

## Creative Writing – Fiction

So you've enrolled in a creative writing class. You thought writing from your imagination would be much easier than writing a research paper. But now you're stuck. How do you define a story, anyway? Which subject should you choose? Where do you begin?

The blank page can intimidate even the most seasoned writer, swallowing up confidence like a dehydrated sea serpent. Not to worry. Writers have been writing for long before you existed, they have faced the same issues you face, and they write about that, too. Here are some notes and tips to help get your story going.

### What Is a Story?

It's quite simple, really. A story is something with a recognizable beginning, middle, and end. Imbedded in that beginning, middle, and end is meaning.

That's it.

Sure, more parameters exist, but once we begin throwing "shoulds" at the craft, someone comes along and breaks all the rules and takes our breath away in the process. The best advice I've heard: Don't overthink the process. It's only a story, only words on a page, all that you have to do is write them.

### Beginnings

There's a saying that goes: *Age quod agis*. Roughly translated to: "Do what you are doing" or "To the business at hand."

Whether this means closing your email or handcuffing yourself to your desk, the idea is to focus all of your attention on writing. No Googling the origin of goblins in the middle of a paragraph. No assembling a ham-and-mayonnaise sandwich between page breaks. Sit. Write. Read.

Begin with character. You may have an amazing idea for plot or setting. You may already know that a murder will take place with a wooden leg in a poppy field on Venus. If you don't know your character, then the idea will scramble fecklessly all over the page. Characters anchor your ideas and give the reader somebody with which to relate. Sketch some character details before you begin writing.

Some questions you might ask yourself:

- Appearance – what does he or she look like?
- Background – from where/who did this character spring?
- Motivation – what is the driving force behind this character?
- Habits – does he or she have any hobbies, ticks, or oddities?

Once you have established your character and your character's motivation, you can place him or her in your setting and let the plot unfold.

**TIP:** *Write what you know.* Even if your character is the opposite gender and lives in an underground lair, your own emotions and experiences should be laced throughout. Expose your innermost fears. Show your character's vulnerabilities. Take risks. If you feel naked and scared after writing the story, then you're probably on the right track.

### **Elements of a Story**

**Conflict** – Ask yourself what each character wants. Then create obstacles that prevent your characters from receiving the object(s) of their desire. Every character in your story should want something, even if that character is a dog, a tree, or a slice of Swiss cheese.

**Imagery** – *Show don't tell.* Describe, describe, describe. Consider: He ate the bacon on the plate. (Telling) **Vs.** With chubby, grease-stained fingers, Creosote reached toward the paper plate. Eleven strips of shriveled bacon quivered beneath his touch. He pinched a slice, holding the fatty side between his thumb and forefinger. It wriggled all the way to his mouth like a live thing captured in flight. He inhaled the bacon with a salty slurp. The only evidence that remained: a slippery stain on the breast of his white shirt. (Showing)

**Point of View** – The point of view will be first person (I), second person (you), or third person (he or she). The most common point of view is third person, or telling the story from an omniscient narrator's perspective. You should consider who is telling the story before you start writing and keep it consistent throughout. Jumping around inside different characters' heads can create unnecessary confusion for the reader.

**Meaning** – *The "So What?" test.* You may not know the meaning of your story until after you've finished writing it. In revision, you can work on infusing the meaning throughout the story, so it's clear to the reader what the story is about. Imagine your reader asking herself, "So what?" after reading the story. If you can't answer this question, then it's time to re-examine each element of the story.

### **The Writing Process**

Every author will have a different writing process. Some authors handwrite the first draft using only blue ink. Others prefer typewriters surrounded by odorless votive candles. The best advice I've heard comes from an interview with Roald Dahl.

### **WHAT IS YOUR WORK ROUTINE?**

My work routine is very simple and it's always been so for the last 45 years. The great thing, of course, is never to work too long at a stretch, because after about two hours you are not at your highest peak of concentration, so you have to stop. Some writers choose certain times to write, others [choose] other times, and it suits me to start rather late. I start at 10 o'clock and I stop at 12. Always. However well I'm doing. I will stay there until 12, even if I'm a bit stuck. You have to keep your bottom on the chair and stick it out. Otherwise, if you start getting in the habit of walking away, you'll never get it done.

### **HOW DO YOU KEEP THE MOMENTUM GOING?**

I never come back to a blank page; I always finish about halfway through. To be confronted with a blank page is not very nice. But Hemingway taught me the finest trick, which is, he simply said in his own words, "When you are going good, stop writing." If everything's going well and you know exactly where the end of the chapter's going to go and you know just what the people are going to do, you don't go on writing and writing until you come to the end of it, because when you do, then you say, well, where am I going to go next? And you get up and you walk away and you don't want to come back because you don't know where you want to go. But if you stop when you are going good, as Hemingway said. . . then you know what you are going to say next. You make yourself stop, put your pencil down and everything, and you walk away. And you can't wait to get back because you know what you want to say next and that's lovely and you have to try and do that. Every time, every day all the way through. If you stop when you are stuck, then you are in trouble!

### **Inspiration**

Before you go jumping right into the story, exercise your writing muscles a little. Here are some tips for getting started, as well as some helpful resources for finding ideas.

### **Read!**

Look at words. Consider their constructions and meanings. Get those creative juices flowing! Here are some helpful online sources for contemporary fiction:

- [McSweeney's](#)
- [The New Yorker](#)
- [Necessary Fiction](#)
- [American Literary Review](#)

### **Scan the Strange News**

If your idea well is running dry, get inspiration from real life. Don't forget to imbue the story and characters with your own emotions and experiences.

<http://www.livescience.com/strange-news/>

- Dangerous 10-Foot Megaweed Invades New York!
- Astronauts Benefit from Red Wine in Orbit
- Gigantic Sea Monster Skull May Be the Biggest Ever Discovered

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/weird-news/>

- Armless Carpenter's Feet Work Handily with Tools
- Bald Eagle Saved by Oregon Vet's Mouth-to-Beak CPR
- Florida Couple Guilty of Letting Python Strangle Two-Year-Old Daughter

### **Free Write**

Put your pen to paper and don't stop for 10 minutes. Recount a memory from childhood or describe someone you know. Sometimes [one word](#) is enough to ignite your imagination.

### **Choose a Writing Prompt**

Prompts can serve as warm-ups before the storytelling begins, or they can blossom into a story all their own. McSweeney's offers [13 Writing Prompts](#) that challenge conventional notions of plot, character, and setting.

Good luck, and remember, writing is a fun, cathartic experience, but it's never easy. Writers are the people for which writing is the most difficult. Don't succumb to the "this is too hard" demon sitting on your shoulder. Squash him with a healthy dose of egotism and soldier on!