

Creative Writing 1

Starting your Novel

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Before you start

Welcome to *Writing 1: Starting Your Novel*.

If you haven't already done so, now is a good time to work through the free introductory course An Introduction to Studying in HE which is available on the OCA student website at:

www.oca-student.com

Don't be tempted to skip this introductory course as it contains valuable advice on study skills (e.g. reading, note-taking), research methods and academic conventions which will stand you in good stead throughout your studies.

The OCA website will be a key resource for you during your studies, so take some time to familiarise yourself with it. Log on to the OCA student website and find the video guide to using the website. Watch the video and take some notes.

Remember, there are other students following this course, so you are not on your own. Use the online forums to reflect on your findings and discuss issues with other students.

Course aims

The aim of this course is to:

- Give practice in writing creatively towards a draft of a novel.
- Explore different literary forms and genres of a novel.
- Develop skills in prose writing technique and craft.
- Develop reflective skills.

Learning outcomes

On successful completion of this course, you'll be able to:

- Write effectively in prose using a range of creative techniques.
- Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of genre and the requirements of the longer literary form.
- Draft, redraft and edit self-generated texts in response to feedback and your own learning.

Your tutor

Your tutor is your main point of contact with OCA. Before you start work, make sure that you're clear about your tuition arrangements. The OCA tuition system is explained in some detail in your Student Handbook.

If you haven't already done so, please write a paragraph or two about your experience to date. Add background information about anything that you think may be relevant for your tutor to know about you – your profile (e.g. your experience of creative writing so far, your reasons for starting this course and what you hope or expect to achieve from it). Email or post your profile to your tutor as soon as possible. This will help him or her understand how best to support you during the course.

Arrange with your tutor how you'll deal with any queries that arise between assignments. This will usually be by email or phone.

Make sure that you label any work that you send to your tutor with your name, student number, course name and assignment number. Your tutor will get back to you as soon as possible after receiving your assignment but this may take a little time. Continue with the course while you're waiting.

Note that you're encouraged to reflect carefully on feedback and, if appropriate, go back to the assignment you submitted and make adjustments to it based on your tutor's comments. If you submit for assessment, making such adjustments demonstrates responsiveness and learning and will help improve your mark.

Formal assessment

Read the section on assessment in your *Creative Writing Student Guide* at an early stage in the course. The *Assessment and How to Get Qualified* study guide gives more detailed information about assessment and accreditation. Please refer to the assessment guidelines on the OCA student site for what to submit for formal assessment: www.oca-student.com/resource-type/assessment-guidelines-creative-writing

Only work done during the course should be submitted to your tutor or for formal assessment.

Pre-assessment review

If you decide to have your work formally assessed, you'll need to spend some time at the end of the course preparing your finished work for submission. How you present your work to the assessors is of critical importance and can make the difference between an average mark and an excellent mark.

Assessment criteria

The assessment criteria are central to the assessment process for this course, so if you're going to have your work assessed to gain formal credits, please make sure you take note of these criteria and consider how each of the assignments you complete demonstrates evidence of each criterion. 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. Write down your findings for each assignment you've completed in your writing diary, 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 five assessment criteria are listed below.

- 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. Its 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. Above HE level 4 (i.e. OCA Levels 2 and 3), we are looking for the development of an individual voice.
- 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.
- Craft of writing. Technical competence in your chosen genre.

Your writing diary

Your writing diary is an integral part of this course. Some students choose to post their writing diary (or selected parts of it) as an online blog but this is optional – many students prefer to keep it private.

Use your writing diary to record your progress through the course. This is a document which you should use in whichever ways you find most helpful. Your writing diary may contain:

- your thoughts on the work you produce for each exercise;
- your ideas and observations as you work through the course;
- your reflections on the reading you do and any research you carry out;
- your reactions to your tutor's reports on your assignments.

Your *Creative Writing Student Guide* has further information.

You may see references to your 'learning log' on the OCA website and in the Student Handbook. This is a term used by other OCA courses that aren't creative-writing based. Learning logs are equivalent to creative writing students' writing diaries, notebooks and commonplace books.

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Pages from Edouard Vuillard's diary, 1890-1940 (pen & ink on lined paper) (b/w photo), © Bridgeman Images

Plan ahead

This Level 1 course represents 400 hours of learning time. Allow around 20 per cent of this time for reflection and keeping your writing diary. The course should take about a year to complete if you spend around eight hours each week on it.

As with all OCA courses, these course materials are intended to be used flexibly but keep your tutor fully informed about your progress. You'll need to allow extra time if you decide to have your work formally assessed.

Starting Your Novel is divided into five parts, corresponding to the five course assignments. The first assignment will enable your tutor to get to know you, review your work so far and decide how best to help you in future.

Each part of the course addresses a different issue or topic and is separated into a series of projects designed to tackle the topic in bite-sized chunks. As well as information and advice, each project offers research, reading and exercises to encourage writing. The exercises slowly build up into the assignments that you'll send to your tutor.

The assignments offer flexibility as to style and content and are designed to help you develop your own creative style and voice. Each assignment will ask you to submit a section from your novel-in-progress (2,000 words for assignment one and 2,500 words for assignments 2-5), as well as a reflective commentary (500 words for Assignments One to Four; 1,500–2,000 words for Assignment Five).

You do not need to write your novel in chronological order (or in the order that the sections appear in the novel). Nor do the sections of your novel submitted to your tutor need to be 'whole chapters' – there is flexibility to allow you to write in the chapter lengths that suit your project, whether this means chapters that are just a single page or several thousand words long. Therefore more than one chapter may be submitted per assignment, to a maximum of 2,500 words per assignment (2,000 words for Assignment One), or your assignment may consist of only part of a chapter (if each chapter is longer than 2,500 words).

Reading

A reading list for the course is available at the end of this course guide and on the OCA website. The reading list recommends key texts and gives suggestions for further reading. Record your thoughts, reactions and critical reflections on your reading in your writing diary; this will be helpful when you come to work on your reflective commentaries. The online reading list on the OCA website is updated regularly, so check this for recently published recommendations.

Referencing your reading

Whenever you read something that you might want to refer to in your projects and assignments, get into the habit of taking down the full reference to the book, article or website straight away. You must fully reference any other work that you draw on if you plan to go for formal assessment. To do this, you should use the Harvard system of referencing – there is a guide to referencing using the Harvard system on the OCA website:

www.oca-student.com/content/harvard-referencing-system-1

Getting down the full reference at the time will save you the frustration of having to hunt for the details of a half-remembered reference long after the event. Referencing other people's work accurately will also help you avoid unintentional plagiarism.

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First editions of books by W.B. Yeats, photo © Brian Seed, Bridgeman Images

Part One

Getting Started

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Sara Hayward, *Burning the Midnight Oil*, 2009 (w/c on paper) Bridgeman Images

Introduction

Part One of Starting Your Novel addresses some of the basic questions concerning novel writing, such as ‘What is a novel?’, ‘Who writes novels?’ and ‘How do I get started on my novel?’ You might think you know the answers to these questions, but it does no harm to begin at the beginning – and you might surprise yourself with some new answers. Part One also asks you to think about the pros and cons of planning, suggests ways you can generate ideas and material for your book, and requires you to write a 2,000-word section of your novel.

Writing a novel is a big undertaking, requiring a significant commitment of time and energy. This course is about starting your novel, not completing it – most new writers spend at least a couple of years writing their first novel. However, by the end of the course you’ll have written at least 10,000 words and will have developed some essential novel-writing skills which will stand you in good stead for completing it. You may wish to return to this novel if you pursue your OCA studies at Level 3, where you work on a project of your own choosing.

Before you begin this course, you should have an idea for a novel that you wish to write. It should be aimed at adults or at the older end of YA fiction (16+). However, your idea can be at a very early stage – it may be that you simply have an idea for a location, an event or a character that you would like to develop. The exercises and prompts will help you to think more deeply about your idea and by the end of Part One you should have a brief outline.

Many writers keep a notebook for jotting down ideas that come to them when they’re not at their desks (or wherever they usually write) and it’s recommended you have at least one notebook which is dedicated to your novel, and which is separate from your writing diary. There are more details about notebooks and writing diaries in the *Creative Writing Student Guide*, which you should keep handy as you work through this course.

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Notebook (engraving), (19th century)
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Project 1: What is a novel?

The novel is the great virtuoso of exceptionalism: it always wiggles out of the rules thrown around it.

(Wood, 2009, p. 83)

A novel can be defined as a book-length work of fiction written in prose (as opposed to a script or poetry). The length of a novel is usually discussed in words rather than pages, and many are around 80,000–100,000 words. Science fiction (sci-fi) and fantasy novels are often longer, whereas novels for children and young adults tend to be shorter. Anything under 40,000 words may be considered a novella, and anything under 20,000 words is approaching short story territory.

These word counts are only a guideline and there are always exceptions: both *Animal Farm* (1945) by George Orwell and *Ethan Frome* (1911) by Edith Wharton are closer to 30,000 words (so are arguably novellas), whereas *Middlemarch* (1871) by George Eliot is more than 300,000 words.

Most novels are divided into chapters (but not all), and chapter lengths range from half a page (or even a sentence) to hundreds of pages. Some writers keep their chapters roughly equal lengths, but chapters don't need to be the same length.

It can be useful to have a rough word count in mind when you start working on your novel, so that you don't end up with a 10,000-word short story or a 600,000-word epic. If you know you're aiming for 100,000 words, for example, you might think about dividing it up into equal-length sections, perhaps twenty-five chapters of 4,000 words each. While this kind of framework is useful when you begin, don't worry if you don't stick to this initial plan – novels have a habit of evolving as you write them.

These are the kinds of decisions you'll make as you bring your novel into being, and you're likely to revise some decisions many times. The choices you make will be influenced by the kind of novel you're writing, the style you're writing it in, and how you decide to structure it.

Genres

Novels come in different styles, known as genres. Dividing novels into genres helps publishers to market the books they're selling and helps readers to know what they're buying.

Genres include crime, historical, thriller, sci-fi, speculative fiction, fantasy, horror, romance and comic. Within these genres there are subgenres, so some crime novels may be gritty and violent (e.g. novels by James Ellroy), whereas others may be more cosy and domestic (e.g. Agatha Christie's whodunits).

Assigning a genre to a novel can be a useful shorthand, but genres aren't intended to limit what a book can be. Some books straddle different genres, and blurring the boundaries can be one of the exciting aspects of writing a new book. The *Harry Potter* series successfully combined fantasy with boarding school fiction, and *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* (2004) by Susanna Clarke combines historical fiction, fantasy and psychological thriller.

What you don't want to do is switch genres halfway through. Put yourself in your reader's shoes – it would be disconcerting, and perhaps even downright annoying, if you started reading a crime thriller that became a romance halfway through. If a book is marketed in a particular way, a reader will have certain expectations of the novel. If Agatha Christie had failed to deliver the name of the culprit in her novels, readers' expectations would be disappointed. So if you're writing a novel in a particular genre, you'll need to think about what your reader expects and how you'll manage those expectations.

'Literary fiction' is sometimes distinguished from other genres, but for the purposes of this course 'literary fiction' will be considered as one genre among many. Literary fiction is a contested term: some writers and critics claim it is more 'serious' than other types of fiction, and that it has more literary merit – literary fiction often prioritises originality and a sophisticated prose style over a fast-paced plot, and it can sometimes be more demanding to read. However, this is a vast simplification and does not do justice to many fine works of fiction that are also 'genre'.



Research point

Make a list of as many genres and subgenres as you can. You can browse bookshops or libraries to help you, as well as the internet. Then look up definitions of 'literary fiction' and make notes in your writing diary about what you think makes a novel 'literary' or otherwise.



Exercise 1

As a reader, you may enjoy reading particular genres. Go to your bookshelves (this may be a virtual bookshelf, such as an e-reader) and have a look at the kinds of books you read.

Make a list of the genres you enjoy. Is there one genre in particular that you're drawn to?

List any genres that are missing and ask yourself why. Could you broaden your reading habits to include books from this genre? Don't let stereotypes cloud your judgement and prevent you from enjoying some fine work.

The genre you enjoy reading most is likely to be the kind of book you will enjoy writing – but not always. It's important to read deeply in your chosen genre, but you should also read widely too, as there's much to be learnt from novels in every genre.



Exercise 2

Even if you have only the haziest idea for your novel at the moment, write down what genre(s) it is likely to be written in. Do you read a lot of novels in this genre? If not, you've got some reading to do.

How would you characterise this genre? What aspects of the book suggest which genre it is? For example, is it the main plot line ('what happens'), the style it's written in, or the way the book ends?

Are there any characteristics that you expect to find in most books written in this genre? Some writers like to 'push the boundaries' of genre, but if you push them too far, the book may no longer fit within that genre. For example, can you have a crime book where no crime is actually committed? Or a romance without a happy ending?

Think about how you'll satisfy your readers' expectations – and possibly subvert them. If you decide to deviate from the expectations of the genre, think about how you will ensure your readers won't be disappointed. Make notes in your writing diary.



Research point

Reading other novels is an important way of doing research – as well as reading for enjoyment, you need to read like a novelist and think about what other writers' novels can teach you. Get into the habit of thinking about each novel you read in terms of how the writer created it. How do they build their characters? How do they construct their plots? Have they created a convincing world? Books where these things aren't done well can also be extremely constructive. Think about what didn't work and why.

Get into the habit of making notes in your writing diary about your reading, such as every time you finish a book.

Project 2: What is a novelist?

There's a simple answer to this: a novelist is someone who writes novels. It may sound facetious, but it isn't meant to be. The point is that there's no particular 'type' of person who writes novels.

Perhaps the only thing that all novelists have in common is that they have determination. Writing a novel means being in it for the long haul. No one writes a novel in a week (or not a very good one!). There are tall tales about books being written in a very short time, but these are misleading – while a draft may have been bashed out in a month, the writer may have been carrying the idea around in their mind for many years and have already filled copious notebooks with thoughts and ideas. Or if the first draft was written in a short splurge, many months were then spent redrafting and honing it. The fact is, writing a novel takes time – lots of it.

If you want to write a novel, you need to ask yourself whether you have the determination to see a big project through to the end. But before you feel completely daunted, remember that it can be broken into small, manageable chunks. Setting yourself a series of small tasks can make the process much easier (such as the exercises and assignments you'll complete for this course).

What sometimes gets forgotten in all the talk about how difficult novel writing is and how much time it takes, is how enjoyable the process is. Novelists wouldn't do it otherwise. Creating characters, constructing a plot, and building a world that other people will lose themselves in for at least several hours, is a deeply satisfying experience.



Exercise 3

This exercise comes from Louise Doughty's excellent book, *A Novel in a Year* (Simon & Schuster, 2007) and requires complete honesty. After you've completed it, you can rip it up and burn it so that nobody will see what you've written – but you do need to be honest with yourself.

Write down why you want to write a novel. There's no right or wrong answer to this question. If you want to be a novelist because you think it will bring you glamour and money, then say so. (Though be warned you might be in the wrong business! Lucrative book deals are rare – that's why they make the news). If you want to prove someone wrong who said you couldn't do it, that's fine. If you want to create a beautiful piece of art, write that down. If you love reading and want to bring that kind of pleasure to other people, that's fine too.

You can keep hold of this to remind yourself of why you started this mammoth task when times get tough. But if you want to keep these thoughts private, then get the matches out!

Just as every novel is different, so people's reasons for wanting to write a novel vary wildly. The truth is that very few writers find their jobs particularly glamorous or lucrative, and this is why it's important that you actually enjoy the writing process, rather than simply treating it as a means to an end. Of course, writing can be difficult and frustrating at times, but if you don't enjoy writing at least some of the time, then writing a novel may not be the best option for you.



Reading

If the one characteristic that all novelists have in common is determination, then one characteristic all good novelists have in common is that they are avid readers. If you want to write well, then reading widely, deeply and critically, as well as for sheer enjoyment, is essential. In every reflective commentary (which you submit with your creative assignments) you should refer to your reading and consider how it is influencing your own writing.

For more guidance on what to include in your reflective commentaries, consult the *Critical Writing Guide*: <https://www.oca-student.com/resource-type/study-guide/critical-writing-guide>

When you have learned to analyse and criticise other writers' strengths and weaknesses, you will be well on your way to learning how to analyse and criticise your own.

(Doughty, 2007, p. 30)

If you haven't read much in the way of classic literature, then dip in and find out what you like. This shouldn't feel like a burden, though. Reading contemporary literature is at least as important, if not more so. 'Contemporary' simply means any writers publishing new work since 1950. 'Classic' is a more contested term, but is often used to mean a book that's regarded as exemplary or noteworthy; these will often feature on reading lists and school and university curricula. Classics are often older books that have 'stood the test of time' (such as novels by Jane Austen, Charles Dickens and George Eliot) that are still enjoyed today. There's much that can be learned from classic writers, but this doesn't mean you should write like Jane Austen. Indeed, if Jane Austen was writing now, she wouldn't sound like Jane Austen anymore either.

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Mario Sughì, *Sunday morning at the park*, © Bridgeman Images



Exercise 4

If you want to write a novel, you must love reading them. Take a moment to think about three of your favourite novels.

Write a few sentences about each one, describing why you love these books. It could be anything – the characters, the plot, the world that you lose yourself in every time you open it – but try to be precise.

What is it exactly about the character that draws you in? What is so engrossing about the plot?

Think about whether there are any qualities in these books that you'd like to capture or recreate in your own novel. Make some notes in your writing diary.

Thinking about what you enjoy as a reader is very helpful for thinking about what your aims are as a writer. Read widely and follow your own path. Read in your own genre, read the latest bestsellers and prize-winners, but read off the beaten track too. Libraries and second-hand bookshops are great places for truffling around and discovering overlooked but wonderful writers. Read books written by writers from around the world and books in translation, too, as it will open your mind to a huge range of possibilities about what a novel can be.

If you only read the books that everyone else is reading, you can only think what everyone else is thinking.

(Haruki Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*, p. 39)

Finding support

When you write a novel you will need as much support as you can get – whether this is from your tutor, your family and friends, other OCA students or perhaps from a writing group.



Exercise 5

This is a well-established creative writing exercise, adapted from Andrew Cowan's *The Art of Writing Fiction* (2011) (on your essential reading list).

First of all, under 'Allies', list everything that helps you to write. These can be as profound or as trivial as you like (e.g. a notebook, friends who are supportive of your ambitions to write, and a fruit bowl which sits next to your laptop, so you can snack on satsumas without getting up and losing your train of thought). Spend five minutes writing the list and try to include as many different things as possible.

Now write a new list, titled 'Enemies'. Here you need to list everything that stops you writing. These might not be real 'enemies' – they might be your family, who naturally require a lot of your time. It might be your cat, who likes to sit on your laptop. Or it might be that niggly inner voice (and you're not alone, most writers have one) that says you can't do this and that everything you write is rubbish.

Now look at the first list and think about whether there are ways to maximise contact with your 'allies':

- Could you spend time with supportive friends and share your work?
- How about keeping a supply of your favourite notebooks?
- Are you able to stock up on snacks to keep nearby?

Do the same with your second list, but think about whether there are ways to minimise your contact with your 'enemies':

- Obviously you can't ship your family off to a desert island, but perhaps you could schedule some regular time alone?
- Could you persuade the cat to sit elsewhere?
- As for that niggly inner voice – that's not easy to silence, but spending time with those who are supportive of your work and writing ambitions will help.

Building up momentum: finding a writing routine that works

If you're writing short fiction, journalism or poetry, having a writing routine might not be particularly important. But for writers working on long-form projects (novels, non-fiction books and full-length scripts), having a regular block of time set aside for writing can be crucial. You need to 'touch base' with your work regularly, and unless you ring-fence regular chunks of time for writing, it can be very hard to build up the momentum necessary to complete your book.

Writing at the same time on a regular basis can be helpful. Perhaps there's an hour or two each day that you could set aside? This is ideal, as many writers thrive by writing 'little and often'. When you're not writing, the subconscious is often still hard at work, and will send ideas floating up to your conscious brain when you least expect it – driving to work, weeding the flowerbed, washing your hair, and so on.

But if you can't write every day, don't panic – you can still complete a novel. Perhaps there are a couple of occasions each week you could reserve for writing – going to a café every Monday after work for a few hours, or unplugging the phone on Sunday afternoons and writing at home, for example?

Writing a novel is likely to require a few sacrifices. It's a big time commitment, and so will use up the hours that you've been spending in other ways. Will something need to give?



Exercise 6

Take a look at your diary (for the coming twelve months if possible). There are bound to be times when you know you won't be able to get much writing done – family occasions, busy times at work, and other major commitments. These are inevitable parts of life, and they need to be taken into consideration. But what about the rest of the time?

Set aside at least two occasions every week for your writing (up to five if possible – but not seven, as days off are important too), and write in your diary that these times are reserved for your novel. This will help prevent you from putting other appointments in these slots.

Think about how you spend your time already – is there anything you could give up (not for forever, but for at least a year as you work through this course) in order to make more time for your novel?

Notebooks

Ideas arrive in the brain at the most inconvenient of moments. Keeping a notebook handy – one small enough to slip in a coat pocket or the car door – means you'll never forget an idea again.

Many writers get pretty obsessive about the stationery side of things – but while rituals about particular notebooks or pencils, or having hot drinks to hand, or a special cushion to sit on, might seem like a distraction, they can be useful ways of letting the mind and body know that you are preparing to write, and help many writers get into the 'writing zone'.

Some writers prefer to have a notebook that's only for the particular novel they're working on. Here's novelist Nicola Barker on her own stationery habits:

Each novel has its own specially designed and decorated notebook. These are sacred objects to me. They will be full of letters and tickets and articles from magazines. Prayer cards. Stickers. The covers are usually ornate and preserved with sticky-back plastic. I love marker pens – circling things with them, using them for emphasis. When I feel defeated I return to the notebook and it always reassures me. There will often be ideas there that I have completely forgotten about.

(Nicola Barker, quoted in *The Guardian*, 18 November 2017)

Where to write

As well as needing something to write on (such as notebooks, A4 pads, a laptop) you need somewhere to write, somewhere that suits your personal needs as a writer. Some people are happy to write in the middle of bustle – in cafés, on trains, on benches in shopping centres. Other people need absolute quiet and have to be creative in finding that space for themselves. Think about your own needs as a writer and what you can do to meet them. If you need quiet and your home is not a quiet space, think about writing in your local library. Some writers even borrow spare rooms in friends' houses or rent offices especially for writing, but that option isn't available to many of us.

Project 3: Generating material: using your own life

The next two projects are about generating material. If you don't have a clear idea for your novel, hopefully these exercises will generate some useful thoughts. If the exercises send you off on tangents, that's even better – just keep writing. Don't worry about following the exercise precisely as they are only prompts.

Regardless of how well-thought out your novel is already, take the plunge with these exercises. A novel is created from more than one idea: it takes hundreds, if not thousands, of ideas to complete one. You never know how doing what seems like a completely unrelated exercise might provide inspiration for something that is related to your novel – an idea for a new character, a resonant image, or a dramatic event that might alter the plot. Even if the material you produce is eventually discarded, you will still be learning, simply by writing.

There are two things that almost all novels have in common:

- They contain characters.
- They contain events.

Rather than launching into six months' research about the Napoleonic Wars, or life in contemporary North Korea, the easiest way to start generating material is by writing about people and events from your own life. This doesn't mean you're writing autobiography: your own life is simply the starting point. You can embellish and drift as far from the truth as you like.



Exercise 7

Most of us feel like slightly different people depending on who we are with. We might be confident around our family, but more nervous at work. We might be outgoing with a close friend, but shy in a big group. Think about when you feel most like yourself – your 'best' self, if you like.

Write a short piece in first person (using the pronoun 'I'), introducing your 'best' self to a stranger, someone who is going to really like you. Tell them about yourself – who you are, what you're like, what your interests are, your hopes and fears.

Write no more than a page and then put it to one side for now.



Exercise 8

Think of someone you know well, but haven't seen in a while.

Describe them taking the bus somewhere (even if this person never usually takes the bus). Imagine the bus gets stuck in traffic and they are going to be late for an important appointment. How do they react? Calm, angry or anxious? Would they be on their phone, or engage the person next to them in conversation?

Now sketch this out as a short scene.

Putting a character in a scenario and showing them under pressure can be a very effective way of letting the reader get to know them. And it's far more interesting than having them sitting alone in a room, musing about the meaning of life – unless you are a very skilled writer indeed.

Dramatic incidents

Drama is the lifeblood of novels: when you have 80,000 words to work with, something needs to happen. A slice of life is unlikely to capture and hold your readers' imagination for the duration of a novel. But drama doesn't need to mean extreme events like car chases or nuclear bombs (although feel free to include this level of drama if that's what appeals!).

Drama can be created from everyday events, such as a family member returning after a long absence or a character discovering they're pregnant.

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due to copyright.**

Traffic in Piccadilly Circus (coloured photo), © Bridgeman Images



Exercise 9

Think of a time when you had an accident. It can be as major or as minor as you like.

Write a short scene (no more than a page) in which the 'drama' of this accident unfolds. Even if it's something small like smashing a glass, try to make the scene as tense as possible by slowing down the action and focusing on small details.

Bring in as many of the five senses as you can – sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste. This will help the reader enter into the drama and imagine it for themselves.



Exercise 10

Think of a location you know well. It can be any kind of place: a country, a city, a meadow, a shed, a room.

Go there in your mind. Think about the five senses again.

Now send one of the characters from your novel there and write a short piece describing the place from their point of view. They might see it quite differently from you.

This exercise shows how character can have an impact on setting: a rural paradise for one character is the back of beyond for another. Bear this in mind when describing the environment of your novel – how it's described will depend on whose point of view the story is being told from.

Project 4: Generating material: using the lives of others

Most novels are a complicated mixture of materials drawn from the writer's life, from the lives of those around them, from specific research, and from the strange realm known as the imagination. Often a writer blends these different materials together so intricately, even they forget what's from life and what's made up.

It can be a mistake to do all the research before you start writing your novel: it may be possible to research a subject for so many years that you end up not writing your book at all. Alternatively, you may research many things that don't end up being useful for your book and fail to research the things that you do actually need to know. Often, you won't be clear about exactly what you need to know until you start writing. So how can you find the balance between researching and writing?

Doing research

A novelist must be someone who is curious – about other people, other species, the wider world. Take a moment to think about what interests you. Often novelists find a way of incorporating their interests into their books. For example, Barbara Kingsolver is interested in climate change and explores this issue in her novel *Flight Behaviour* (2012).

Your novel might feature something you already know a lot about – perhaps you are a musician or a chef and want to write about someone with this profession. In her debut novel, *The Sewing Machine* (2017), Natalie Fergie made use of her expertise in textiles and sewing. Or there might be something you're keen to research especially for your novel – Ian McEwan researched the experiences of a surgeon for his novel *Saturday* (2005).



Exercise 11

Take a moment to think about your interests. Don't be modest: everyone has at least one specialist subject, whether it's bread-making, car mechanics, knitting, guinea-pig breeding, Tarot reading, or local history.

Could you make use of any of this knowledge in your novel? It doesn't have to play a major role, but ascribing a character a particular passion can make even a minor character more interesting and memorable for the reader. Make notes in your writing diary.

Now think about some areas of interest that you know nothing about – but would like to. How easy would they be to research? Make a list in your writing diary, along with notes about how you could research these topics.

Research can be done in many different ways. But before you say that your novel won't require any research, you should be aware that all novels require research, even those that are loosely autobiographical.

Research can involve reading non-fiction books and scouring the internet for factual information, such as about a place or time. It can also involve visiting a place, whether another country or city, or simply the kind of landscape that features in your novel. Perhaps a character visits an art gallery, in which case you could do the same and make notes about the things you see and hear and even smell in a gallery. If your character is a skilled practitioner at something, you might even be able to learn this skill yourself – a musical instrument or a craft, for example.

If that's not possible, perhaps you could interview someone who does know about this activity? People are often very willing to talk about something they love, and if you approach them in a friendly and professional manner, you may be amazed at the results.

Wherever your novel is set, you'll need to inhabit it imaginatively, and if you can do this in the practical ways described above then so much the better. But perhaps your novel is set somewhere you can't visit or even learn about from books – perhaps it's about a silicon-based life form that lives in another galaxy. In that case, you need to do research in your mind, asking yourself all sorts of questions about the environment, the language, the appearance, the values and belief systems, the laws of physics and the habits that exist in the world you're creating.

There will be more about world building and developing your research skills in Parts Three and Five.



Exercise 12

Imagine someone who's the opposite of you in as many ways as possible.

Think about where they live, what they look like, what they do with their time, the language they speak, their beliefs and values, what they like to eat, how they dress, and so on.

Write a paragraph in first person, allowing them to introduce themselves.

If you like thinking about this character, keep writing. You can choose to develop this character further in Part Two of the course.

Often a writer's characters will contain a little kernel of the writer's personality in them, even if the character seems nothing like the writer on the surface. You can use your own personality – your character traits, your way of speaking, your values and beliefs – to create a whole range of new characters.



Exercise 13

Go back to the monologue you wrote for Exercise 7 in Project 3, describing what you are like.

Rewrite it in third person and use whichever gender you like. As you rewrite it, allow yourself to move away from the idea that this is you – don't worry about sticking to the truth. Start to embellish this character sketch: exaggerate some characteristics, minimise others, and give this person some views or personality traits that are nothing like yours. See if this character catches fire and becomes someone independent from you.

Keeping a commonplace book

This is a rather misleading name for a box or folder in which you file items that might inspire you to write at some point. You may have already started a file, box or drawer that contains newspaper clippings, postcards, CDs, letters, old notebooks and other items that have become your writer's storehouse.

Some people also keep a commonplace book online, using websites such as Pinterest or software such as Evernote. Use whatever suits you.



Research point

Read OCA tutor Nina Milton's blog on keeping a commonplace book:

<https://weareoca.com/subject/creative-writing/the-commonplace-book-a-miscellany-of-new-ideas/>



Exercise 14

Spend a few hours trawling for material that could be helpful for your novel. Remember that your commonplace book can be a file or a box (a shoebox is a good size), or even a small plastic crate.

Think about what images could be useful, e.g. for the novel's setting. If your book is set in the Lake District, you could look at some tourism websites and find images of the fells.

Sometimes objects can be helpful. Does your character have an object which is particularly special to them (e.g. a piece of clothing, a pebble or an old photograph)? Writers often forget the sense of touch, but this can be as powerful as smell when it comes to unlocking a character's memories and emotions. Keep your eyes peeled when you're out and about for any objects that might help you to develop your characters.

Look through books and magazines, browse online, take your camera (or smartphone with camera) out into the city or into the woods – wherever your characters go.

Keep adding to your collection on a regular basis, and on those days that you're struggling to find inspiration, see if you can find it in your commonplace book.

Project 5: Planning

There's no formula or secret recipe to writing a good novel. All writers work differently and every novel is written in a different way.

At one extreme, some writers will plan their novel in great detail on paper or on screen before starting to write it. Others will plan it in great detail in their heads. Others will do very little planning at all, whether on paper or in their heads. But many writers will fall somewhere between the two extremes.

There are considerable benefits to planning your novel. You will probably reduce the number of false starts and wrong turnings you make, for one thing. You may even reduce the number of drafts you need to do. You can write with confidence, heading towards a known ending.

On the other hand, planning in lots of detail may lead to inflexibility. If a new idea occurs to you part way in, you may feel reluctant to see where it leads, because you don't want to deviate from your plan. But it's natural for novels to evolve as you write them – new ideas will occur to you, and you will get a deeper sense of what your novel is really about. Following these new ideas may make for a more profound and interesting novel.

Think about where you lie on the planning scale – are you a meticulous planner or do you prefer to dive into the unknown? Perhaps you could spend some time sketching out a rough outline, chapter-by-chapter, but leave some things open. Even if you don't think you're a planner, give the next two exercises a try.



Exercise 15

Think about the genre you're writing and what sort of word count you're aiming for. Remember most novels are around 80,000 to 100,000 words, but sci-fi and fantasy tend to be longer, romance is often shorter, and literary fiction is more varied.

Now think about how you want to divide the words up in terms of chapters.

- Will your chapters be long or short?
- Will they be the same length or vary, depending on what's happening in the plot?
- Will your chapters be grouped into sections?

Make some notes in your notebook or writing diary.

For each assignment on this course you're asked to submit a section of your novel, but this doesn't have to correspond to one chapter per assignment. Depending how long your chapters are, one assignment might include three chapters, for example, or only half of one chapter, so long as you don't exceed the maximum word count (2,000 words for Assignment One and 2,500 words for subsequent assignments).

This image has been removed due to copyright.

Edward Ruscha, *We Few Open Book*, 2003 (acrylic on linen),
© Bridgeman Images



Research point

There's plenty of software available for writers which can be used to plan, research, write, redraft and complete your work. Research this software online and think about whether this approach could be helpful for you.



Exercise 16

You can write this in paragraphs or use bullet points if you prefer.

- Give your novel a title (this is just a working title – you can change it later).
- Describe your novel in terms of its genre (and subgenre if appropriate). If you have a sense of its mood or tone then put that in, too (e.g. crime fiction can be kooky and offbeat, or gritty and hard-hitting; a comedy can be a searing political satire or a knockabout romcom. Try to be as precise as you can.
- List the main characters and describe them in a sentence or two. Focus on their personalities rather than their appearance (unless any aspect of their appearance is particularly important to the novel).
- Describe the setting(s) of the novel briefly.
- Outline the main events of the novel to the best of your knowledge.
- If you know how you want the novel to end, make sure you include this.

Try to keep your response to this exercise under 500 words. You'll be asked to submit it to your tutor as part of Assignment One, but nothing you've written here is set in stone. It's just a snapshot of your thinking about your novel at this stage in the course.

Project 6: Launching into your novel

You've warmed up. You've got your swimming costume and goggles on. Your towel is folded up at the side of the pool and you've got a bar of your favourite chocolate ready in your bag for later. But now it's time to dive in.

For your first assignment you will need to submit 2,000 words of your novel. By now you should have a character or two (maybe more) beginning to form, and an outline.

Every novel that was ever written began with a single sentence. The first sentence you write is likely to be revised many times before it finds its final form, so don't sweat over it too much. Some writers start at the beginning, writing the first chapter first, then the second chapter, then the third, and so on. Other writers dart around, writing whatever scenes they feel most inclined to write. There are pros and cons to both approaches, but neither is right or wrong. Part of being a writer is about finding what works for you.



Research point

Read OCA tutor Nina Milton's blog, '*Hollow Places*', about the perils of not writing from the beginning: <https://weareoca.com/subject/creative-writing/hollow-places/>

There are no short cuts. There are no guarantees that you won't make a false start (or several), but every word you put down is one word closer to the end, even if that word is later discarded or revised. You simply have to begin.



Exercise 17

If that's still too scary, try a freewrite. Write at the top of the page, 'My novel is about ...' and then keep writing for exactly ten minutes.

- It's best to set a timer so you're not distracted by checking the time.
- Keep your pen to the paper (or fingers to the keyboard) and write without worrying about what you're writing.
- Don't stop to correct or delete anything, don't worry about spelling, punctuation or grammar.
- Just empty your mind on to the page and don't censor yourself.

When the time's up, read through your freewriting, highlighting any words or phrases that strike you as interesting or might have potential in your novel. Transfer them into your notebook.



Exercise 18

Try another freewrite, this time completing the following sentence: 'My mother always told me ...' Follow the same guidelines as in the exercise above.

The great thing about freewrites is that, as well as generating material, they can reveal some of your preoccupations, which are often the very things you want to write about in your novel.



Exercise 19

Try a freewrite on different aspects of your novel. Write a character's name at the top of the page and freewrite whatever comes to mind.

You can do the same with locations, themes, or anything else that you already know about your novel.



Exercise 20

No more exercises, no more freewrites. Just write a first draft of a section from your novel – the beginning if that's the easiest place to start – and try to get at least 2,000 words on the page.

This can be as unpolished and rambling as you like – it's just a first draft.

Put it away for at least three days, then print it out and read it through once without tinkering. Printing it out is important as most of us read more carefully on paper than on screen.

Read it through a second time and make notes on it about what works and what doesn't, what needs to be changed and what needs to be deleted.

Then open a new document and type up or handwrite a second draft. This is the business of writing – splurging words on the page, taking some time away, then redrafting with a cool head.



Tip

Get into the habit of saving all the versions of your drafts as you go. That way, if you decide you've taken a wrong turning, or deleted something you later want to retrieve, you can return to a previous version of your novel. It may take a while before you find the perfect method of storing your documents. Some writers save each version of the novel as a single document, whereas others start a new document for each chapter.

But whatever you do, back your work up. The importance of this cannot be overstated. There are true stories of writers running into burning buildings to retrieve laptops because they contain the only versions of their novels-in-progress! Saving work online is one of the best methods of saving work, because it will still exist even if you lose your hardware. Use an online storage facility (such as The Cloud) or simply email your work to yourself on a (very!) regular basis.

Assignment One

Congratulations – you’ve almost completed the first part of the course. You have thought about what a novel is, what kind of novel you want to write, how you can make time for writing, and the pros and cons of planning. You will also have started to generate some material for your novel.

Read through each project again, checking that you understood it the first time round. You may need (or want) to repeat some of the exercises – make sure you’ve done each one at least once.

For this assignment, you need to work on a more extended piece of writing and this should be a section of your intended novel. It might be the beginning or it might be a section from further into the novel. It should be just one section, though, rather than a few unrelated sections. Write around 2,000 words (no more). Although this is an early draft, you should edit and proofread your work before sending it to your tutor.

You should also submit your 500-word outline of your novel (Project 5, Exercise 16), so your tutor can get a sense of how your novel might unfold.

This first assignment is not submitted for formal assessment. It will help your tutor to get to know your work better and see where your strengths and weaknesses lie. It should take at least three hours.

Consult the *Creative Writing Student Guide* for how to present your assignment. Put your name, student number, course name (‘Starting Your Novel’) and assignment number on all pieces of work you are submitting. Put this information in the header or footer field so it appears automatically on every page. Double space your work and number your pages.

You will also need to write a 500-word reflective commentary. Remind yourself of what’s required by looking at the *Critical Writing Guide*. Your commentary should focus on the work you’re submitting and it should discuss the techniques you’ve used and why. Reflect honestly on its strengths and weaknesses. Mention what you’ve been reading and consider how your reading is influencing your own writing. List any references according to the Harvard referencing style.

Reflection

Before you send this assignment to your tutor, take a look at the assessment criteria for this course, which will be used to mark your work if you get your work formally assessed.

The assessment criteria are listed in the introduction to this course. Review how you think you have done against the criteria and make notes in your writing diary.