HANDBOOK
for
u3a Creative Writing Groups

First edition compiled 2008 by Maggie Smith, Subject Coordinator, Creative Writing, with contributions from the following u3a Writing groups:-

Bexley, Borehamwood & Elstree, Bristol, Buckingham & District, Cardiff, Cheltenham (3), Derby, Devizes, Grange, Stevenage, S.London, Bridgend, Deepings, North Cotswolds

With permission & many thanks to:-

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Second edition 2025. Revised and edited by Marcia Humphries, u3a Creative Writing Adviser.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION 2025

As part of a general update of materials, u3a office asked me, earlier this year, to consider an update to the Handbook. This was something my predecessor Maggie Smith & I had discussed, & with her permission, I have gone ahead.

I started by reading through the first edition & was again impressed by the amount of information it contained. Maggie's advice had stood the test of time, & I could see why groups were still finding the book helpful. There were, however, some things that needed adjusting, eg resources & contacts were named that no longer exist. I have added to the section on starting up a group to include some of my own ideas. Also, I have added to the recommended books & materials, put in a section on revising & editing your work & inserted a guide to checking your progress.

I recommend this Handbook to groups as a valuable resource for covering the basics of creative writing.

Marcia Humphries, u3a Creative Writing Adviser 2025

INTRODUCTION TO THE 2008 EDITION

The booklets currently available from U3A Office have been very useful, but it seemed time to produce a comprehensive Handbook which covers the FAQs I receive as National Coordinator. Groups were invited to send in ideas which have been incorporated in the text. A huge number, as may be expected, were duplicated so there is no individual acknowledgement of contributions, but I would like to thank all those who took time and trouble to respond. There are enough ideas here to keep you writing non-stop for the rest of your lives; I can't wait to try some of the new ones.

I've attempted to offer an overview of everything a U3A Writers Group may need. The Handbook is geared towards fiction and poetry, but any kind of writing group – travel, articles, – will benefit from exploring style and language. Autobiography and memoirs still need to be well-written, with realistic dialogue and atmosphere to hold the reader's attention. No websites or magazines are recommended; they tend to come and go very quickly, and the Internet or Reference libraries offer far more. Similarly, there is nothing about publishing. Those who are interested have ways of finding out and many groups write purely for pleasure.

There are guidelines – and they are only guidelines, there are no fixed rules - for setting up a group; for offering constructive feedback and a list of books, by no means exhaustive, that I and others have found useful. The main body of the Handbook consists of ideas and exercises. These have been divided into basic trigger exercises, followed by more complex ones. Later sections cover specific aspects including among them language and style, characters, dialogue, settings and point of view.

Think before you write. The most basic skill in prose is probably clarity of expression. If you want to pass information of any kind to a reader, clarity is essential and to achieve that you must have a clear idea in your own mind what it is you are trying to convey. That does not mean you have to work out every detail of a story in your head before you can write it, but it does mean you should at least have some idea of who your characters are, the setting & theme.

Enjoy – and get writing,

Maggie Smith, September 2008

Starting a New Creative Writing Group.

1. Check with your U3A Committee that they agree to the starting of a new group. They may be able to help with publicity for it, suggest a venue & advise on timing to fit-in with other interest groups. They may already have a note of people who would like to join a writing group.

2. Try to limit the group size to 10 or less. At this stage, you may be looking for members. If this is the case, approach existing groups in your u3a like the book club, poetry, literature or storytelling.

3. The usual format for groups is 2 hours (coffee break at half time), fortnightly meetings. At the end of each session, a writing prompt is given to be written on by next time. Good not to lay down rules, especially at first, so a poem or story or article are all acceptable. At the next session, people read out their work for comments from the others. Go easy on this until the group start to feel comfortable with each other, but say *something* or people feel their efforts have been wasted. Keeping numbers down allows time for everyone to read, but make clear it's fine to come along if you haven't been able to write this time. Try to allow time for a writing exercise during the meeting (ideas in this Handbook).

4. Establish the experience of your group. You may have people who have (self) published,or are ex-teachers. Some may belong to other writing groups. These can give help initially.

5.Establish best practices for writing: keeping a writing notebook, listening out for unusual conversations, writing regularly, reading, including news stories.

6. Let the Subject Adviser know you have started a group,& ask to be added to the mailing list so you receive future Newsletters/mailings.

Remember, there is no right or wrong way to run a group. It's a question of finding what works for the members involved.

Decide what kind of group you want to offer. Some groups specialise in fiction, travel, memoirs, poetry, etc. and many offer a mixture. Some are less serious than others about their writing. You will not be comfortable unless the group's needs match yours. Ask at the first session what they want to do; what kind of writing they do & what they like to read.

Offer various ideas - do they want to learn more about short story and prose writing? If perhaps they want to write poetry then decide if you want to, or can, teach it, or ask if someone else will volunteer to lead these sessions.

USEFUL BOOKS FOR WRITING GROUPS 2008

AUTHOR	TITLE	ISBN
Julia Ball & Paul Magrs (Eds)	The Creative Writing Coursebook	0-333-78225-9
Anne Bernays & Pam Painter	What If? Exercises for Fiction Writers	0-06272-066
Carole Blake	From Pitch to Publication	0-333-71435-0
John Braine	How to Write a Novel	0-413-31540-1
Dorothea Brande	Becoming a Writer	0-333-34673-4
Celia Brayfield	Bestseller	1-85702-383-8
Natalie Goldberg	Writing Down the Bones	0-87773-375-9
John Haffron	Writers' Ideas Book	1-38297-179-X
Stephen King	On Writing	978-0-340-82046-9
Michael Legat	Plotting the Novel	0-7090-4770-3
Thomson Step-by Step	How to Write Short Stories	0-7689-1084-6-51295

RECOMMENDED BOOKS & PUBLICATIONS 2025

Back to Creative Writing School, by Bridget Whelan. Like having an informal chat with an expert. It shows you the basics & makes you believe you can write.

Wannabe a Writer, by Jane Wenham-Jones. This book is chatty, full of humour, but packed with sound, practical advice, delivered so that it makes an enjoyable read.

Creative Writing for Dummies by Maggie Hamand. A great basic course.

365 Ways to Get You Writing by Jane Cooper. Loads of one-off exercises

A Novel in a Year, by Louise Doughty.A frank and funny approach to the practicalities and techniques of novel writing. Ideas, information & resources.

Teaching Creative Writing by Helen Stockton. Covers EVERYTHING about running a group

FREE ON-LINE RESOURCES

TED TALKS Brief talks on lots of subjects. Search for TED (Technology, Entertainment & Design) Talks on Creative Writing.

MOOCS (Massive open on-line courses) Search for MOOCS on Creative Writing.

FUTURE LEARN Short, free on-line courses supported by OPEN UNIVERSITY, some aimed specifically at Creative Writing.

SIMPLE EXERCISES

Offer one of these titles for a 10-15 minute writing session:

the bend in the road	the lump under the bedclothes
eavesdropping	train/coach/plane cancelled
the web	upside down and inside out
mother and or/father	grandma and or/grandpa
the rain	a child crying
theft	shoplifting
a celebration gone wrong	heat or cold
a remembered feast	downsizing
an unknown place	the box
my first day at school	the garden
why am I here?	grumpy old woman/man

SLIGHTLY MORE COMPLEX EXERCISES

- This can be used as a 'warm-up' exercise for a new group or new members to get to know each other

Write your name; who gave it to you; how you feel about it. Would you prefer a different name? Discuss in the group.

- Take a five letter word. Ask each group member to write a phrase which makes sense, each word in the phrase beginning with each successive letter from the word. **Example**: CARDS

  Can Albert ring Dan soon?
  Can anyone remember darning socks?
  Crinolines are rather dated, sadly.

- You find a piece of paper; the contents concern you, but you shouldn't know anything about them

- Write a story or poem beginning with an established famous line, e.g 'I wandered lonely as a cloud....' ; 'Is there anybody there?' said the traveller; 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.'

  First and last lines: '*The cow nudged open the gate ..... Mary said as she closed the door.'* Use one or both for a story.

- Take **one** from each of A, B, C, D below and write a fifteen minute story.
  a) A crying child; a store detective; a minicab driver; a drunk.
  b) A busy high street; a wedding; a house for sale; a river bank.
  c) A cream cake: a necklace: snapped knicker elastic; a barking dog.
  d) Noon Midnight 5a.m. 5p.m.

- Continue one of these three stories for ten minutes**:**
  a) I was determined not to listen, but the voice broke in again
  b) 'Time you were going. The snow's thicker than ever'
  c) There was no point in getting up, because……
  d) I just tripped .....

- Use the *last* line of a well-written novel as an opening sentence: e.g. **'**And at last faintly, falling; this day's over**.' (**Ian McEwan: Saturday) 'The old man was dreaming about the lions.' (Ernest Hemingway: The Old Man and the Sea)
  Ruth closed the door. (Susan Hill: In the Springtime of the Year)

- Members of the group invent in turn:
  Male name; female name; geographical place; setting (house; hospital etc.); time of year; time of day; weather. The group **must** use this list but each member devises an individual plot.

- Either find or imagine an unusual small ad eg:
  Wedding dress size 12. Worn twice.

- Give a selection of newspaper headlines - comic, dramatic, tragic. Write the story behind the headlines.

- Genuine top ten bizarre items left behind in Travelodges in 2007:
  a Lord Mayor's chain; a suitcase full of diamond jewellery; a blue glass eye; a 6'x6' remote-controlled helicopter; keys of a Bentley;'Princess,' a Persian cat; an urn of ashes an antique gold family necklace; a child
  Write the story behind one of these.

- Write a piece by an inanimate object. Ideas have ranged from a zip fastener to an amputated leg.

- A newspaper report written from the point of view of an eye witness, in the style of a specific newspaper.

Prepare beforehand cards naming characters at a wedding: bride, groom, Vicar; Great Aunt Jemima, Cousin Fred, etc.
Each member pick a card, then write the character's account of the event (funerals too?).

- Give each person a list of characters, objects and settings. Write choice of character on a scrap of paper, pass it to your right. Select an object and add to the paper you receive, then pass it on. Choose setting next. Final pass round. 15 minutes to write a short story.

CHARACTER	OBJECT	SETTING
detective	needle	church fete
circus clown	wooden spoon	football match
doctor	hot water bottle	mountain top
shoplifter	supermarket trolley	cinema
drag artist	carving knife	AGM
nun	glass of wine	Jobcentre

EXERCISES FOR SPECIFIC ASPECTS OF WRITING

BUILDING AN ATMOSPHERE, CREATING A MOOD.

Here the writer is conjuring up the spirit that will give life to the narrative. Setting gives an idea of the plot and mood of the story. You need to be specific - words like joy, misery, beauty, are abstract. Instead of
'I was miserable.' you might write
'I was running out of tissues. Thank goodness I don't wear mascara. I longed to run home, pretend he was still there.'
Similarly, rather than
'The room still held all the familiar smells from my childhood visits,'
NAME the smell:
'I could swear the room still smelled of tobacco, could almost see Grandpa's shabby tobacco pouch.'

Think of a room from your childhood or early adulthood. Describe the room as if you have never been there before, letting the reader know your feelings by SHOWING, not telling. Remember we have ambivalent feelings about rooms from our past – choose a not too painful episode. If you write about this fictionally, how would that differ from autobiography? In fiction, there must be a reason for this event which makes it dramatic. A good topic for group discussion

(Adapted from a Workshop with Lynne Patrick of Real Writers)
Think of a room you are currently familiar with. Describe it in detail, BUT create a mood - fear, sadness, etc. Try NOT to include people or a complex

plot. Aim at atmosphere through pictures.

Up to ten minutes to write. Read to the group. No comments this time.

NOW: Describe exactly the same setting, but change the mood. (Example: Overturned chair - anger in one, hasty excitement in the second). Read aloud then discuss, noting how you altered the moods. **Example**:

a) The guttering candles, wax collecting in grubby lumps down the sides of the candlesticks, fitfully reflected the half-emptied plates. Rain spattered against the window, driven there by the October gale. An empty chair was shoved untidily back, a knife spinning on the floor under the table. Heavy silence, the white and yellow walls incongruously cheerful in the rapidly cooling evening air. Through the open kitchen door an acrid smell - the celebration pudding was ruined.

b) The bright yellow candles, chosen to tone with the newly-papered yellow and white walls, shut out the spattering rain and October gale. The feast was almost over, plates scraped, just enough room left for the piece de resistance. Through the open door leading to the kitchen a fragrant odour, a cheerful screech.
'Help, the sauce is burning!'
A chair pushed hastily back, a knife sent spinning under the table, the pudding rescued.

Read aloud; notice how the mood is altered and discuss.

SCENE-SETTING

The setting is an important element in a story and even more in a poem, creating the where and possibly the when.Your strengths may lie in inventing plots, producing complex and exciting characters, or creating vivid dialogue. Many of us forget to include details of the setting, yet this can tell the reader a great deal about the characters and possibly the plot. A description of a wintry day can reflect the icy anger in the heart or the pain s/he is experiencing. We need to be able to SEE AND HEAR a real person

Select a character & setting from the lists below. Link them in a story/poem.
Characters: student teenager tourist immigrant grandparent baby
Settings: Scottish beach garden in Cornwall, kitchen Greek Island, crowded street hotel bar

Think of a story you are writing or have written. Take one of your characters; make us see their home, their workplace, the inside of their car. Although this is not necessarily part of the story and you may never use these notes, they offer new ways to enhance the whole.

Take a fairytale – create a behind the scene set.
Example: describe the room Cinderella is expected to sleep in.

CREATING CHARACTERS

Are your characters convincing? Do they sound real and credible? Are their names appropriate? Do they sound different from each other when they speak? Do their words sound natural?

- Grow your Own
  Characters: First name**:** a
  childhood pet.
  Surname: first address you remember (drop 'Road'
  etc.) Describe the character – age, dress, reactions to
  others.
  Join another group member and write a dialogue between the two (One group had Buster Montgomery meeting Bubble Stanley.)

- Divide the group into pairs; give each pair a page from a large-scale road atlas. Using village names for characters
  Example: Shudy Camps (Cambs) a thin, weasel-like little man, a petty criminal and police informant.
  Take 10–15 minutes to collaborate in choosing two or three characters and creating a synopsis for a story. Pairs offer their outline for group comments; stories can be developed later, possibly at home.

- Give the group a list of possibly stereotypical names.
  Example: Sam, Gerald, Helena, Hugo, Lloyd, Naomi, Sophie, Sunita. Each choose two and write brief character descriptions. Include age, class, nationality, appearance, education, job, housing, etc. (15 mins) Read out each character in turn.
  Note similarities/differences, any unused names, reaction to names: why do we like/dislike some of them?
  Take one of the above names no-one chose and ask everyone to write about that person. Good for discussion of stereotyping.

DIALOGUE

Why is dialogue important?

- It varies the pace of a story
- It develops a character
- It moves the plot along

It may seem at first that dialogue is simply written-down grammatical speech; far from it. Many inexperienced writers find it difficult; it is certainly difficult to make it sound authentic. Speech is active, with an immediate effect on the listener. It covers facial expression, gesture, tone and volume of voice, body language.

Dress and other indicators of status influence the way the words are received. To be effective, written dialogue has to indicate as best it can at least some of these aspects and to convince the reader that there is a *believable* character speaking. People hesitate, interrupt, fail to finish sentences, speak in jargon.

Which is the more authentic of the two below?

"You wish to go to the cinema tonight? It is essential to request that of your father" OR *"A film? Tonight? You'll have to ask Dad*."

Somewhat over-emphasized but it makes a point.

- Invent a conversation between two fairytale characters e.g
  Cinderella's step-sisters after the ball
  Hansel and Gretel on their way home
  Goldilocks and her mother
  Take 10 minutes. Read round the group, give feedback:
  Does the conversation sound authentic; interesting? Does it develop the characters and 'show' rather than 'tell' what is happening? (See later for 'show, don't tell.')

- Grandparent and grandchild out for the day. Invent their conversation.
  Again, discuss and offer feedback

- Plain dialogue, without 'He said' or 'She whispered sadly' etc. Find ways to make the different voices clear and to convey mood. (Vary sentence length, vocabulary, etc.)

- 'The ringing phone filled her with dread'
  Write the conversation which follows when the phone is answered.
  Read, then discuss the advantages/limitations of this type of writing.

- Conflict or different agendas:
  returning home tired – one at home wants to discuss problems.
  teenager and parent.
  parking warden and driver.

- Imagine meeting someone from the future in an ordinary everyday setting. From another planet, a human being, yourself or a grandchild in years to come. Invent the conversation.

LANGUAGE AND STYLE

- **Focus**: using descriptive nouns and verbs
  Take a sentence like: 'The woman walked across the room'.
  Each person list:
  10 adjectives to describe a
  woman; 10 nouns to use instead
  of woman 10 verbs to replace
  'walked';
  10 nouns instead of 'room'.
  Use these lists to write 3 more sentences in different styles for group comments.
  N.B. For gender balance, next time use 'The man sat in the seat.'

- Write something in exactly 50 words. Notice how many words you had to cut out and still tell a story with meaning.

- Write 100 words; read round, then change just five words to alter the meaning completely. Perhaps change someone else's 100 word story.

- Each member of the group contributes a word to include in a story.

- Get five members of the group to choose a number between 1 and 5, preferably a few of the same number. Others then choose another five numbers between 6 and 20. Mix the numbers up so that you have a list something like this: 3, 3, 2, 18, 19, 7, 1, 20, 6, 1.
  Choose a fairly dramatic subject, perhaps a car crash and write for 10 minutes, using sentence lengths specified by the numbers.

- Each member picks a word at random from a dictionary. However obscure, the words are written down and used *in the order they have been heard* to write a paragraph at home for the next session.

- Exchanging random word lists and using them in a piece of writing.

Brainstorm Abstract Nouns -

friendship	worry	generosity	hope	surprise	shyness
power	jealousy	selfishness	greed	guilt	boredom
loneliness	anxiety	optimism	fame	envy	modesty

Choose one. What sound and feeling do you associate with it? What colour? How does it taste/smell?

PLOT

What is plot? The basic definition is 'what happens in a story.' It is built of significant events in the story – a bean in Jack's hand is not significant, unless it is the one which will grow into a beanstalk. Plot is what characters do, say or think that move the story forward.
Writers must ask themselves:
What – When – Where – Why – and what is at stake?
Plots can be found everywhere if we use our eyes and ears – and ask 'What if...?' Newspapers, snatches of conversations on buses, trains, mobile phones, photographs, our own lives (suitably disguised unless we are writing memoirs). The following ideas are for those moments in a Writing Group when the mind goes blank:-

- You are 21. You go to a fortune teller who is said to be genuine. She gives you 4 predictions for Heart, Head, Career and Life. Write about how the predictions work out (or not) over the next few days, weeks, or years. Use a third person character if you prefer to.

- Aged 65, you (or your character) suddenly find a diary of the year you left school. What were your plans – were they fulfilled?

- Choose one plot from the four below and begin a story
  - Your vehicle has broken down late at night on a lonely road.
  - A grandchild, who can barely swim, drifting out to sea on a lilo.
  - You are invited to a colleague's wedding...but…
  - Shoplifting for the third time – never caught before.

  Write for 5/8/10 ten minutes – (depends how long you want the exercise to last altogether.)
  Pass it to the person on the left, to continue that story.
  Pass it on again – next person finish the story.
  Depending on time and the size of the group this can go round ALL members or stop at three. Last person READS the story aloud.
  Group comments: as the first writer, was this the ending you planned?

  Alternative: Use the above but each write an individual story

- Use pictures of a house for sale, an action photo, an advertisement. Possibly give names and a time of day, or weather. Create a story.

- Write a story based on an inn sign.

POINT OF VIEW

Every piece of writing comes from a particular point of view. One of the things to be clear about, from the very start, is that you are adopting a specific and consistent point of view and that you are doing it for a reason.

Paul Magrs "The Creative Writing Coursebook"

The notion of Point of View is too complex to explain briefly, but it could be described as 'Who is telling this story?'
It is the view of the relationship between characters and events, of the cause and effect of actions on the story and controls the story.
The narrator may be the author, (known as 'omniscient') but here the reader finds it harder to identify with any one character as all are treated equally. It is no longer generally used in the short story, where one point of view focuses the attention. Using more than one viewpoint may confuse the reader or change the whole story.

First person: The "I" narrator is part of the action. Can be anyone, can attempt to tell the reader how to view the other characters. Known only through what s/he tells us and everything within the text must be something which is known to him or her. Useful in the short story, which has a more limited plot and timescale than a novel.
Third person: The most popular point of view, it puts the reader in the position of a viewer, usually through the eyes of the main character or protagonist. Offers similar problems as first person, unless others' views are occasionally mentioned.
Omniscient: Does the narrator have a God-like ability to go anywhere, know, hear and see everything? Will the narrator be able to go into rooms before the characters arrive, or to see things the characters know nothing about? One of the difficulties many writers find when they use third person narrative is switching between characters' thoughts at random. Better, to begin with, to restrict the point of view to one character. Choose a protagonist and follow their story. To explore other characters, try to *imply* their thoughts, perhaps through dialogue.

It is important to think about:

- Whose story you are telling – and who is telling it.
- What can they see and know?
- What difference does it make if someone else tells the story?

Take the Three Bears, normally told in the third person from a general narrator's viewpoint. Suppose Mrs Bear, writing in the first person, had told the tale – the reader would have a different idea of what was important, most probably a different opinion of Goldilocks.

- Pick a fairytale. Choose a character whose point of view is not often considered; write a piece by them eg Red Riding Hood from Grandma's point of view; Cinderella from Buttons'.

- Take the characters from the Adam and Eve story: on separate pieces of paper write God; Adam; Eve; the serpent. Each person picks one and retells the story from a different viewpoint.
- Tell one event with a paragraph or two from three different viewpoints. **EXAMPLE:** Moving house. The owner, the removal man, a rebellious teenager.

THE SENSES

No need for an explanation – we use sight and sound – but what about the others? Smell, taste and touch can be of equal value.

- Sight: The sea; a traffic jam; a dead tree.
  Smell: New baked bread; woodsmoke; a bad egg.
  Sound: A siren – (ambulance, police or fire); Elvis
  Taste: Chocolate cake; curry
  Touch: Silk; a stinging nettle; a brand new book.

  Write a story using one item from each sense. Read and discuss.
  What feelings accompany these words for you?
  How many evoked more than one sense? (Book = sight, touch, possibly smell. Bread = taste, sight, touch, smell.)

When I was ten. Think of the sights. smells, sounds, tastes and things to touch encountered by a ten year old. Imagine a meeting with your ten year old self – perhaps hold a conversation about the different senses which appealed then and now.

Imagine a lemon – its texture, colour, smell.
Imagine a knife to slice it – put a section in your mouth. How have you reacted physically?
Is your mouth puckered from the sour taste?

Imagine you have lost one of your senses – what would life be like?

SHOW, DON'T TELL

This phrase slips regularly from the tongue of creative writing group leaders, but what does it *mean*? It means exactly what the phrase says – *show* what is happening, don't *tell* the reader. *Show,* through dialogue only, how people feel and behave. See also 'Creating Mood' and 'the Senses.'
Emotions are important - learn to include them and to **show** them without using the word. A story that deals only with facts and states bluntly, for example,
Celia was so angry she destroyed his work
soon bores the reader. Instead, paint a picture of Celia's anger
All his books, his papers, the pens she swept to the floor, stamping on the nearest ones. Breathing loudly, almost snorting, her teeth chewing her lower lip, Celia started towards him; he flinched
NOT 'She was furious,' but
'She kneaded the bread as if it were his severed head.'

- Rewrite these sentences to ***show*** how the characters felt and behaved:
  She was so happy when John proposed.
  Jan was devastated by her son's illness.
  Richard was depressed when he first retired.
  Discuss in the group what effect this had on the writing.
  This exercise could be turned into a story.

- Bring some of your earlier writing to the group and see how it might benefit from less tell. A good opportunity to practise feedback skills.

- Make a list of six emotions and describe them in sentences without naming the emotion. Read round and guess which emotion is intended

- Non-verbal clues: Pick any 3 of these openings and continue, indicating the person's mood and character by his/her body language. Think about facial expressions, gestures, tics, fidgets, movements, actions, etc. What they say also helps to create a character – accents, emphasis, colloquialisms, jargon, etc.
  1. Pamela hurried to join the group peering down at . . . . . .
  2. Julia, sitting across the restaurant table from Alan, sighed . . . .
  3. Todd doubted whether it was true . . . . . .
  4. "Wrong again!" thought Henry . . . . . .

5. Tristram slammed the door of his BMW . . . . . .
6. Ethel was horrified by Sarah's news .
7. "I dunno as I know that for sure!" Dan was puzzled . . . . .
8. "How's your Mum today?" Sheila asked . . . . . .
9. Heather shivered, even though the day was warm.. . . . . .
10. Mandy giggled, seeming delighted . . . . . .
11. It wasn't like Arthur to get upset . . . . . .
12. Irritated, Crispin shook the rain from his umbrella . . . . .
13. Carlotta was nervous . . . . . .
14. Tina longed for the phone to ring . . . . . .
15. "Dahling, It's not mink, is it?" Felicity queried . . . . .
16. The delay on the internet connection always exasperated Linda.

Write 3 paragraphs about the characters on your list and read round.

- Use two of the above sentences (not ones chosen earlier) and write a story involving the two characters. Use show, don't tell as much as possible, but remember a few *basic* facts must be included.

THE UNKNOWN

We are told to write about what we know, but is P.D James a murderer? For this kind of information thorough research is essential. But we often fail to harness the imagination. Here are some ideas for writing about what we DON'T know (Adapted from a workshop with the late Julia Darling)

- List up to ten events in your life, not necessarily deep and meaningful. **Example**: learning to ride a bike, last day at school.
  Then a list of things you **don't** remember. (This takes rather longer). **Example**: birth of a sibling, starting school, something that remains a mystery.
  I didn't remember when my Gran came to live with us; how I learned about sex; my first day at work.

  Choose one of the events you don't remember and imagine how it **could** have been. (Mine was a six year old finding out from a friend where babies come from.)
  Take ten minutes. Each person read aloud.
  Discuss how like/unlike the probable original situation the piece may be.

- On a small piece of paper, write down an unusual skill, not necessarily one you possess. I've seen making poppadums, replacing a head gasket, folding damask dinner napkins into swans, building a dry-stone wall. Put the pieces of paper in a hat, each person pick one out.

  Write for ten minutes, describing the skill you chose, in whatever way you wish. 'Making poppadums' was written as a cookery demonstration that never took off and was hilarious. I set my 'Gutting a fish' in Whitby, with an old fisherman and his grandson who hated fish.
  Each person read out. How easy/difficult was it to use your imagination?

USING OUR EXPERIENCES

Whether we are writing memoirs, autobiography, fiction or poetry, our own lives provide a very valuable source of inspiration. It can be useful to chart our lives, although if you fictionalise actual events, beware the laws of libel.

- Lifeline: Beginning at the left-hand side of the page, draw a line representing your life. There is no need at this stage to mark yearly intervals, it is like a road, showing ups and downs. Go back as far as you can remember.
  Take a coloured pen and underline major events. With another colour mark events you may not want to discuss.
  Now mark five-year periods on the line and begin to write a list.
  Add to your lifeline some or all of these categories (not necessarily immediately, this may be a *pro forma* for an autobiography or plotlines, to be added to as you wish.)

Arts/books	Births	Career	Education	Food & Drink
Friendships	Funerals	Games	Grandparents	Health
Homes	Interests	Lovers	Money	Parents
Politics	Relatives	Religion	Siblings	Travel
Volunteering	Wartime	Weddings		

Example: Under Career include Saturday jobs; unemployment; ambitions. If Autobiography, remember the social environment at the time. This list could provide you with enough material for several novels or may inspire you to write those memoirs.

USING VISUAL PROMPTS

- Put out several fairly unusual items on a tray; people choose two or three and compose a story. Amazing results if you choose things like a carving knife; a silk glove; a high-heeled shoe; a child's photo; a bar of chocolate... we produced murders and kidnaps.

- Take an interesting painting or photo and write a story about it. (It worked for 'Girl with a Pearl Earring.') Try Rembrandt, Edward Hopper, Monet or even Tracy Emin.

- Ask members to bring a photo of themselves when young. Lay the photos face down and each pick one. Write an imaginary story behind the photo. It's uncanny how similar imagination and truth can be when all is revealed.

- Pairs of photos, one depicting a person, the second a place/event. Real or from a newspaper, magazine or the internet and more than enough for each member of the group. Place each face down in two separate places people take one from each at random and write the story.

Newspaper/magazine/internet pictures:
a) Unusual houses – you are moving into or out of one of them.
b) Outfits, handbags, shoes – invent the person who wears them
c) People and scenes – the characters and background story
 Lonely Hearts Ads. Cut out some more unusual ones. Each member picks one and replies to it
Read out the reply, then write another letter after meeting them.
 Invent a Lonely Hearts Ad about yourself. Each member draws one of these out of a hat and replies to it. A recipe for hilarity and a good example of show, don't tell plus imagination.
 Work in pairs, each pair having a sealed envelope containing a vital clue. Example: a train ticket, a 6-inch nail, a Yale key, a bath plug. Tell the group they have a dead body; they invent age, sex, location, how the person was killed and solve the crime using the vital clue. Give up to 20 minutes. Pairs present their case, the rest comment.

Ask members to bring one or more artefacts, or supply your own. Example: a Polynesian cannibal brain scoop which made the group think with what brains they still had left.

Create a setting based on a picture (postcard, illustration).

Produce a paper bag containing enough everyday objects for each member to pick two. Example: a bar of soap, a teabag, a 50p piece, a fork; a glove; a postcard from abroad, a hair ribbon. Each member picks two blindly from the bag and uses them in a story.

Show several pairs of shoes ,or jewellery, gloves, etc. Write about one of the pairs, answering the following questions:
What comes to mind when you look at these?
Who bought them? When? Where? Why? For self or someone else? How much did they cost? Expensive or not for the purchaser?
Have they always belonged to the same person? How many other pairs did the wearer own?
How did the wearer feel the first time they wore them? What clothes were worn with them?
How often were they worn? Best/everyday/special occasions? How were they cared for? What memories do they hold?
Successful pair or a sad one?

EXERCISES AND IDEAS FOR POETRY WRITERS

- Look at a poem by a published poet. Note its form, metre or rhyming structure if any, composition, subject and whether it is inward or outward looking, lyrical or action/story centred.
Create your own work using a similar structure.

- Someone is charged before the meeting with writing a number of cards, each with a word on it. Include verbs, adverbs, nouns, colours, names, activities, times of day. Mix up the notes and conceal them in a box or bag.
Writers take a lucky dip, retrieving say six words, each of which has to be incorporated into their work, again in a limited time. The results are read out and discussed. Can be repeated.

- Members each bring a small favourite object (a picture postcard, vase, doll, jewellery). The objects are grouped together and members choose from any of these as a subject to write about for around 20 minutes. The results are read out and discussed. Can be repeated choosing a different object.

- Examine an established, formal poetry structure such as a sonnet, sestina, roundel, villanelle, haiku, pantoum. Note its structure and constraints and write your own work using this form.

REVISING YOUR WORK

This is re-writing, moving & removing words & passages around, noticing what doesn't work, what is muddled. Have you called a character Jim to begin with but Tom later on? Are all events chronologically possible? A basic skill in writing prose is clarity of expression. If you want to tell the reader something, tell them clearly.

When should you revise? Whenever you find works for you, but I'd say not until you've completed the outline of the piece. Get the general shape down on paper. If you hone paragraph one to perfection, it can frighten you off writing paragraph 2 for fear it won't match up.

Look at your words. Words are your raw material, your building blocks. Every word is there for a reason……if not, delete it. If you find you've been repeating a word, find other words of similar meaning & replace the repetition. If you think the story's the important thing, any words that tell it are fine, you make a mistake. Look for the best words. Blue will do, but ice-blue or sky blue create more of an image. Use better verbs….not 'she cried' but but she wept or sobbed. Not 'He walked towards her' but 'He limped or loped or marched towards her'. Sometimes of course you only need a basic word, but at least try out words that paint more of a picture. Cut down on adverbs, the ly words that come after verbs & describe how the action was done. Instead of 'the music played loudly' say 'the music boomed. Not 'He ate greedily' but 'He hoovered-up his food'.
Cut out tautology, the saying of something twice over in different words, eg old antique maps, a tiny little kitten. A common fault is using modifying adverbs like very, rather, a little,to qualify adjectives. 'An old wooden, somewhat scratched pine table' is better described as 'A pine table, scratched by years of use'.

Look at your sentences. The job of a sentence is to lead the reader to the next sentence. Vary the length of sentences, to keep things interesting & to vary the pace for the reader. Short sentences generally express simple ideas & are read at a faster pace. In a longer sentence, make sure the images are in the order in which you want the reader to see them.

Look at your paragraphs. Each paragraph should deal with a separate idea. It should not be a mix of unrelated thoughts or topics.

Look at your punctuation. It gives control of the reader's voice.

Read your work aloud to hear how it sounds. You don't need anyone else to listen.

You cannot expect to write a perfect piece at the first attempt. Taking the time to go over what you've written & polish it up makes a world of difference.

OFFERING CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

Most of the groups and individuals who contact me ask
'How can we be more open when we criticise people's work?' or say, 'People say they want their work criticised, but we don't want to offend and they can get defensive.'

First step: stop calling it criticism.Constructive Feedback is a far more appropriate phrase. The guidelines which follow work well for groups I have met at Summer Schools and Study Days. You probably won't need all these at any one session.

BASIC GROUND RULES

The reader: Listen with an open mind. Give full attention and respect.
Say something! Having work greeted in silence can lead to paranoia.
Don't suggest a complete re-write or new plot. Be honest (but not cruel) and constructive.
Be as specific as possible. Do you want to read on?
Receivers may ask for clarification. Time-limit on comments - 2/3 minutes.
The writer: Hear and accept the feedback – no need to defend or explain. Think what your work says to others.

MORE FORMAL FEEDBACK

Ask, where possible, what the writers want from you. They may say "general comments" but may also want to know about character, dialogue, over-describing, plot, anything.
Start with the positive: Say what you liked about the writing.
Mood: what does it convey? Can you see, hear, feel the place, the people?
Content - is it interesting, exciting? Could it be more lively - how?
Be helpful - could the writer say more about…less about.....
What is missing? As writers we are often unaware that, although WE know what is happening, we may not have explained it to the reader.

PLEASE DON'T SAY: 'It's very nice...'
'You ought to have written about ….' 'What I would have said is...'

USE PHRASES LIKE: 'I wondered if '
'Had you thought of '
'I wasn't quite clear about '

How Can I Tell whether my Writing is Improving?

You can sense a general improvement, but more specifically:-

You easily start writing from the topic/prompt given and write without hesitation. You keep the pen moving without stopping to think/consider. You allow yourself to write freely, knowing some of it is daft and you can revise later. You write more naturally, with less self-consciousness.

You write creatively, rather than as if it's your diary of what happened. You realise you can blend people and events and don't have to be factual.

Your verbs are lively and diverse….ie you vary them.

You hardly use adverbs.

Your images are fresh, you don't use clichés.

Your sentences vary in length and structure. You save the strongest word for the end of the sentence, without it sounding forced.

You include details in your stories.

You create moods, describing things through all the senses.

You don't write pieces that are too long or too short.

You have expanded your language and are using new words.

You don't rush to finish a piece, you take your time.

You show rather than telling.

The Magic of Writing Groups

Magic….the very word is thrilling. Magic fountain, magic mountain, an adventure conjured up.
Magic spell, magic wand, a frisson of the forbidden. Abracadabra, you cast a spell.

In the Writing groups, we are all magicians. We conjure up something out of a prompt in a few words….sometimes just one word. We bring to our meetings characters & places, events, situations & stories from imagination mixed with memory. We notice the magic when we are rapt by what someone reads out, or when the same idea has come to more than one of us. Sometimes a few of us will have used the same unusual word not heard in everyday speech. Usually, the amazement is the variety of stories the prompt has conjured up.

Look at a shelf of books, gathering dust. Take down & open any one. Each contains a world & a journey. Light-up your Kindle & open up more stories, gathered there from the magic of the Internet.

Writing is magic. It's a therapy when you are low or lonely. It can lift your mood & show you that you can create something. Writing has, over time, created characters who have passed into our consciousness & culture. It's hard to believe that Sherlock Holmes never existed, nor Hercule Poirot, nor Tom Sawyer. There was never actually a Jane Eyre, no Heathcliffe, no Scarlett O'Hara. But they all now exist in our collective consciousness.

A member reads their work to the Writing group, & there is a hush as they follow the story being revealed……murmurs at the end as they take in what happened. There is laughter, cries of "Yes, me too, I know about that….wish I'd thought of writing about it." Some stories cause fear or tears. Some help us understand our fellows & what made them who they are.

Writing is magic. Keep casting those spells.

Marcia Humphries

THE END