

Creative Writing BA (Hons): Practise writing for new students

Introduction

Try some of the following exercises, just to practise your writing.

These are not (unless you are very lucky) exercises to help you write a finished piece of work, but exercises to stretch your imagination and help you think about your use of language.

Exercise 1 – Watch your hand

This is an exercise about observation and imagination.

1. Watch your hand
2. Take a piece of paper
3. Pick up a pen or pencil
4. Keep watching your hand
5. Write down six words that you like for any reason
6. Put down your pen or pencil
7. Now write an account of what your hand has just been doing, with as much detail as possible
8. Re-write the account from your hand's point of view. Imagine your hand sees

Exercise 2 – Six words

This is an exercise to help you write about a subject indirectly and by suggestion.

1. If you did exercise 1, you already have six words. If you are starting with this exercise, write down the first six words that come into your head, so long as they do not form a sentence.
2. Think about these words.
3. Go back to the first word on your list. Think about it and write down six words or phrases that come into your head in connection with that word.
The first should be a colour.
The second should be a sound.
The third should be a way of moving.
The fourth should be a texture.
The fifth should be a physical sensation.
The sixth should be an object.

4. Now write a sentence related in some way to your first word without mentioning that word. Instead, draw upon the six words that each of your first words has generated.
5. Do the same for each of the six words in your original list.
6. When you have done this, you should have six sentences that are indirectly related to your first sentence. Think about the relation they have to the words with which you started.
7. Just for fun, see if you can edit them into a coherent paragraph.

Exercise 3 - Writing a poem in strict form

This is an exercise to help you think about the shape and pattern of a poem.

Here is a famous sonnet by the Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser:

Like as a huntsman after weary chase,
Seeing the game from him escaped away:
sits down to rest him in some shady place,
with panting hounds beguiled of their pray.
So after long pursuit and vain assay,
when I all weary had the chase forsook,
the gentle dear returned the self-same way,
thinking to quench her thirst at the next brook.
There she beholding me with milder look,
sought not to fly, but fearless still did bide:
till I in hand her yet half trembling took,
and with her own goodwill her firmly tied.
Strange thing me seemed to see a beast so wild,
so goodly won with her own will beguiled.

Make notes on:

- the rhyme pattern
- the rhythm
- points at which there is a pause, whether at the end of a line or in the middle if you wish, the development of the narrative.

Choose an entirely different topic (if you can't think of one, try either going shopping or a day at the seaside).

Try to write a poem with the same rhyme pattern, the same rhythm and some of the same pauses. See if your narrative develops in the same way as Edmund Spenser's.

When you have finished writing your own poem, look back at Spenser's poem and see what you have learnt.

Exercise 4 - Writing a poem in free verse

Read this short, free verse poem by T.E. Hulme (1883-1917):

Autumn

A touch of cold in the Autumn night –
I walked abroad,
And saw the ruddy moon lean over a hedge
Like a red-faced farmer.
I did not stop to speak, but nodded,
And round about were the wistful stars
With white faces like town children.

Look at the poem carefully, thinking about how pauses and line-endings control the way in which you read it. How do these help the development of the poem and is there any way in which they are related to its subject.

Now take the following sentence of prose (the last sentence of the first chapter of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce) and see if you can shape it into a free verse poem. Edit the sentence if that makes the poem work better.

In the soft grey silence he could hear the bump of the balls: and from here and from there through the quiet air the sound of the cricket bats: pick, pack, pock, puck: like drops of water in a fountain falling softly in the brimming bowl.

Think about what you have learnt about free verse from this process.

Exercise 5

Write about anything that interests you, using one or more of the techniques you have used in exercises 1 – 4.

Exercise 6

Go on a journey which you take regularly (e.g. to the shops) as though you were doing this for the first time. Look for details and listen to sounds, snatches of conversation. If you can, note down phrases that you might use.

Now decide which of your observations would be useful for the following:

- the opening of a short story
- an image in a poem
- establishing a character
- an element in an audio drama or podcast
- the starting point of a blog post or journal entry

Try writing around one or more of the observations.