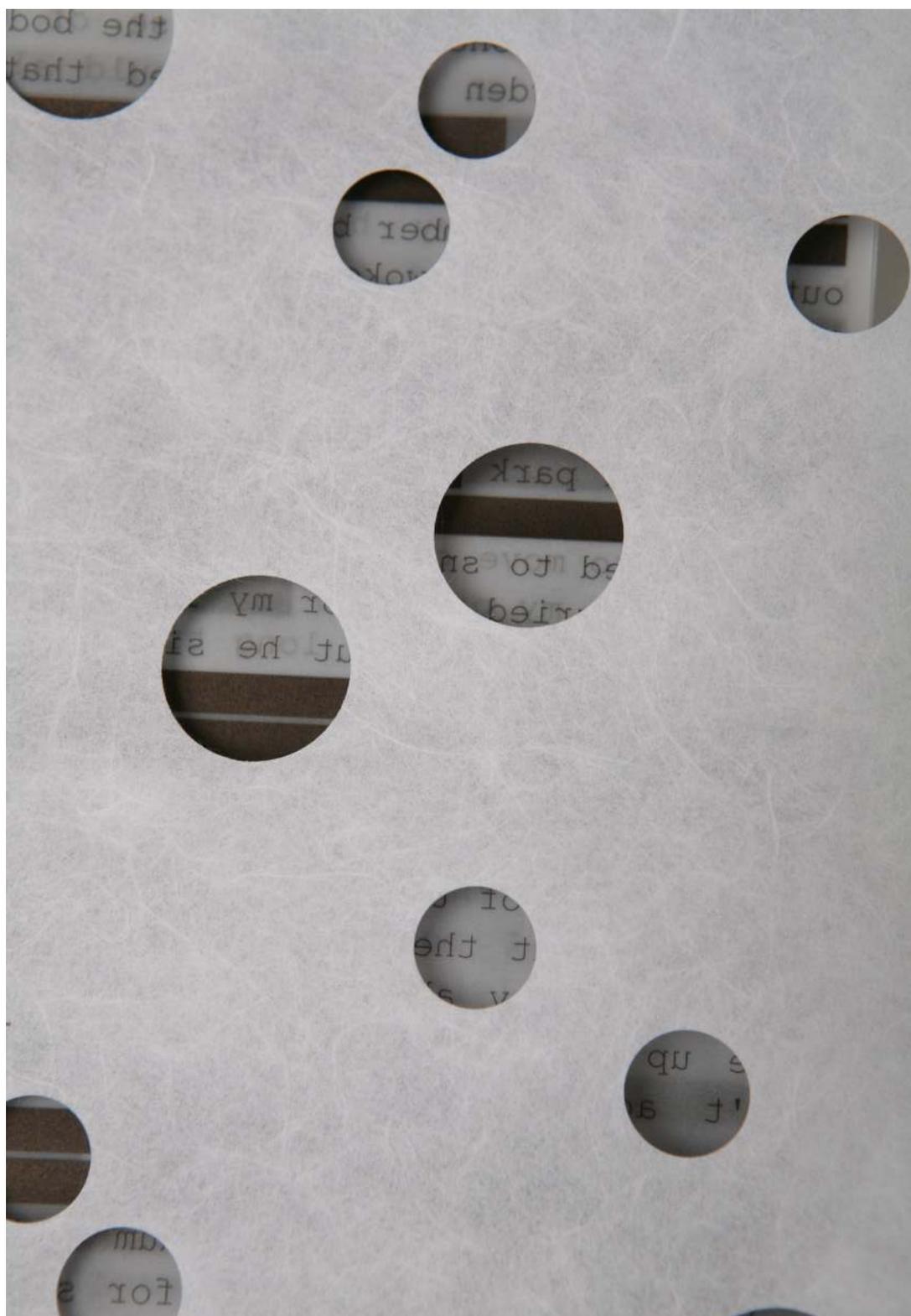


Creative Writing 1

Writing Skills



Level HE4 - 40 CATS

Open College of the Arts
Michael Young Arts Centre
Redbrook Business Park
Wilthorpe Road
Barnsley S75 1JN

0800 731 2116
enquiries@oca.ac.uk
weareoca.com
oca.ac.uk

Registered charity number: 327446
OCA is a company limited by guarantee and
registered in England under number 2125674.

Copyright OCA: Updated 2018

Document Control Number: CW4WS310118

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means - electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or otherwise - without prior permission of the publisher (Open College of the Arts)

Cover image: Stephanie D'Hubert

Contents

Part one Getting started	9
Project 1 Keeping a writer's notebook	12
Project 2 Freewriting	16
Project 3 A commonplace book	18
Project 4 Writing as seeing	19
Project 5 The five senses	23
Project 6 Descriptive prose passages	26
Assignment one	29
Part two Writing about people	31
Project 1 Observing people	34
Project 2 Landscapes and emotions	40
Project 3 Possessions and characterisation	43
Project 4 Motivating your characters	45
Project 5 Creating a history	47
Assignment two	49
Part three Making your characters speak	51
Project 1 Monologue	54
Project 2 Writing dialogue in a story	56
Project 3 Point of view	61
Project 4 Variations in speech	64
Project 5 Making your characters think	67
Project 6 Creating a balanced narrative	69
Assignment three	71

Part four Style and language	73
Project 1 Style and convention	76
Project 2 Voice and persona	80
Project 3 Simplicity	83
Project 4 Language	87
Project 5 Imagery	95
Assignment four	97
Part five Plot and structure	99
Project 1 Creating a 'spark of inspiration'	102
Project 2 Character and conflict	104
Project 3 Plotlines	107
Project 4 Beginnings, middles and endings	109
Project 5 Structure	115
Project 6 Themes	118
Project 7 Redrafting	121
Project 8 Overview	122
Assignment five	123

Before You Start

Welcome to *Writing 1: Writing Skills*. Your OCA Student handbook should be able to answer most questions about this and all other OCA courses, so keep it to hand as you work through this course.

If you are new to the OCA, make sure you work through the OCA's free online induction course **An Introduction to HE** at: <https://www.oca-student.com/before-you-start>.

The *Creative Writing Student Guide* and the *Critical Writing Guide* are also important resources for this and all other Creative Writing courses.

Course aims

Writing 1: Writing Skills aims to:

- Give practice in writing creatively from direct sensory experience and detailed observation.
- Explore language and style in different literary forms.
- Develop skills in drafting, evaluating and editing texts.
- Develop your reflective skills.

Course outcomes

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

- Write effectively drawing on sensory experience and observation.
- Show development of language, style and expression within your writing.
- Draft, redraft and edit self-generated texts with discrimination.
- Reflect on your own learning experience.

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 system is explained in some detail in your Student handbook.

If you haven't already done so, please create a profile of yourself and email it to your tutor as soon as possible. This will help them to understand how best to support you during the course. Your profile should be a paragraph or two about your experience to date. Add any background information that you think may be relevant for your tutor to know – for example, your experience of writing so far, your reasons for starting this course and what you hope to achieve from it. It's also helpful for your tutor to know the kinds of things you enjoy reading.

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 ('Writing Skills') and assignment number. Your tutor will get back to you in the meantime continue with the course while you're waiting, but wait to receive their feedback before completing the next assignment.

Formal assessment

Read the section on assessment in your Creative Writing Student Guide at an early stage in the course. Your *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.

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 whatever 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 and learning logs are the equivalent to creative writing students' writing diaries, notebooks and commonplace books.

Planning ahead

This Level 1 course represents 400 hours of learning time. Allow around 20% of this time for reflection and writing diary development. The course should take about a year to complete if you spend around 8 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.

Writing 1: Writing Skills is divided into five parts, corresponding to the five course assignments. Each part of the course addresses a different issue or topic and is separated into projects designed to tackle the topic in bite-sized chunks. As well as information and advice, each project offers writing exercises. The exercises build up slowly and feed into the assignments that you'll send to your tutor.

Each assignment will ask you for between 1000 and 3000 words of writing, the word count increasing slightly each time. You'll also submit a short reflective commentary (up to 500 words) describing the writing process and your experience of that part of the course. You'll be asked to write an extended reflective commentary (1000-1500 words) on the course as a whole as part of your final assignment.

Look at the sections in the *Critical Writing Guide* for what to include in your Reflective Commentaries. These are separate from your writing diary (which is for you alone, unless you choose to share it or put it online), your notebooks and your commonplace book, all of which are discussed in Part one.

The first assignment is a diagnostic assignment that will allow your tutor to get a feel for your writing and help them to decide how best to support you. This assignment is not submitted for formal assessment.

Managing your time

Each part of the course should take about 80 hours to complete. You'll need to decide how to divide this time in a way that works effectively for you.

The time you spend on each part of the course will depend on how quickly you work, the time available to you, how easy or hard you find each exercise, and how quickly you want to complete the course. Don't worry if you take more or less time than suggested, provided that you're not getting bogged down in a particular part of the course and that your tutor is happy with the work you're producing. If it helps, draft a rough study plan and revisit this at the end of each part. The course structure is intended to be flexible, but it's always useful to keep deadlines in mind.

Reading

You'll be provided with a copy of the course reader, which you'll need to refer to throughout the course:

Bell, Julia and Magrs, Paul (eds) (2001) *The Creative Writing Coursebook* London: Macmillan.

A reading list for the course is available at the end of this course guide and on the OCA website. Your tutor will also make reading suggestions on the Tutor Report they give you when you have completed each assignment.

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 for the book, article or website straight away. You must fully reference any 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 – and ensure that you don't inadvertently plagiarise someone else's work.

Assessment criteria

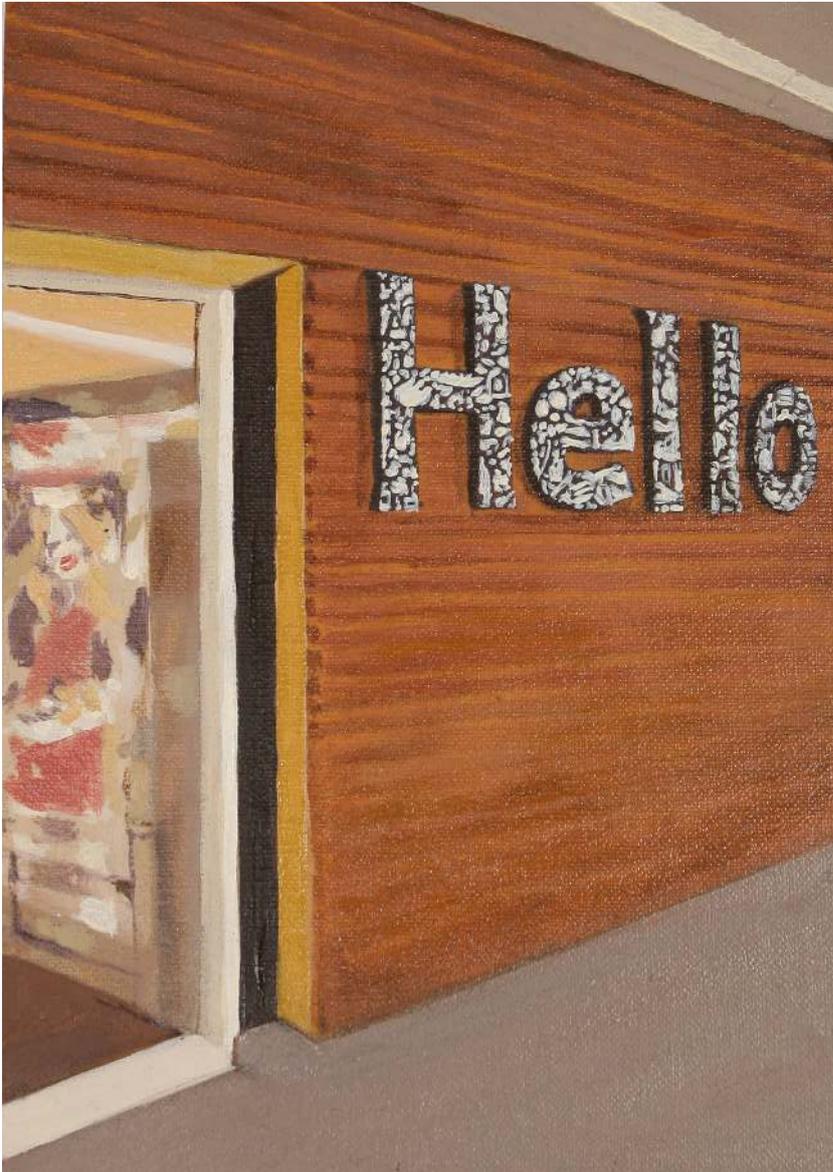
Here are the assessment criteria for this course. These are central to the assessment process for this course, so if you are going to have your work assessed to gain formal credits, please make sure you take note of these criteria and consider how each of the assignments you complete demonstrates evidence 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. Note down your findings in your writing diary, referring to your perceived strengths and weaknesses, and taking into account the criteria every step of the way. This will help you to prepare for assessment.

Assessment criteria points

- **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 the student's 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 level 4, 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 (e.g. Poetry).
- **Craft of writing** - Technical competence in the student's 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.)

Creative Writing 1

Part One Getting Started



OCA student Angela Johnson

'Just write; tomorrow you can make it better.'

Bernard MacLaverty

Please use the table below to keep track of your progress throughout Part One.

Exercise	Page	Complete
1.0	15	
1.1	15	
1.2	17	
1.3	19	
1.4	20	
1.5	20	
1.6	22	
1.7	24	
1.8	24	
1.9	25	
1.10	25	
1.11	26	
Research Point		
1.0	14	
1.1	15	
1.2	17	
1.3	19	
1.4	23	
1.5	28	

Introduction

Writing is about storytelling. Stories lie at the heart of all human society and fulfil our need to communicate and 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 but 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 story may carry deeper messages.

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

You will be asked to make use of several forms of note taking. These are: a writer's notebook, writing diary, commonplace book and reflective commentary. Make sure you understand the difference between these forms of activity and use each notebook appropriately. Project 1 explains how to use a notebook, and Project 3 focuses on the commonplace book.

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

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

Project 1 Keeping a writer's notebook

'Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!'

Henry James, *The Art of Fiction*

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.

You should have already planned your writing diary, but it's easy at first to confuse this with notebook keeping. Keep the two separate. Use your writing diary to record your thoughts on the writing process and your progression through the work you'll do.

Use your notebooks to record writing. Aim to use your notebooks at least as much as your writing diary. 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 to get you in the habit of writing daily.

You can 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 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 – 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 good 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. 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. Jot it down when it comes to you, ready to work on later.

Polishing up your description

With your notebook in your pocket, whatever you see or experience can be instantly recorded. 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 you have your notebook with you, you can document anything you need.

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. 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.

For example

If you try to write freely 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.



Research point 1.0

Read Section 1 ‘Getting Started’ in Bell and Magrs (eds), *The Creative Writing Coursebook*.

Exercise 1.0

Once you have managed to record 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 above 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.

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



Research point 1.1

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 may 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 Katherine Mansfield Notebooks (University of Minnesota Press)

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

A Writer's Notebook, W. Somerset Maugham (Vintage)

A Writer's Notebook, Anthony Powell (William Heinemann)

South and West: From A Notebook, Joan Didion (Fourth Estate)

Exercise 1.1

- 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.
- Clearly name and file this work.

This exercise should take you approximately an hour.

Project 2 Freewriting

Freewriting is a form of writing that takes the pressure off you and frees up the imagination. It can also tap into the deepest levels of your thought processes. It is extremely useful as an exercise to get the writing muscles working before you start anything else in your writing day. Freewriting prevents you from constantly correcting your writing, or coming to a complete halt because you feel it isn't good enough.

- Choose a topic, perhaps a single word. At first, choose your topics at random, but later you might wish to explore specific themes that interest you.
- Decide on a time limit. At first make this quite short, say ten minutes. Increase the time as the days move on. You can set a timer, or give yourself the challenge of writing to the bottom of the page.
- Start writing. It doesn't matter what you write. It doesn't matter if the topic changes.
- Once you start writing, you must not stop. You must not lay down your pen at all. If you run out of things to say, write I can't think of what to say, or what shall I write, what shall I write, or repeat the last word you wrote or any other repetitive phrase over and over until you get going again (it won't be long).
- Do not stop to correct your work. Don't correct spellings, grammar or punctuation, or the proper sequence of events. Do not cross things out.
- Use memory and your thought processes to keep writing. For example, your subject is sky and you begin writing about stars. Then a memory of lying on your back watching the clouds comes to you, but as you write about that, you recall what you did before or after watching the clouds, so you write about that, and as you do, you get interested in writing about the people you were with. When memory runs out, you make stuff up.
- Remember that none of this need see the light of day. The reason you never need to stop writing is because it really doesn't matter what you write.
- Read through your work straight away – especially if you don't think you'll be able to read your handwriting later – and use a highlighter to indicate the parts you think are worth keeping.
- Add further thoughts or expand the ones that are already there.
- Try freewriting when you first wake up in the morning. By writing in this half-trance state, you lift the lid to your internal world.

Incorporate freewriting into the work you are doing in this course. Get into the habit of freewriting for about ten minutes at the start of your writing time – or you may prefer to do it on waking each morning. You may choose to use one of your existing notebooks, or select a notebook that you use only for freewriting.

The important thing is to make no judgements about what is interesting and what isn't. Don't be afraid to write at great speed or to plunge into what may seem like incoherence. Freewriting often unearths forgotten events or images. Think of the writing as having a life of its own and let it run through you on to the page. The Welsh poet R S Thomas once said, 'Every day I sit down to see what words can do'. Writing in this way starts as a form of playfulness, but can rapidly become purposeful as it exercises your imagination.

Exercise 1.2

- To get you started on a regular routine of freewriting, have a go now. Grab a notebook and put the word RIPPING at the top of the page.
- Notice that as soon as you write the word (in fact as soon as you read it), associations popped up in your mind. Get your pen onto the paper and write, however ridiculous or clumsy it might feel at the time.
- Keep going for at least five minutes.
- You may feel quite excited about how this helps the thoughts flow onto the page. So start again; this time, choose your own word or pick one randomly.

This exercise should take between thirty minutes and one hour.



Research point 1.2

See what other writers have to say about freewriting. Try the following books:

Writing Without Teachers, Peter Elbow (Oxford University Press)

The Artist's Way, Julia Cameron (Penguin)

Writing Down the Bones, Natalie Goldberg (Shambhala Publications Inc.).



Joanna Beaumont, Book Design 1

Project 3 A commonplace book

Commonplace books have been used since the Middle Ages – the phrase translates from the Latin, *locus communis*, loosely meaning ‘a wise proverb’. John Milton’s commonplace book was a vast collection of sayings. Over hundreds of years the term expanded to include collections with a common theme. Often these were scrapbooks including quotes, letters, poems and even prayers.

A writer’s commonplace book will contain all the visual or written material that catches their interest and which might be useful, or might excite the imagination.

Your first step is to acquire a file that will suit your needs. Don’t go for a scrapbook – your cuttings may include articles that run over both sides of a page. Instead, look for a simple plastic or card file, a box file, a ring binder, loose-leaf folder, or even a shoe box.

Start your collection by rifling through things you might have stored haphazardly around the house: photographs, newspaper cuttings, postcards, flyers, or any other material that you think may be of later interest in your writing. Buy the weekend’s newspapers and their supplements, plus any other publications that catch your eye. Cut out anything that seems the least bit interesting, including photographs that might stimulate ideas or descriptions. Make a note of the date and source of any information that you gather, particularly news items, in case you want to delve further into the background of a story.

If you let your friends know what you are doing, they might start spotting interesting items for your collection in their own magazines and newspapers. Naturally, if you already know what you are interested in writing about, you will be searching out cuttings on a specific subject, and it will soon need a file of its own. As your collection grows, organise an index using different sections such as:

- crime stories and court reports
- folk takes and myths
- celebrity profiles and obituaries
- extracts from other writers
- travel and holiday reports
- book reviews
- letters
- Images
- inspirational passages
- poems



Tip

Plagiarism: Never copy something down without noting the author, where it comes from and a page reference/website address. It is all too easy to forget that it is a quote and not something that you have written yourself. You can re-use any writer’s ideas you like – by the time you have imprinted your writing style upon the material, it will look nothing like the original. But never copy, word for word, any published work – that is plagiarism.

Project 4 Writing as seeing

What makes a writer is the ability to observe, understand and record an experience accurately: to record it in such a way that the reader has the best possible chance of understanding what it was like. So, if you've seen something new or surprising in an everyday object, it's your job as a writer to convey that experience through the quality of your writing, just as an artist like van Gogh tried to convey what he saw in a simple vase of sunflowers.

Notebook-keeping relies heavily on detailed observation. Flick through your entries and you'll notice how many times you begin with what you observe. But the ability to see is also an internal capacity. We can visualise all sorts of experiences, including things that have never happened to us, or that, logically, could never happen – purple aliens or a mountain made of Stilton cheese. We also talk of second sight in which seeing takes on a magical or prophetic quality; writers, like soothsayers, can invent the future.

The following passage is full of visual imagery:

My father's bed was against the south wall. It always looked ruffled and unmade because he lay on top of it more than he slept within any folds it might have had. Beside it, there was a little brown table. An archaic goose-necked reading light, a battered table radio, a mound of wooden matches, one or two packages of tobacco, a deck of cigarette papers and an overflowing ashtray cluttered its surface. The brown larvae of tobacco shreds and the grey flecks of ash covered both the table and the floor beneath it. The once-varnished surface of the table was disfigured by numerous black scars and gashes inflicted by the neglected burning cigarettes of many years.

Alistair MacLeod, *'The Boat' in Island: collected stories (2002)*

Writing in this way is related to painting, drawing, photography or film; although we are using words, we are stimulating pictures in a reader's mind.

The important thing is to learn to see clearly and accurately. The problem should not be 'What shall I write?' but rather, 'How can I do justice to the richness of the world around me?'



Research point 1.3

Read Section 2 'Training the Eye' in Bell and Magrs (eds), *The Creative Writing Coursebook*.

Exercise 1.3

- Take your notebook and find an object to write about. This could be anything from a thimble or pebble to a coffee cup or houseplant.
- Make a list of all its characteristics and descriptive qualities. In other words write down what you can see in front of you as accurately as you can.
- If visual observation is difficult for you, focus on texture for this exercise.

Exercise 1.4

- Now find or make a group of objects (the kitchen table just after breakfast or your bedside table would be ideal) and start a new list.
- Try to list as many words and phrases as you can. Don't be afraid to be bold, using words that might at first thought not seem appropriate. For instance, you might already have called the marmalade jar: clear glass, printed label, orange colour, screw top lying on the table, sticky inside. But how about: tiger-striped, tacky like glue, bubbling jelly, open-mouthed welcome-mouthed, crystal tangerine contents, a jar ripe for fishing trips – all it needs is a bit of string, marmalade like a bubble-filled glass paperweight. It doesn't matter how far-fetched you allow yourself to become.

Exercise 1.5

- Close your eyes and visualise a scene you experienced fairly recently. It could be as simple as your local shop, or a room in a friend's house, or you could visualise a beach or church you loved on your last holiday.
- Make this a stationary experience, rather than a busy, moving one. Don't make things too difficult for yourself at this stage. Don't bring dialogue or action into this writing. Again, create a list that starts simply, but becomes as imaginative as you can make it.

Take at least four hours to complete this group of four exercises.



Arlene Sharp,
Painting 1: Understanding Painting Media

Moving from notes to drafts

By starting with notes that no one need ever see – notes that can be as rough as needed – you will liberate your imagination. But before showing your writing to people, such as your tutor, you will want to polish the notes in the best way you can. This is making a draft of your work. At this point you can turn to your screen and keyboard.

Redrafting isn't necessarily rewriting the entire piece, far from it. The piece may only need a tweak here and there. Keep using your highlighter to show you what you want to keep. Introduce a red pen, and circle or underline things you're not so sure about. Cross out things that need to go.

As you gain in skills and confidence, you will continually move your own goalpost as to what is a ready draft to show others. For now, so long as you are happy with it, that's fine. This process of proceeding from notes through to a series of drafts should now be your working method for the rest of the course.

Length

Your short pieces should be around 200 to 700 words at present. Think of them as parts of incomplete whole stories rather than being disembodied accounts. Leave them open-ended so that they can be continued, rather than trying to sum-up with some well-chosen phrases at the end. As we move through the course the length of the pieces will inevitably increase, and if you move steadily through all the exercises, you won't find this a problem.

Different types of writing can be divided up into different forms and in fiction word count is one of the most important ways of defining form. You may have heard of 'flash fiction', a term for very short stories that can range from 6 (yes, 6 – that's not a typo!) to 750 words. Flash fiction is popular all over the world and is also known as micro-fiction, nano-fiction, short shorts and sudden fiction. There's more about this in the Level 2 course: Writing Short Fiction.

Anything over 1000 words is getting rather long for flash fiction and is entering the domain of the short story. Novellas are longer than short stories but shorter than novels, and are often between 17,500 and 40,000 words, but the dividing line between a short story and a novella is blurred. Many short story competitions specify lengths of between 2000 and 8000 words, so this is a good ball park figure.

Novels vary considerably in terms of word count, but most are upwards of 80,000 words (and can be much higher, especially for fantasy and sci-fi where the authors need to do more 'world building').

In this course the longest assignment you'll be asked to submit is 3000 words (Assignment 5); this might be a complete short story or an extract from a potentially longer piece of work.

Exercise 1.6

- Return to the work you produced in the first few exercises.
- Use the highlighter for the parts that are the freshest, the most focused. Focus in on the aspects of your description that you feel the most fresh and original.
- Use the red pen on the weakest parts of your work. Tweak the bits that could be improved and delete those that need to go.
- Some of the writing will be in the form of lists of words – use as much of your list in each case as you like – but also change and embroider it. It's fine to re-examine the object or scene (if that's possible).
- Don't feel this has to be a perfect, definitive descriptive piece. Just attempt to make a draft that you feel happy with.
- Name and save your work.

This exercise should take you at least two hours.

Your observations are your writer's archive. Everything you observe can be stored and used. Nothing is without interest for the writer. The world is full of small miracles and each one can be the starting point for a new piece of imaginative writing. Keep your mind alert as you move through the world – try to see things with a fresh, imaginative slant. Store your thoughts in your notebooks.

Project 5 The five senses

Give a baby an object and it will suck, smell, feel and listen to it. It is only as we get older that sight and language assume pre-eminence. So having now explored seeing in some depth, it is time to look at the other senses.

The great poet and illustrator William Blake said:

If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.

Blake's words hold an important message for us as writers. Some people think that they can't write because their lives are too ordinary, but there have been great writers – such as Janet Frame, Emily Dickinson, Jane Austen or the Brontë sisters – who could be said to have led very restricted lives. Their inner selves burned with such tremendous curiosity that they could apply this to their everyday experiences and create quite extraordinary new fictional worlds through their writing. William Blake's doors of perception can be opened in many ways.



Research point 1.4

Move around your environment now, inside and outside, searching for things to feel. Run your fingers along walls, over fabrics. Touch your cheek with objects that are shiny or furry. Sense the movement of cool or warm air over your skin. Recall painful sensations, and agreeable ones. Now turn to taste. Move into the kitchen and spend time delighting (or shuddering) at the things you can put on your tongue. Search for things to smell. You'll find these in bedrooms, bathrooms and kitchens.

Sit in the house at night, with the lights off and wait for those tiny sounds. This is a time when you can concentrate on listening.



Angela Johnson, Painting 1: Understanding Painting Media

For example

When the French novelist Flaubert was finishing his novel *Madame Bovary*, in which the heroine dies horribly after being poisoned, it is said that he had to keep stopping in order to be sick! His imagination was fully engaged with the scene he was writing:

Great beads of sweat were standing out on her face which had taken on a faint blue tinge. It was as though some metallic exhalation had turned her rigid. Her teeth were chattering, and her eyes, suddenly enlarged, gazed vaguely about her. To every question she replied only with a movement of her head. Two or three times she even smiled. By degrees the groans became louder; at times they sounded almost like suppressed screams.

Very soon she started to vomit blood. Her lips became more and more tightly compressed. Her limbs were rigid; brown patches showed on her body and her pulse thrilled beneath the doctor's fingers like the strings of a harop just before it breaks.

Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (1856)

This writing is brilliantly convincing – we feel the dying woman's pulse under our own fingers. It's the writer's job to implicate the reader in their work like this until there is no easy escape. One of the best ways to do so is to involve all five of the reader's senses.

Exercise 1.7

Look back through the notes you have written so far (rather than your saved drafts) and use a highlighter on description that went beyond the purely visual. It isn't easy to capture the sense of smell or taste on paper because we have a much more limited vocabulary for such sensations. One useful way to explore the other senses is temporarily to shut off the faculty of sight.

Exercise 1.8

- Choose a small household object – preferably one that might have taste, sound or smell. Shut your eyes and explore the object; touching, smelling, even listening to it. Now put the object down and without looking at it free write your sensations. Finally, look at the object and add to your record all the things you can see.
- Read through your free write and redraft it. Make it more comprehensible and add the thoughts you now have that you didn't fully have at the time.

Letting it flow

Once you begin to write in this way you may find it difficult to stop, because the flow of sensation itself never stops (although it may slow down or speed up). Indeed, you should now be well on the way to realising what William Blake meant when he 'cleansed the doors of perception' to find the world infinite. Recording perceptions like this is a good way to overcome writer's block. You can think of this as stepping into a new dimension of the imagination.

Exercise 1.9

- Sit outdoors, or by an open door, with your eyes closed.
- Try to focus intently without becoming tense. Take your time.
- Now write down your experiences – tastes, smells and sounds, and any sensations that you become aware of: the feel of grass under your feet or the bench you sat on; the touch of wind, sun, rain.
- Repeat step one with your eyes open and your notebook on your lap. Add all the things you can actually see to your record.
- Redraft, name and save.



Angela Johnson, Painting 1: Understanding Painting Media

Exercise 1.10

- Go out for walk and take your notebook with you. Write down everything that is happening around you.
- This time, record every sensation from the contact your feet make with the ground to the feel of the wind in your hair. Try to keep up a flow of words, and leave no sensation unexplored or unrecorded. Touch the things around you – walls, railings, hedges – as you pass by. Touch the bark of trees. Dip your hands in water if there is any about. Smell anything there is to smell: a bonfire; new paint, flowers, traffic fumes.
- Write it all down.
- Create a piece from the initial notes. Add any information or thoughts that didn't occur to you initially. Name and save.

Including research time these two exercises will take between two and three hours.

Project 6 Descriptive prose passages

By now, you may be itching to start on a story, and be feeling frustrated that you haven't had the opportunity yet. But good stories are complicated beings. Element by element you are building up the necessary component skills.

Stories need strong and extended structures to hold them in place. Sentences support individual words and phrases. Think of sentence length in terms of where you need to breathe when reading the passages aloud. Sentences are organised into paragraphs, which change as the theme or subject matter changes, and allows the reader to recognise how the text is moving on.

An imaginative life

Inventing details that may never have actually happened is an important way to develop your writing. Recording real experience in detail helps develop invented experience – the life of a fictional character – in an authentic way.

Exercise 1.11

- Sift through your notebooks for a description of a holiday you took in the past. If you haven't trawled that part of your life yet, put the next half hour aside to create a free write with the topic 'A Favourite Holiday Moment'.
- Redraft, using the highlighter and red pen technique.
- Retain only the parts that you are happy with, and add anything that you think will enrich the piece, whether or not it really happened.
- Return to the previous exercise and ask yourself: Am I skimming over description or focusing on detail?
- Check that each of your component thoughts are in separate sentences, and that each time you engage in a fresh series of thoughts, or move perspective, you start a new paragraph by indenting your line. Give the piece a final read through before you name and save it.

The exercise should take you between one and two hours.

Close-up detail

Skimming over a description loses readers; close-up focus absorbs them. Become intimate with the most interesting parts of the whole. Get in close.

The following passages give us insights on subjects with a holiday flavour by building words into sentences and paragraphs that focus on tiny details:

I pulled the cornetto apart. It was still warm and flaky because it was so fresh. It oozed apricot jam. I watched Adolfo as the man kept carrying in the boxes of cakes, and carrying out empty ones when Adolfo had finished with them.

The glass case quickly filled up with flat tarts full of yellow custard and scattered with crushed almonds; pies covered with heavily glazed fruits; rolls of apple strudel full of spice, sultanas and pine-nuts. The last box carried in contained savoury things, which were set in a space reserved for them on the left: crisp bread rolls with cheese and salami protruding from them; long savoury pastries full of smoked ham and egg.

I admired the speed and neatness with which Adolfo emptied the boxes and filled the case, gently layering some of the flat cakes like tiles on a roof.

Deirdre Madden, *Remembering Light And Stone* (2014)

Deirdre Madden uses a listing technique to create a sense of luxuriance, building layer upon layer of language, just like the cakes are layered in the display cabinet. But if you read the passage aloud you'll hear how delicately each word balances upon the next. Here's a very different passage that works in a similar way:

Flop. The cone-shaped bar of lead tied to the end of the fishing line dropped into the sea without causing a ripple. It sank rapidly through the long seaweed that grew on the face of the rock. It sank twenty-five feet and then struck the bottom. It tumbled around and then lay on its side in a niche at the top of a round pool.

The man on top of the rock hauled in his line until it was taut. The bar of lead bobbed up and down twice. Then it rested straight on its end in the niche. Three short plaits of stiff horsehair extended crookedly like tentacles from the line above the leaden weight at regular intervals. At the end of each plait was a hook baited all over with shelled periwinkle. A small crab, transfixed through the belly, wriggled on the lowest hook. The two upper hooks had a covering of crushed crab tied by thin strings around the periwinkles. The three baited hooks swung round and round, glistening white through the red strands of broad seaweed that hung lazily from their stems in the rock face.

Dark caverns at the base of the rock cast long shadows out over the bottom of the sea about the hooks. Little bulbous things, growing in groups on the bottom spluttered methodically as they stirred.

Liam O'Flaherty, *'The Rockfish' in The Collected Stories* (2000)

Liam O'Flaherty isn't afraid to begin his story with a one-word sentence that imparts the physical sensation of the lead weight hitting the sea. He builds up layers of precise detail – even using the poetic device of repetition to give his language rhythmical movement. But he never loses control of the passage or indulges in detail for its own sake. By the end he's taken us to the bottom of the sea as we follow the baited line.



Research Point 1.5

It's a good idea to build a small reference library for yourself so that you can check specific details in a piece of writing. This library might include books on natural history and science, encyclopaedias, maps and atlases. These books can be a source of factual information that will lend authority and authenticity to your writing.

There is a great deal of reference material online but you must try to ensure that you are using established and trusted websites - Wikipedia is not always reliable, for example, so is not a suitable source of information.

Here's a selection of reference books you may find helpful:

The Concise Oxford Dictionary or a dictionary of similar size, such as Collins or Penguin

Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases or a simpler thesaurus, such as *Chamber's Thesaurus*

Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable – a fascinating reference book and a good source of ideas for any writer

Usage and Abusage: A Guide to Good English (Penguin Reference Books)

Fowler's A Dictionary of Modern English Usage (Oxford University Press)

For more books to help with grammar consult the booklist at the end of this course guide and on the OCA website.

Assignment 1 Getting started

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 you between two and three hours.

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.

Choose the two pieces you like the best. If you want to do any further work on them, this is your opportunity. Write around 1000 words in total (no more).

Up until now, you may have kept your writing to yourself so that you don't feel inhibited about what you write. But sooner or later you'll want to show your finished work to someone else. On this course that person will be your tutor, and the act of showing anyone a piece of writing is a symbolic one: it recognises that you are taking your work from the private to the public domain. Even though your relationship with your tutor is a personal one, you should think of them as your writing audience.

Please don't think that these first efforts should be perfect – don't forget that your tutor will be helping you to improve your work.

Consult the *Creative Writing student* guide for how to present your assignment. Put your name, student number, course name ('Writing Skills') 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 reflective commentary (500 words max.). 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. Discuss how you redrafted your work and 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.