

Creative Writing MA writing exercises

To give you some idea of the level at which you will be working for this MA, here are four examples of writing exercises taken from each of the four genres covered: fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction and script.

You might like to try some of these activities now. All are taken from the opening chapters of each genre, and are designed to introduce some of the definitive elements in each case. Note that you will sometimes, though not always, be asked to share this work with other students, and to give and receive feedback on written work with your peers.

The online work will be moderated by an Associate Lecturer who will also give some group feedback from time to time, but will not comment on every piece of work. There will be detailed and specific comments from tutors on all your assessed work, the TMAs and final EMA (end-of-module assessment).

Remember that you won't be working in all genres. Initially you will choose your primary genre, and in Block 2 of the first part of the MA (A802) you will choose a secondary genre. There are no constraints within this – you can choose any two genres during A802.

Fiction

The function of a beginning is to introduce the reader to the world they are about to discover and to let them know what kind of story it is. Someone who looks at the first words you have written might need to be convinced they should carry on. They may judge you on those first words, and move on. Yet for the writer a beginning is something else – the glimmer of a story they haven't yet invented. The writer's beginning comes long before those first arresting words.

Writing Activity

Write three possible opening paragraphs to the same story, taking three different approaches:

- Making a startling or arresting statement of fact.
- Offering an invitation to the exotic or particular world of your story.
- Taking the reader '*in medias res*' – the action has already begun. This may mean beginning with dialogue, in the midst of a conversation.

You can use a well-known story that you are already familiar with, such as a classic novel, or a fairy tale such as Red Riding Hood, or else use a story of your own.

Poetry

As you develop, your own voice and style, you may also want to consider the purpose of poetry. As David Constantine puts it, 'What is poetry *for*?' He writes, 'Poetry won't stop the worst things happening' but he also believes that it is important to continue the business of 'fetching things so close that we are bound to see them, of particularizing, naming, keeping

things real and concrete, of making sure that the human being always has a face', calling this a 'very necessary undertaking.' (2013, p.85)

You won't answer the big questions about poetry quickly. However, in giving your attention to how language works, you are engaging with these questions nonetheless. In the next exercise, you'll try putting what Constantine says into practice.

Writing Activity

List several of the objects around you. Then taking three of these, focus on a smaller detail of each, writing ten words or phrases that come to mind. You might see an inner curl of metal on a door handle or the twist of a wood-knot on a chair back. How does it feel? Why was it made? Your writing may relate to the history of this item, or to your own history. You might visualise this object in other situations or think about how it came to be near you.

Later, re-read, writing other thoughts or phrases inspired by those already there. Eventually, select the most compelling sections of your writing and revise these into a draft poem of at least 20 lines. You might decide to render them in free verse, to link them together by theme or to use a stanza for each particular image.

Creative nonfiction

Creative nonfiction's combination of storytelling, attention to language and ability to address disparate subjects has drawn many writers to the form.

Annie Dillard says in her famous essay 'To Fashion a Text':

When I gave up writing poetry I was very sad... But I was delighted to find that nonfiction prose can also carry meaning in its structures, can tolerate all sorts of figurative language, ...it can handle discursive ideas and plain information as well as character and story. It can do everything. I felt as though I had switched from a single reed instrument to a full orchestra. (1998, pp.144-5)

In this exercise, you will concentrate on an object or set of objects in order to explore the significance of these for the protagonist or other characters.

Writing Activity

Jot down ideas for a work of non-fiction. It could initially be about taking up a skill or hobby, or be driven by thoughts on some aspect of achievement in life, or it might stem from an interest in the characters around you. Pick one of the most promising ideas. Now, using either first person or third person, or beginning in general terms using 'you' before switching to 'I', draft an opening for your work. (6-10 paragraphs)

In the first person, check that you vary the use of 'I' and check that you are using other pronouns in considered ways. Revise as necessary. Note that in early-stage work, you may want to stick with using either the first or the third person as some works require this stability and a consistency throughout.

Script

There are all sorts of considerations you need to bear in mind when deciding whether to write a radio drama, a stage play or a film, but the most important is which medium is the best one for your story. An idea that makes use of sound to create atmosphere may work well as a radio drama. One that requires physicality and movement could work best on stage. And one that is either strongly realist, or relies on visual narrative, might be best as a film.

Writing Activity

Consider the following ideas (some invented, some based on true news stories), and think about how they might work for stage, film or radio.

- A husband and wife who are both musicians find themselves in competition for a place in an elite orchestra or band
- A group of Chilean miners are trapped underground in a copper mine for over two months
- A police detective with a gambling addiction works to solve the double murder of a casino owner and his mistress
- Squatters in an abandoned house are haunted by the ghost of a former occupant

Part of your thinking may be around practicalities and cost, but the main thing to focus on is which medium would be the best one to tell the story. Choose one of the ideas and write the opening 3-5 pages of the script in the medium you think would work best for it.

Each of the three media has slightly different conventions for the way script should be laid out. You can find examples of correct layout in Neale, p.44 (stage), p. 98 (radio) and p. 125 (screen). These and US layout variations can also be found in the BBC's WritersRoom <http://www.bbc.co.uk/writersroom/writers-lab/medium-and-format#heading-script-examples>