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A PATH TO SUCCESSFUL CREATIVE WRITING

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Abstract: *This article is an attempt to penetrate into the depth of the writer's creative mind and analyse some of the methods professional writers commonly employ to make their composition interesting, unusual and notable. The main aim set to this paper is to propose an in-depth research into the major stages of the creative writing process and to outline a range of useful techniques which enable beginner writers to master the art of writing successfully. Among them the most productive seem to be the following: looking at a phenomenon from a new perspective, brainstorming, note-taking, open-ended writing, clustering ideas, using visual materials, humour, tone, strong vocabulary and vivid language.*

Key words: *creative writing, stages of creative process, writing techniques.*

1. Introduction

Creative writing is a complex skill and requires a special ability to present facts and ideas clearly, concisely and accurately. It is also a very challenging task which demands good knowledge, intellectual effort, cognitive expertise and awareness of various writing techniques.

There are various types of writing. Among them the most commonly used are descriptive, expository, and persuasive narratives. These basic modes can be broken down into subcategories such as argumentative writing, business writing, literary response, personal writing, etc. Every type has its specific characteristics which are defined by the purpose the writing performs.

Creative writing is commonly regarded as an important experience for a few reasons. It helps to arouse feelings, discover and articulate ideas, share these ideas, persuade and convince people. Wright believes that creativity develops personality, allows a writer to apply intelligence and gives an opportunity to experience the language (Wright 4); Dakowska indicates that creative writing is not only rewarding and motivating but it also reduces stress, and enhances imagination and visualization (Dakowska 258); White and Arndt express the idea that the importance of creative writing lies in its ability to inform, entertain, provoke reflection, thought, feeling or emotion, influence opinion, share personal experiences, thoughts and feelings (White & Arndt 49); Cunningwoth and Tomlinson along with Rivers and Temperley emphasise that writing cannot be treated as speech written down because it has its own rules and conventions, it is an art that requires consciously directed effort and deliberate choice in language (Cunningwoth &Tomlinson 45; Rivers & Temperley 263).

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In this article we will try to penetrate into the depth of the creative mind of a professional writer and examine major stages of creative writing: observing, generating ideas, structuring and planning, writing a draft, revising and editing. Our task will also include the analysis of some techniques which enable beginning writers to master the art of writing successfully.

Creative writing is often regarded as free and independent writing; it is a form of personal freedom that allows a writer to express thoughts and feelings in an imaginative, often unique, and poetic way. When composing a story writers use their imagination, pretend anything they want and help the reader to do the same. Creative imagination must have something to work on; the new ideas are not formed out of nothing or conjured up from the air; we start creating new things with what already exists. A large amount of the information we use comes through our eyes. Therefore, novice writers should develop their ability to see things and make detailed observations, for they are the material for future creative writing.

2. Observing

The act of careful analytical observation is the first stage of writing a story. Adair defines observation as a skill which implies an attempt to see a person, object or a scene from a new perspective, as if we had never seen it before in our life. The researcher notes that the observation made through the eyes will undergo transformation to varying degrees in the creative mind as it is combined with other elements into a new idea (Adair 40-43).

At the lowest level, observation implies the ability to see what is actually in front of us, but it is almost impossible to be totally objective since our comprehension is accompanied by our feelings and emotions. Our minds are programmed to notice certain things rather than the whole complete reality; we tend to see what we know already or what fits our particular interests.

The act of observation is complete when we have recorded what we have seen. Then observation evokes inspiration; ideas and emotions are turned into words and sentences. A creative writer combines ideas or elements that already exist but this synthesis is more than the sum of its parts.

A good writer should possess an open mind and a high degree of curiosity. In order to develop curiosity it is advisable to start asking questions, both when we are talking with others and when we are talking in our mind to ourselves. Questioning, carefully done, helps a writer to distinguish between what is known and what is unknown. He/she should constantly ask himself/herself questions about what is happening around and be ready for surprising answers. Such curiosity is the food for the intellect, the raw material of creative thought.

3. Generating ideas

Generating ideas is considered to be a crucial part of the creative writing process. It is also called an initiating process and plays an important role in getting started, which is normally seen as the most difficult step while writing. Nonetheless, generating ideas takes place in later stages as well.

Inspiration doesn't always come easily. But for any writer, it's vital to be able to generate ideas and get on with the work. The most effective way of getting started and discovering ideas is brainstorming, which consists of listing ideas, writing down spontaneous words and expressions concerning the topic. These sorts of lists allow the writer to get lots of thoughts on paper quickly and start categorising these ideas roughly. Then comes the hard part of

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limiting the focus to a few of these ideas and developing them, gathering examples, illustrations and evidence to support them, showing how they fit together into one argument, refining the original argument when it turns out on closer inspection to be more complicated than it first appeared, walking the reader through these complications. Brainstorming involves "thinking quickly and without inhibition so that to produce as many ideas as possible" (White & Arndt 18). Brainstorming can also be beneficial when choosing a topic and developing it, identifying a purpose for writing and finding an appropriate form. If we brainstorm for fiction, we can juxtapose two very different elements which together give us that spark we need to come up with something truly creative.

Visual materials, such as photographs, pictures, objects, charts, diagrams, maps, etc. are also very useful for gathering ideas. They are powerful sources of information and provide ample opportunity for creativity: tables help us to demonstrate various points, present and compare large quantities of data and figures; a bar graph allows us to compare amounts; a scatter graph indicates how two variables correlate and a line graph displays a relationship or trend; an organizational chart reveals hierarchies; pictures and photographs describe a process, memorably illustrate examples; diagrams emphasise process steps or sequences; and drawings underscore specific details. By representing information spatially and with images, writers are able to focus on meaning, reorganise and group similar ideas easily, show the relationships between them.

A valuable technique for generating ideas is also note-taking, which involves recording ideas and facts that help us remember and use them later. The notes make up a skeleton for a draft; they are later broadened and arranged into a coherent text. White and Arndt distinguish between structured and unstructured notes. While taking unstructured notes writers put down whatever comes to their minds connected with the topic; however, in structured note-taking they group their ideas in some order or categories. (White & Arndt 18-42).

A very helpful technique for collecting ideas and developing an argument is open-ended writing, which consists of noting down freely in one burst without stopping for five or ten minutes any thoughts, terms, phrases or words that come to mind and are related to a particular topic, no matter how silly they may seem. This technique does not force the writers clarify their ideas at the outset, and offers plenty of room for discovery. It allows exploration of a topic, finding new directions and identifying the conflict, mystery or surprise that may help start writing. The pressure of time can compel a person to be creative, jotting things down almost in desperation, but when this person looks back over the written ideas he or she may find some gems in there.

Open-ended writing consists of two basic activities: free-writing and summing up. The free-writing process can be repeated many times, gradually narrowing down the scope of the theme, until the writer is able to condense the topic to a sentence which captures the core idea. The sentence might be a summary of what the writer wrote above, but not necessarily, or it could help the writer restate the thesis outright or get back on track in case he strayed off it. Such a summary makes it easier to proceed to the next step of the writing process – structuring and planning.

4. Structuring and planning

Writing well constructed paragraphs is a corner-stone of good written style. Some novice writers mistakenly claim that

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structure stifles creativity and puts the narrator into a frame. Such an opinion, however, can be seen as immature and groundless. On the contrary, structure enhances creativity, it imposes discipline, moulds the written work into a recognisable form.

It is advisable to organise ideas by clustering them. At the beginning we can write some topics or problems we are going to discuss in the centre of a page and circle them. Then we will arrange related ideas around each theme, trying to place ever-more-detailed pieces of information close to one another on the paper. This will give us some idea of how to structure our composition. If many ideas have accumulated in one area, we may want to focus there. Alternatively, one topic may be far too broad – so it is useful to jot down sub-points around it.

Another step of structuring is arranging ideas into categories or groups through establishing relations between them by answering the following questions: What ideas are prerequisite to other ideas? Which of them work together to form another? What is the most dramatic idea? etc. The grouped ideas are then joined into well formed sentences, which are further combined to produce effective descriptive paragraphs. Successful pieces of writing have a sense of wholeness about them. Therefore, the task of writers is to link the conclusion of their text both with its opening and theses in an informative and interesting way.

This process of grouping ideas together, ordering information, experimenting with arrangements and deciding how to link them in a coherent way is called structuring, Although it should be done before getting started, many writers do not arrange their ideas until they actually start writing. It happens so because in the process of creative writing some new ideas come to our mind and the original plans have to be continually readjusted.

Having found some ideas and grouped them in accordance with central themes the next crucial stage is to arrange the ideas in such a way that they meet the reader's expectations. Structuring is very important here because it helps readers anticipate how a narrative is going to play out. For example, the reader expects the hero to solve the problem but he does not want it to be done easily. There must be a logical progression, and mistakes made, before a character arrives at the correct solution.

The beauty of structure lies in the fact that it is flexible. The writer could open his/her piece with an escalation of the problem (for example, by mentioning a murder because this has a dramatic impact to hook the reader) and then return in flashback to what has happened previously. This is perfectly allowable, but the structure remains. It is also important to keep in mind the purpose in writing and keep to it. If readers find it hard to ferret out what the writer is trying to say, they will be bored, frustrated, discouraged or angry and this may lead to their rejection and even hostility towards the composition they are reading and its creator.

To make a piece of writing interesting and valuable writers need to communicate the messages effectively. Everyone loves amusing things and a writer may allow his or her own sense of humour to come through in fiction writing. It can be expressed through particular characters, scenes or situations in a story. Humour used in relevant places will add to the musicality of the creative work. Appropriate verbs in a dialogue will help show the character's mood and actions rather than the narrator telling the reader about them. For example, rather than saying that a character is happy about something, that character can make a statement with a smile or a grin. A writer

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may even describe the smile or grin using some specific adjective or an adverb. Characters' voices also speak loud and clear to readers about internal conflicts they may be going through, they also convey their belief system and their moral values through their conversations with other characters.

Experienced writers are masters of language; they know how to heighten the intensity of their composition by sculpting the scene, using precise diction, figurative language, graphical devices, creative paragraphing and punctuation that might enhance the effect of their writing. Writers may also play with language and syntax, experiment with diction, form, narrations and narrators, and even invent new words. A game is liberating, it stretches the imagination and frees the writer from the pressure of having every sentence mean something, like Gertrude Stein's poems, which are mainly meant to be appreciated for their visual form and eclectic style – purely the sound of the language.

Writers should also be critical about what they write. They have to be aware of the fact that readers' opinions, attitudes and expectations can be different from their own; therefore, the way of expressing ideas should be neatly considered and arranged. Readers also have certain expectations about content, structure and graphic appearance of a text. It is important to meet these expectations by bringing form and topic into conformity. To achieve this, a writer can experiment with the same ideas in various ways for different texts.

Before writers start writing the first draft, they need to identify the audience and purpose for writing, because there will be differences in the language and structure. For instance, for children a writer has to use simpler language, and use more vivid, descriptive examples than for an adult audience.

The second step is to decide on the tone or writer's voice. It shows how the writer feels about the subject matter. For example, if a writer is writing a humorous story he would make the tone light-hearted and/or funny.

Now that ideas and an outline of the composition are prepared, a subject, purpose, audience, and tone of writing are selected, the writer is ready to start writing the first draft.

5. Writing a Draft

Drafting is the first step of a final product. This process may cause a lot of trouble for writers if they start with writing an introduction. It may easily lead them into the trap of writing dozens of introductions, rejecting them all, and starting over each time. Until one sees the whole body of the composition, it is almost impossible to write an effective introduction. It's fairly obvious that this is a non-productive waste of time. Therefore, it is better to save the introduction for the second draft and begin with trial theses using the notes from the earlier stages. They will make the body of the composition. At this stage we can successfully apply various writing methods (comparison, contrast, illustrations, examples, cause-and-effect strategy), types of order (chronological, order of importance, spatial), or types of texts (expository, persuasive or descriptive writing).

First drafts give writers a framework in which they can fix and edit their writing later. It may appear that we don't have all of the material we need: examples of several of our points, illustrations for some ideas, evidence that we haven't found yet. It is a good idea to put a reminder note in brackets and move on to the next point. It is important not to stop the fluent writing process and at the same time have some

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notes we need to find and develop later. If we can get ourselves into the flow of writing, our thoughts and words will come more easily, we are more likely to find connections between ideas and develop them. Writers should not worry about the very process of writing, unless some mechanical errors distract their attention and they feel compelled to correct them. On the other hand, a "shopping list" of ideas will save a great deal of time and make our further research much easier because it will help us define what we need to finish the composition. It is equally important to refer to the main idea and try to get down on paper what we want the whole work to say. Moreover, the whole should determine the parts, not the parts the whole.

It is good advice to use strong verbs and vivid language to convey meaning and create visual images of what is happening in the story. It makes the writing more expressive and descriptive. For example, instead of writing: "she was crying", we could put "she was bawling at the top of her lungs". Bawling is a stronger verb because it lets us know that she had a loud, bellowing cry, plus, "at the top of her lungs" further enriches the image.

If a story contains bare facts it will sound boring, lifeless and unimaginative. To avoid monotony writers dig deeper and look for broader implications. For example, when describing a person, they not only comment on a character's physical attributes or clothes but also his or her social status, occupation, way of speaking, behaviour, attitude towards others.

Once the first draft is completed, it is important for writers to utilize their research, outlines and editing skills to turn the draft into a finished work. Editing a rough draft gives writers an opportunity to compare their first attempt with their original goal and to check it against their outline. When editing a rough draft, writers can pay attention to any part of the paper or book that needs significant revision and ensure that their final product is polished and free of major errors.

6. Revising and editing

Writers often go through many revisions before they are satisfied with their work. They may find that they want to take a different approach than they had originally planned. Editing will help them to clarify what details are important enough to pursue and what can be omitted. Some writers have excellent ideas but weak ways of expressing them. Sometimes it is because of weak grammatical skills, and sometimes it is just inconsistent language. Smoothing out the language can make a story more readable and distract less from the story behind the language.

Writers should get used to the idea that their writing will be read by many different people, many of whom will be critical about their writing. This gives them the psychological motivation to go to great efforts, and capacity for self-assessment. It is hard work that a writer devotes to a piece of writing that is likely to reach a wide audience, and serves as a reflection of themselves. The process of editing and revising is based on an evaluation of the writing. However, this does not mean that writers should only look for grammatical accuracy and correctness of spelling, punctuation, word order and so on. Of course, eliminating errors is important but a writer also ought to decide whether he or she has been successful, taking into consideration the purpose of the text, the audience, and the form. Reviewing includes checking the logical and linguistic connections and coherence between all elements in the text as well as assessing the impact of the language that has been chosen in order to create the best effect and impression on the reader.

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Revision literally means to "see again," to look at something from a fresh, critical perspective. It would be advisable to take a break between completing the first draft and starting on the second, which allows the writer to come back to the text with a renewed vigour and a fresh set of eyes. It is also essential to include only the text that moves the story forward. Readers by nature are impatient and they will have little time for bloated paragraphs and fluffy descriptions. By the same token if a section is relevant and significant to the story but does not give enough information or detail, then it is worth expanding. We can't assume that readers will know certain facts unless they are presented in black and white.

A good rule of thumb for writers, both beginners and experienced ones, is to let other people read the newly-created composition. It is important to find such readers who are not going to be biased about the author or his work. Their suggestions and constructive criticism in a professional manner might allow the author to perfect his art of writing.

The writer and writing teacher Pattison in her e-book *After the First Draft. 30 Fast, Easy Writing Tips for the Second Draft* gives some valuable recommendations of how to revise the first draft. She advises writers to pay attention to the following issues: the title of the work and eventual subtitles, which are the thresholds of a story; chapter divisions, their efficient number and length; characters, their descriptions, types, names (How do they sound? What do they mean? Are they appropriate to the context?); the setting, which shapes the emotional environment of the composition and echoes its plot; connection of emotional and narrative arcs; unique character dialogue; transitions from one scene to the next with the help of indications of time ('three hours later'), setting ('later, in the living room'), relationship to plot elements ('after the argument'), and emotion ('weeping at the loss of her dog') to make the audience understand what happened between scenes; how the theme, setting, characters, action, plot and subplots, beginning and ending are all knitted together.

An effective technique for revising and editing is to read the composition aloud. This serves to create a detachment between the writer's mind and the work, making it possible to hear what the reader reads and let the author find some clunky phrase that does not fit the context or will make the readers lose interest in the story. Reviewing and evaluating the ideas and themes can be done by scoring, prioritising, summarising, briefly restating or whatever method seems best.

Writing is a process of discovery, and writers don't always produce their best material when they first get started. So revision is a chance for them to look critically at what they have written to see if it's really worth saying, if the text renders exactly what they wanted to say, and if readers will understand what they are saying.

In later stages of the revision process it is necessary to examine the balance within the composition: Are all parts in proportion to each other? Has a trivial point received more attention than a more important issue? Are all the details given early, with the points getting thinner by the end? Does the beginning set up the ending? Have all the problematic issues received their resolution?

Careful attention should be paid to checking whether the promises to readers are kept: Are all claims and theses supported by examples and illustrations? Are the tone and formality of the language appropriate for the intended audience? Are any of the statements misleading? Do the details provided satisfy readers' curiosity?

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7. Conclusions

In summing up, it is worth mentioning that the purpose of creative writing is to express thoughts, feelings and emotions rather than simply convey information. The main function of a writer is to be read; the more people he or she can reach, the happier he or she becomes. If a writer creates something which he or she alone regards as a masterpiece while being shunned by the rest of the world, such a writer is a miserable failure.

A writer has to feel his work out. Creating good characters, dramatic situations or good dialogue takes time and practice. Creative writing is based on observation and is made up through trial and error; it lets the unconscious take over and go wherever it wants. In the end, creative writing is a form of personal freedom, which frees us from the mass identity we see all around us and allows us to survive as individuals.

Creative writing is also a source of great entertainment and knowledge. We write with the hope of inventing something new, or offering a refreshing twist on something that is old. Above all, writing is a therapy, both for the writer and the reader. As we unburden our feelings and emotions onto the paper or a screen it is as though we are making ourselves better people. Being creative can also be hard and challenging at times, but immensely fun. Writing of any sort is rewarding work since a huge amount of satisfaction can be gained from a finished piece. Besides, writers learn as much about themselves through their writing as their readers do. Society can only benefit from having a glut of good writers. Political or religious speeches, scientific reports or analytical discourses all need careful treatment by a skilful wordsmith, and the more we value these rare creatures, the greater will be their output. Moreover, without such genius as Shakespeare, Balzac, Pushkin, Goethe and hundreds of others our life would not be so colourful and varied

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