

**HANDBOOK  
FOR  
USA CREATIVE  
WRITING GROUPS**



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WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE FOLLOWING  
U3A CREATIVE WRITING GROUPS:

Bexley U3A Creative Writing Group  
Borehamwood & Elstree U3A.  
Bristol U3A Poetry Writing Group  
Buckingham & District U3A Creative Writers  
Cardiff U3A Writers Group  
Cheltenham U3A Writing for Pleasure (3)  
Derby Creative Writing Group  
Devizes U3A Writers  
Grange U3A Creative Writing Workshop  
Patcham U3A Writers Group  
Pens At Ten Stevenage U3A  
Writers Workshop U3A S. London  
Writing for Pleasure Bridgend U3A.  
Writing for Pleasure Deepings U3A  
Writing for Pleasure North Cotswolds U3A

With permission:  
Online Course designers:  
Poetry - Jean Thompson  
Short Story - Ian Searle  
Bristol Polygon Poetry Group  
Kirkdale Writers Group (Sydenham)

Many thanks for these. Special thanks to Derek Stevens, Pembrokeshire U3A and fellow-Mentor on the U3A Online Short Story Course, for his impeccable and meticulous proof-reading.

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 of what it is you are trying to convey. That does not mean you have to work every detail of a story in your head before you can write it, but it does mean you should at least have some ideas about

- ❖ who your characters are
- ❖ the setting in which they exist
- ❖ the theme of the story

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The booklets currently available from National Office have been very useful, but it seemed time to produce a comprehensive Handbook which covers the 'most frequently asked questions' I receive as National Coordinator. Groups who are members of the Network 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, a rash decision as there will immediately be an enquiry mentioning points I hadn't considered. The Handbook is geared towards fiction and poetry, but any kind of writing group – travel, articles, etc. – 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 U3A 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.

Let me know if you find the Handbook useful. My email address is in U3A News and Writers' Newsletter. If you or your group are not yet on the Subject Coordinators' Membership List, please contact me; membership is free.

Enjoy – and get writing.

Maggie Smith  
U3A National Subject Coordinator  
Creative Writing  
September 2008

## 2            SETTING UP A U3A CREATIVE WRITING GROUP

These guidelines on the structure of most U3A – and other – Writers' groups are NOT set in stone; some U3A Writers' Groups use the time solely to read and critique each other's work. A Writers' Group develops its own style and I suggest you simply adapt these suggestions to suit your group.

**You do not need to be a former teacher or an 'expert' to lead a U3A group. It helps if you know something about the subject but there is support available – from the Coordinator, the Resource Centre, Study Days. Knowing how to manage groups is sometimes more important.**

- ❖ Meet for 2 hours, probably once a fortnight.
- ❖ Mornings: begin with coffee/tea. Afternoons: end with tea. Members usually pay around 50p.
- ❖ Size: depends on space available and time given to reading. Around 8-10.
- ❖ Members usually bring some writing of their own to read. Very little feedback in the first weeks until the group begins to trust and the leader can see who can and cannot take challenging feedback.
- ❖ Ask at the first session what they want to do; what kind of writing they do - or in some cases do not do - and what they like to read.
- ❖ 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.
- ❖ Offer various ideas - do they want to learn more about short story writing etc. If perhaps they want to write poetry then decide if you want to, or can, teach it (see above), or ask if someone else will volunteer to lead these sessions.
- ❖ After people have read their work and heard feedback, offer an exercise. Set a time limit, leaving time to read aloud. Members then go away and finish it or write something completely different for the next session. You may not call it homework but *they* will.
- ❖ Keep slightly longer exercises for days when only two or three turn up.

### 3 USEFUL BOOKS FOR WRITING GROUPS

<b>AUTHOR</b>	<b>TITLE</b>	<b>ISBN NO</b>
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

If you decide to buy only one or two, I would definitely recommend for group use 'The Creative Writing Course Book' and for individuals possibly Dorothea Brande, Stephen King, Celia Brayfield and Carole Blake. Books on writing are published almost weekly and the above list is compiled of those I and others have found useful, by authors acknowledged, some for many years, as 'tried and tested.'

## 4 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...'

### WRITTEN FEEDBACK

Some U3A Groups are 'manuscript only' and use their sessions for reading out their work and sharing feedback. This form of feedback is very useful if time is limited or the writer wants to be able to study the comments long-term. We use this method at Summer School, where a participant introduced it. After each person reads everyone writes comments and gives them to the reader to take home. Post-it notes are excellent as they can be stuck onto the manuscript and read later.

## 5 THE EXERCISES

### SIMPLE TRIGGERS TO START YOU WRITING

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 heirloom
the wooden trunk in the attic	the garden
why am I here?	grumpy old woman/man
Flood (a U3A affected by the 2007 floods; similar crises may trigger themes)	

### 6. 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.
 

**Example:** 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 jewelry;
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.
 

**Example:** the local paper, The Guardian, The Sun etc.

Someone else rewrite it as if from a very different paper.

- ❖ 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 of charity
nun	glass of wine	Jobcentre

## 7 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 pièce 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.

## 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  
(This 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

### **For those interested in Scriptwriting:**

Stage & TV: remember to set the scene; include stage and lighting directions.

Radio: include sound, not forgetting music.

## 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.
  
- ❖ Try in the group the 60-word stories page in Woman's Weekly (Fiction Series). Submit at least some of them. Being published is a great confidence booster and any 60-word story published wins a dictionary.
  
- ❖ Brainstorm Abstract Nouns - e.g.  

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

Choose one about which you feel particularly positive/negative:  
What sound would you associate with it? What colour? What does it

taste like? How does it smell? Think of a feeling you associate with it  
**EXAMPLE:** DESPAIR sounds like crying, is grey; it tastes bitter and smells of damp roots; it feels like walking in the rain

## PLOTS

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, snippets 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 it
- ❖ Aged 65, you (or your character) suddenly finds a Diary of the year you left school. What were your plans – were they fulfilled?
- ❖ Choose one 'plot' from the five 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 fairy tale, classic story or myth. Choose a character whose point of view is not often considered; write a poem or prose piece in their name. Examples: Red Riding Hood from Grandmother's point of view; Cinderella from a lovesick 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.

## SCENE-SETTING

(See also 'Creating Mood' and 'Using Visual Prompts'.)

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 and a setting from the two lists below. Link the two in a short story/poem.

<b>Characters:</b>	student	teenager	tourist
	immigrant	grandparent	baby
<b>Settings:</b>	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.

## 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: Newly 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 if 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, etc.

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	etc. etc.	

**Example:** Under "Career" include "Saturday" jobs; unemployment; ambitions etc. 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 to 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, etc.
- ❖ 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 (Not in reality.... unless you want to....). 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 used teabag, a 5p 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.
- ❖ In this case several pairs of shoes (or jewelry, a picture, gloves, etc.). Write about one of the pairs, answering the following questions:  
 What comes to mind when you look at these shoes?  
 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 of shoes 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 shoes or sad ones?
- ❖ Each member brings an unusual object, a souvenir from abroad, a family treasure etc., without giving details of its origin/history. Give them out blindly and the new 'owners' write what THEY imagine to be the history of the object.

## 8 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 etc. 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 etc). 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 etc. Note its structure and constraints and write your own work using this form.

The Poetry Society promotes Ecopoetry Study packs, which are resources for poetry and creative writing groups, designed for schools, young adults and poets. Free to download!!

See [www.poetrysociety.org.uk](http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/content/education/poetryclass/news) /content/education/poetryclass/news

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