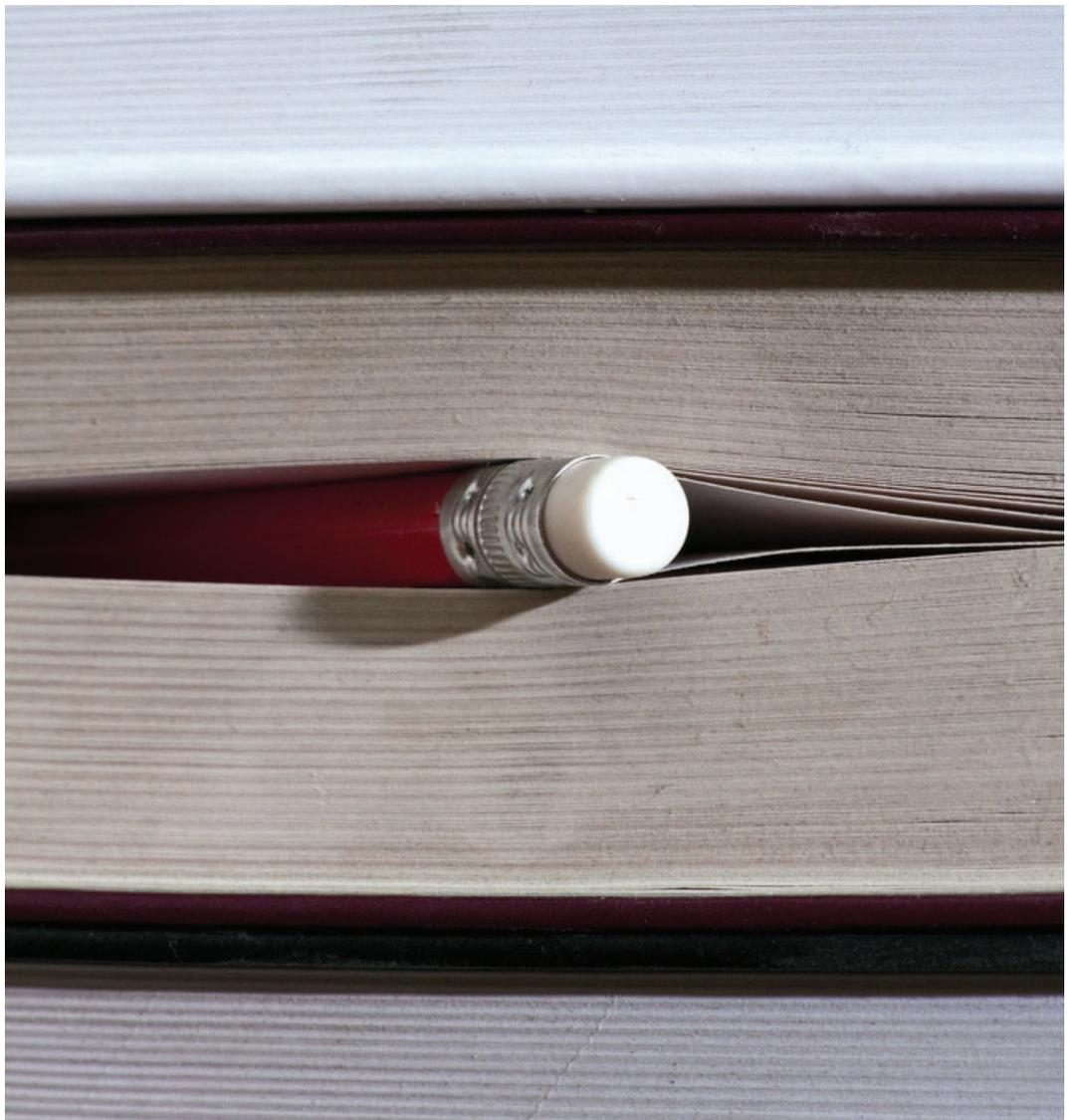
Two last points:

- It probably makes sense with each course to begin by quickly reading it in its entirety – so you have an initial overview – and then to start again at the beginning and work your way through it in earnest. Reading the course from beginning to end won't take long, a couple of hours at most. On the other hand, actually engaging with it, working through it in detail, completing the assignments, acting on the suggestions, exploring the reading suggested, represents a considerable investment of time and energy.
- Courses that adopt a mentoring approach are clearly reliant on the quality of the working relationship that's forged between tutor and student. It may be that in your studies with OCA to date you've found a tutor with whom you particularly enjoy working. That's certainly an important factor. But you should also look carefully at the tutor profiles on the OCA website to see if anyone offers a close match in terms of having a particular interest in the kind of writing you wish to develop. A good working relationship is essential in these advanced level courses, so it's worth giving careful thought to this at the outset and making sure you choose whoever seems best for what you want to do.

Creative Writing 3

Introduction

Hard work and miracles



Horia Varlan, Red pencil stuck between the pages of a book

Experience has shown me that there are no miracles in writing. The only thing that produces good writing is hard work.

(Isaac Bashevis Singer, interview in *Writers at Work* (5th series), 1981)

Retrospect and Prospect is written from a perspective that's broadly in line with Singer's view. Surely it's naïve to think of writers as star-struck individuals who simply have to wait for a flash of inspiration and then, powered by this mysterious lightening bolt, hey presto, stories, poems, plays materialise effortlessly, as if from nowhere. As William Zinsser puts it:

Writing is hard work. A clear sentence is no accident. Very few sentences come out right first time, or even third time. Remember this in moments of despair. If you find that writing is hard, it's because it is hard.

(Zinsser, 2001, p.12)

It's also *fun*. Which of us would endure the hard work needed if it wasn't also incredibly rewarding? To be fully engaged with a piece of writing is a wonderful experience (anyone planning to take this course who doesn't already know that would do well to think again).

Isaac Bashevis Singer (1904–91)

Isaac Bashevis Singer is widely regarded as one of the greatest storytellers of the twentieth century. His output was prolific – novels, short stories, memoir, children’s books, reviews, translation, journalism.

Ted Hughes had this to say about Singer’s achievement:

His powerful, wise, deep, full-face paragraphs make almost every other modern fiction seem by comparison labored, shallow, overloaded with alien and undigested junk, too fancy, fuddled, not quite squared up to life.

Hughes’ review – revealingly entitled ‘The Genius of Isaac Bashevis Singer’ – appeared in the *New York Review of Books* in 1965. The full text is available here:

www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1965/apr/22/the-genius-of-isaac-bashevis-singer/

Singer was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1978. His acceptance speech includes some interesting reflections on why he writes for children:

Ladies and Gentlemen: There are five hundred reasons why I began to write for children, but to save time I will mention only ten of them. Number 1) Children read books, not reviews. They don't give a hoot about the critics. Number 2) Children don't read to find their identity. Number 3) They don't read to free themselves of guilt, to quench the thirst for rebellion, or to get rid of alienation. Number 4) They have no use for psychology. Number 5) They detest sociology. Number 6) They don't try to understand Kafka or Finnegans Wake. Number 7) They still believe in God, the family, angels, devils, witches, goblins, logic, clarity, punctuation, and other such obsolete stuff. Number 8) They love interesting stories, not commentary, guides, or footnotes. Number 9) When a book is boring, they yawn openly, without any shame or fear of authority. Number 10) They don't expect their beloved writer to redeem humanity. Young as they are, they know that it is not in his power. Only the adults have such childish illusions.

See www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1978/singer-speech.html for the full text of Singer’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech.

The Nobel Prize website also provides useful information about Singer’s life and work with links to other resources. An audio recording of his Nobel lecture is available here:

www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1978/singer-lecture.html

Apply some of Singer's 10 reasons for writing for children to your own writing and consider whether it would pass the test implied (regardless of whether you're writing for children or not).

For more on Singer, see Damion Searls' 'A Guide to Isaac Bashevis Singer' in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* (September 2012). The full text is available here:

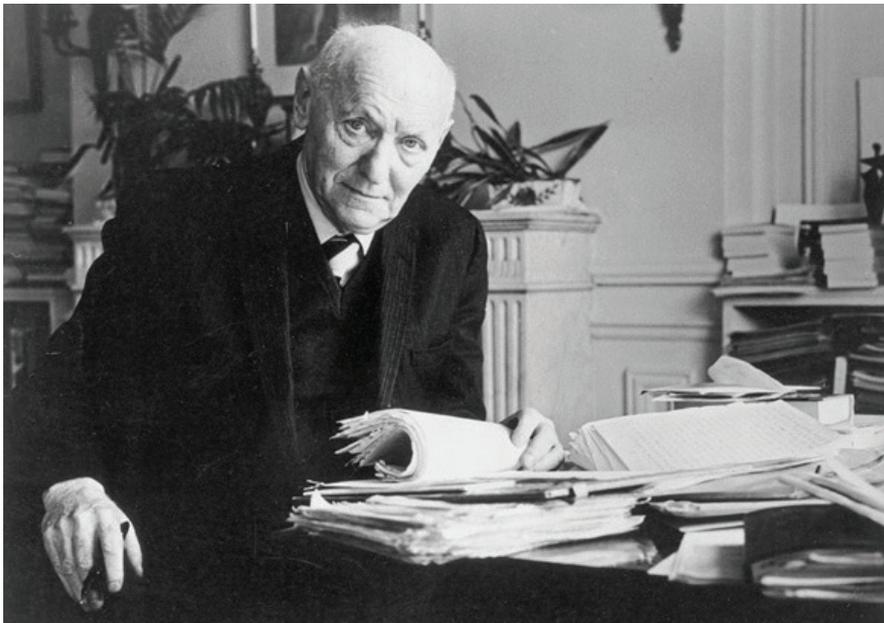
<https://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/a-guide-to-isaac-bashevis-singer>

The Fall 1968 issue of *The Paris Review* carries an interview with Singer (by Harold Flender):

www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4242/the-art-of-fiction-no-42-isaac-bashevis-singer

The Library of America also contains links to an interview, along with many other resources on Singer. See <http://singer100.loa.org/>

[All websites accessed 27/02/14]



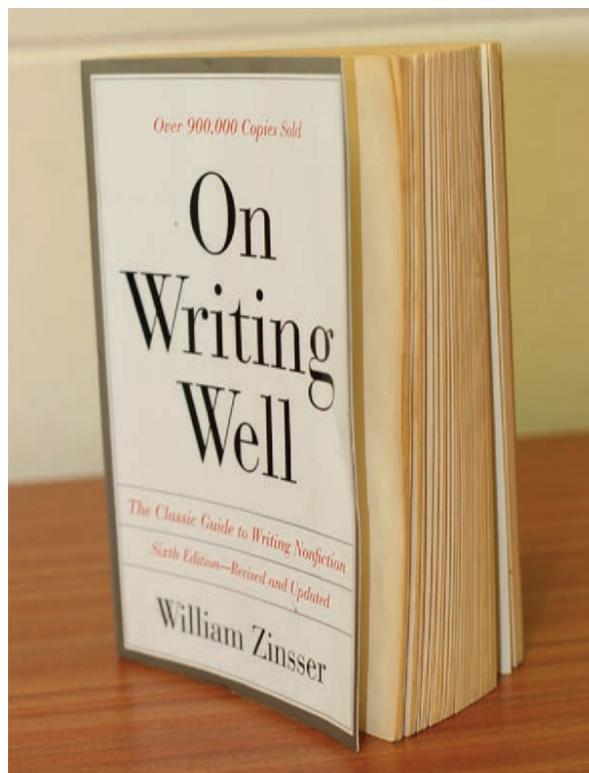
Isaac Bashevis Singer, photographed by Jerry Bauer for Farrar, Straus and Giroux

The – necessary – emphasis put on hard work by Singer, Zinsser and countless other writers, and the dismissal of magical inspiration as an unhelpful illusion, shouldn't obscure the fact that there's a considerable element of mystery in creative writing. It's not just a prosaic, predictable activity. Sitting for hours at a page or screen and dutifully labouring over your words won't necessarily produce a masterpiece. Much time and effort can be spent on something that, in the end, simply isn't very good. Conversely, brilliant writing does sometimes seem to materialise remarkably quickly – though of course it's far from straightforward to determine when a writer actually begins a piece. When does a poem start? What marks the beginning of a novel or a short story? Where is the origin of an essay or a play?

I am always writing—but in my head.

Jamaica Kincaid

It would be naïve to imagine that a piece of writing only starts when the writer puts pen to paper/fingers to keyboard, or that writers are only at work when they're actually writing.



William Zinsser (b.1922)

William Zinsser's *On Writing Well* is presented – with justification – as 'The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction'. As with Mary Oliver's *A Poetry Handbook*, to be considered shortly, writers of any genre are likely to find it helpful.

In the second chapter of the book (p.12), Zinsser says that writers must "constantly ask: what am I trying to say? Surprisingly often they don't know. Then they must look at what they've written and ask: have I said it?" Try applying these questions to your assignments for this course.

Zinsser has had a distinguished career as a writer, editor and teacher. He started out with the *New York Herald Tribune* and has since written for many leading magazines. He's author of 18 books including *Writing to Learn* and *Easy to Remember: The Great American Songwriters and Their Songs*. He's taught writing at Yale University and at New York's New School and edited a series of books on the art and craft of a variety of literary forms (including memoir, children's writing, biography and religious writing). Zinsser currently writes a column for *The American Scholar*, 'Zinsser on Friday'. He won the 2012 *National Magazine Award* in the category of Digital Commentary.

'Zinsser on Friday' is available online here:

<http://theamericanscholar.org/the-complete-zinsser-on-friday/#.UqYng9JdWPE>

In one of these columns ('The Right to Write') Zinsser responds to criticisms made in the *New York Times Book Review* about the apparent deluge of tedious memoirs now appearing in print. Staff editor Neil Genzlinger excoriates three new memoirs which, he says, typify a now common sort of book – namely something written by

...people you've never heard of, writing uninterestingly about the unexceptional, apparently not realizing how commonplace their little wrinkle is or how many other people have already written about it. . . . That's what happens when immature people write memoirs. . . . Nobody wants to relive your misery.

Zinsser summarises Genzlinger’s tirade as saying: “Don’t even think of writing your stupid memoir.” He then gives a measured rejoinder which memoir writers in particular might like to note:

I don’t like people telling other people they shouldn’t write about their life. All of us earn that right by being born; one of the deepest human impulses is to leave a record of what we did and what we thought and felt on our journey. The issue here is not whether so many bad memoirs should be written. It’s whether they should be published – let’s put the blame where it belongs – and whether, once published, they should be reviewed. The Times can use its space more helpfully than by allowing a critic to hyperventilate on an exhausted subject. We don’t have that many trees left.

Writers will also find *The American Scholar* useful because of the regular ‘Writing Lessons’ in *The Daily Scholar* online: <http://theamericanscholar.org/the-daily-scholar/> where

Each Monday a poet, a novelist, an essayist, a journalist, or a scholar recalls a piece of advice or an experience that was most helpful to their writing career.

William McFeely’s ‘Writing Means Rewriting’ is strongly recommended – particularly for anyone who doubts the necessity of drafting and redrafting.

The American Scholar describes itself as a “venerable but lively quarterly magazine of public affairs, literature, science, history, and culture”. The roster of writers who have appeared in its pages includes many famous names.

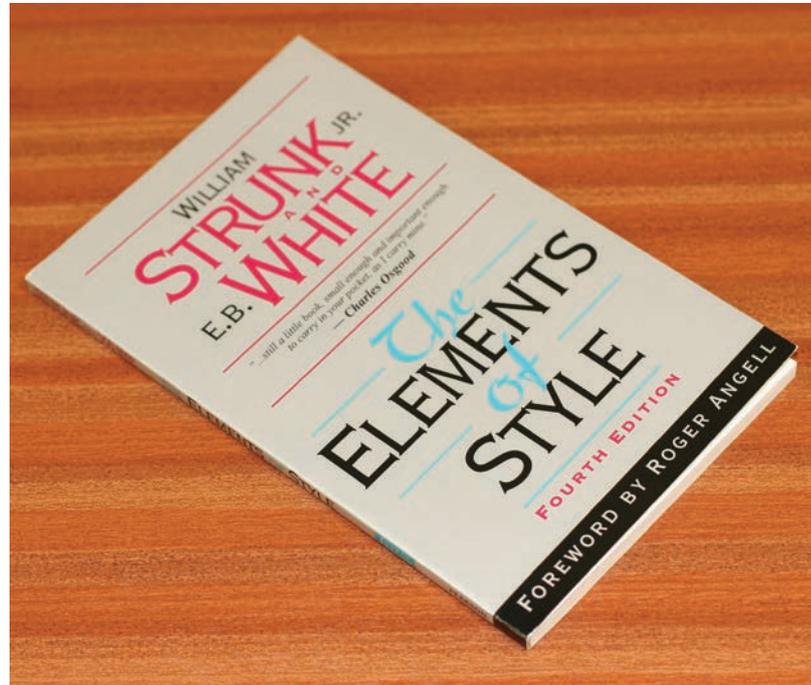
This is a magazine with an impressive literary record. Read it!

Alongside the strictures about hard work emphasised by Singer, Zinsser and others, I always like to place this observation:

Who can confidently say what ignites a certain combination of words, causing them to explode in the mind? Who knows why certain notes in music are capable of stirring the listener deeply, though the same notes slightly rearranged are impotent? These are high mysteries.... There is no satisfactory explanation of style, no infallible guide to good writing, no assurance that a person who thinks clearly will be able to write clearly, no key that unlocks the door, no inflexible rule by which writers may shape their course. Writers will often find themselves steering by stars that are disturbingly in motion.

(Strunk and White, 2000, p.66)

Retrospect and Prospect recognises the need for hard work in writing, but also the powerful element of unpredictability that Strunk and White allude to here. The course seeks to offer strategies and structures that will help bolster the discipline of hard work, thus creating environments favourable to writing word combinations that will “explode in the mind”. But there needs to be an honest recognition that there can be no guarantee of success. If a writer’s stars are not “disturbingly in motion” it might make for easier navigation – but it would surely lead to less interesting places than those we want our words to take us to.



The Elements of Style

When E.B. White was a student at Cornell University, he took an English course taught by Professor William Strunk. The textbook for the course was a privately printed 43-page booklet entitled *Elements of Style*. Many years later – long after Strunk’s death – White was commissioned by Macmillan to revise the book for a published version. He added a considerable amount, but the book is still brief enough at 105 pages to be read at a sitting. The revised edition first appeared in 1959 and has been in print ever since. As one reviewer commented, it “should be the daily companion of anyone who writes for a living and, for that matter, anyone who writes at all.” It should certainly be a volume with which students of creative writing are familiar. Quite apart from the technical guidance Strunk and White offer, their book is beautifully written and contains many useful insights about the process of writing.

You’re strongly recommended to read the book cover to cover.

According to William Zinsser (2001, p.36) *The Elements of Style* “is a book every writer should read once a year”. Here are a few extracts to give a flavour of the book:

Writing, to be effective, must closely follow the thoughts of the writer, but not necessarily in the order in which those thoughts occur. (p.15)

Breaking long paragraphs in two, even if it is not necessary to do so for sense, meaning, or logical development, is often a visual help. But remember, too, that firing off many short paragraphs in quick succession can be distracting. (p.17)

The shape of our language is not rigid; in questions of usage we have no lawgiver whose word is final. (p.39)

A careful and honest writer does not need to worry about style. As you become proficient in the use of language, your style will emerge, because you yourself will emerge, and when this happens you will find it increasingly easy to break through the barriers that separate you from other minds, other hearts – which is, of course, the purpose of writing, as well as its principal reward. (p.70)

The alphabetical list of commonly misused words and expressions contains some entertaining asides. For Strunk and White, 'insightful' is "A suspicious overstatement for 'perceptive'...If it has to be used at all, it should be used for instances of remarkably penetrating wisdom. Usually it crops up merely to inflate the commonplace" (p.50). Their verdict on 'interesting' is that it is "An unconvincing word; avoid it as a means of introduction. Instead of announcing that what you are about to tell is interesting, make it so" (p.50). 'Meaningful' they dismiss as "A bankrupt adjective. Choose another, or rephrase" (p.53). 'Prestigious' is likewise frowned on. They view it as "Often an adjective of last resort. It's in the dictionary, but that doesn't mean you have to use it." They suggest that "The adjective hasn't been built that can pull a weak or inaccurate noun out of a tight place" (p.71), and they view qualifiers – rather, very, little, pretty – as "leeches that infest the pond of prose, sucking the blood of words" (p.73).

In an essay simply entitled 'Will Strunk', White quotes this passage from his mentor, describing it as "a short, valuable essay on the nature and beauty of brevity":

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer makes all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.

(White, 1999, p.323)

It's a useful exercise for any writer to read through their own work looking for – and deleting – unnecessary sentences and words. Try it and see. In what you write, does every word count?

Not everyone likes *The Elements of Style*. Geoffrey Pullum, for example, delivered a blistering critique that appeared in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2009 under the heading '50 Years of Stupid Grammar Advice'. Read the full text here: <http://chronicle.com/article/50-Years-of-Stupid-Grammar/25497>

For Pullum:

The book's toxic mix of purism, atavism, and personal eccentricity is not underpinned by a proper grounding in English grammar. It is often so misguided that the authors appear not to notice their own egregious flouting of its own rules... It's sad. Several generations of college students learned their grammar from the uninformed bossiness of Strunk and White, and the result is a nation of educated people who know they feel vaguely anxious and insecure whenever they write however or than me or was or which, but can't tell you why.

Beyond noting Pullum's take on things, I don't want to get involved in a debate about the value of *The Elements of Style*. It seems to me important that writers know of the book's existence and become familiar enough with it to judge for themselves whether it's likely to help their writing. If it is, use it; if it's not, don't waste time on it. Taken as an inflexible set of rules which you MUST ALWAYS apply to your writing, *The Elements of Style* would be deeply tiresome. But taken as a commentary about grammar and usage it provides some useful touchstones. It also contains some insightful (or do I mean perceptive?) observations about the nature of writers and writing.

Strunk's full 1918 text is available online on Bartleby.com (www.bartleby.com/141/). However, this is of limited usefulness compared to White's revised and expanded version.

For anyone interested in further information about the origin and impact of this influential little book – it's sold over 10 million copies – Mark Garvey has written *Stylized: A Slightly Obsessive History of Strunk and White's The Elements of Style* (2009, New York: Touchstone).

Creative Writing 3

Part one

Looking back and looking forward



Janus (engraving) Roman god of gates and doors, beginnings and endings

Imagine you're on a long walk. It could be through beautiful countryside – a rainforest, a mountain range, a tropical jungle, acres of wildflower-studded alpine meadows. Or you might be exploring a coastal path that alternates between the flat of sandy beaches and precarious cliff-hugging contours. Maybe you're walking across a desert, or through snow; your route might traverse swamps and mudflats. Or you may be wandering around the intricacies of a built environment in some city you've never visited before. You've already come some way and plan to go much further. To see where you are, to get a sense of orientation and decide where to direct your steps, you need a map that shows your route to date, with an arrow clearly indicating 'You Are Here'. Then you can decide on the best way forward.

The parallel should be obvious, but to spell it out: students taking *Retrospect and Prospect* are not doing so from scratch; they're not just setting out. Rather, they already have a body of work behind them. This may consist of assignments written for other OCA courses, material of their own, or (most likely) both. Their work may be published or unpublished, extensive or still quite modest in amount. In other words, they're not novices tentatively embarking on their first journey – their writing is already underway, in some cases for many years.

The genres in which students will be writing may be as disparate as the various imagined walking milieux. Tropical jungle, desert, sea coast, marsh, and city streets are very different environments. They call for different walking strategies. Likewise varied are the literary landscapes in which students are making their writing journeys: novels, short fiction, poetry, drama, screenplays, essays, children's stories, science fiction, horror, humour, fantasy (or you may be working on some trans-genre piece that doesn't fit comfortably into any of these niches).

Retrospect and Prospect doesn't try to direct you into any particular area of writing. Nor does it pretend to offer the kind of specialist input that particular genres may sometimes require. It doesn't try to tell you in which literary landscape you should be walking, or how you should trace out your journey there. It simply seeks to offer support that's on the same level of practicality as advising walkers about having the right kind of footwear, the usefulness of taking a compass, wearing suitable waterproofs or sunscreen, and the importance of being physically fit before setting out and learning how to pace yourself along the way. It also introduces you to some possible companions – writers who have themselves made interesting journeys and have helpful things to say about the writing process. It's up to you to know (or to find out) where you've come from, where you're headed, what destinations you're aiming for. The questions below are designed to help you do that.

Some orientation questions

1. Why do you write?
2. What sort of writer do you consider yourself to be? (Can you plot your approximate whereabouts on a literary sketch map by reference to the work of other writers?)
3. What sort of writer do you want to be?
4. If there's a gap between your answer to questions 2 and 3, what steps do you think you need to take to close it?
5. What do you consider to be the best piece of work you've done to date?
6. Can you isolate the qualities this piece of work possesses that set it apart as the one you rate most highly?
7. What are you working on now and when do you expect to complete it?
8. By this time next year, what do you hope to have achieved with your writing?
9. In what place and at what time of day (or night) do you tend to write best?
10. What's been the most significant material you've read in terms of its impact on your writing?
11. Who are you writing for – yourself, others, or both? Who do you see as your ideal reader?
12. What's the single most significant barrier to your achieving your writing goals? Are there any ways in which it can be removed or lessened?

Make a note of your answers and consider the questions again at the end of the course – that should enable you to plot your progress, where you may have deviated from your planned route/schedule, how far you still have to go, etc. As with many of the questions posed in OCA's advanced creative writing courses, some of these orientation questions are not so much for instant answer as for taking on board to ponder and turn over in the mind from time to time.

Assignment one

This is a diagnostic/indicative assignment. It is not for assessment.

Imagine that the editor of an online writers' directory asks you for an entry about yourself. Provide in 800–1200 words a statement that explains to readers who you are and what you write. As well as focusing on writing you've done, are currently engaged in, and are planning – making clear in each case the genre(s) involved – the directory entry might make reference to writers you admire and to material you rate highly and feel you've learned something from. (This 'material' isn't necessarily something you've read – it might refer to something viewed or listened to.) You might want to list any publishing credits you have and also include links to websites you've found useful in your writing.