



NO. 21 IN THE WRITING CENTER HANDOUT SERIES

A Guide to Creative Writing

Embarking on a creative writing project can be a little daunting because it is so different from academic writing. If you follow certain guidelines, however, your experience — and your product — will be much more rewarding.

Read.

You have to be a good reader to be a good writer. Read anything and everything. When it comes to reading, genre and top 100 standing are not important. Reading other people's creative writing is essential to writing your own. Whether you notice it or not, you are collecting information on what you think does or does not constitute good writing. Every word you've read and every technique you've appreciated becomes a tool you can use.

Write.

You should already have begun to think of yourself as a writer, and writers write. Like every other skill, language can become a little rusty with disuse. It is important to take some time every day, if possible, to write. Also, keep in mind that crossing genres — writing poetry if you usually write stories — can develop your skills in new ways.

Keep a journal or notebook.

Many writers keep a journal to hone their language skills, even when they are not working on a project. Sometimes called a commonplace book, your writer's journal is a place for you to practice your writing in any way that feels right to you. You could write interesting ideas or things you'd like to remember, your responses to those things, notes to yourself, or even works in progress. Just like constant reading, constant writing gives you an expanded toolbox.

Write what is important to you.

It's important to have the audience in mind, but you are ultimately the boss when it comes to your writing. In fact, part of your job as a writer is to determine how best to communicate your ideas and thoughts to your readers. A good creative writer can make her readers look at anything — from her dog or hometown to parsley or bicycling — in a new and arresting light.

Show, don't tell.

Don't spell out what can be evoked with dialogue, imagery or actions. In creative writing, word choice is extremely important because you are creating sensual art with your words.

Be aware of language conventions.

Grammar, spelling, punctuation, and usage remain important in any type of writing. Although it is sometimes acceptable to defy the rules in creative writing projects, do so only if it serves a specific purpose. Poor grammar does not equal creativity.

Edit.

A work is very seldom finished the moment it's written. Always look at your writing as a work in progress, and continue to work at improving it. Look at it from a different angle, or ask another person for advice.

Share your work with others.

To be an effective (and publishable) creative writer, you must learn to be comfortable sharing your work with others. You should get as much input from diverse audiences as you can — the purpose of creative writing, after all, is communication with others.

For more information on creative writing, see:

Created Writing: Poetry from New Angles, Paul Agostino

Creative Nonfiction, Philip Gerard

Writing Down the Bones, Natalie Goldberg

On Writing, Stephen King

One Writer's Beginnings, Eudora Welty