

LEARNING MADE EASY



2nd Edition

Creative Writing

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand



Learn the basic elements of storytelling

Find the writing genre and medium that suit you

Become part of the writing community

Maggie Hamand, PhD

Award-winning novelist and publisher and pioneering creative writing teacher



Creative Writing

2nd Edition

by Maggie Hamand, PhD

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand

Creative Writing For Dummies®, 2nd Edition

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Introduction

Creative writing may be fun, but it isn't easy. It requires some imagination, a degree of application, and a great deal of effort.

This book gathers everything you need to know about writing and publishing all kinds of creative writing. It distills my more than 30 years of experience in journalism, novel-writing, teaching creative writing, and working in publishing, all in one place. I share the basics – and some of the extras – of writing novels, stories, poetry, plays, screenplays, biography, and autobiography. I discuss journalism and blogging and offer pointers on how to get published or successfully publish yourself.

I try to give you the essence of what a life's work spent in loving reading and writing literature in all its forms has taught me, to help you avoid repeating some of my mistakes!

This book aims to help you gain confidence in your ideas, to inspire you, and to provide the knowledge and skills you need to get started on your writing journey.

About This Book

Most people who write start off by spending a lot of time alone, puzzling out how to tackle the various difficulties and challenges that writing brings up. How do you know what to write about? Where should you begin? What point of view should you tell the story from? How do you write dialogue that leaps off the page, invent intriguing characters, and describe places and objects so that the reader can see them? Should you write your story as an autobiography, or turn it into a novel? And how do you write plays, screenplays, and poems, or sell an article to a newspaper or news website?

Unfortunately, if you sit alone in your room, never reading about how to write or sharing your concerns with others, you may find yourself simply going round in circles. You may spend weeks making elementary errors you could have avoided had you known more about how writing works. Most people tackling matters in

this way find writing so hard that they soon give up, which is a great shame because something unique is then lost to the world.

This book helps you avoid some of the common writing pitfalls and offers practical advice about how to write creatively, no matter what form that writing takes. Each type of writing has its own rules and techniques, challenges and rewards. In this book, I provide the rules and techniques – you get to reap your own rewards.

Reading a lot and thinking about how writing works is vital if you want to write well – reading is the best teacher of how to write. I refer to many different books, plays, and films as examples of good writing to illustrate some of the points I make. I also suggest a lot of books to read. I don't recommend a book, film, or play unless I've read it or seen it, so inevitably these are very personal lists. You may not like some of these works, but almost all are highly acclaimed, so I'm not alone in thinking they're great. (At least reading some of the books, watching some of the plays, and seeing some of the films I suggest is a good idea. Setting yourself some simple targets, such as reading a poem a day and finding some time to write each week, is also helpful.)

This book is also intended to be a companion for you as you explore the process of creative writing. I include exercises to help you try for yourself some of the techniques I describe. I believe that you learn to write by writing and not just by reading a book about it. Try out the exercises and see what happens!

You can read this book in a number of ways:

- » If you're a complete beginner, thinking about writing creatively for the first time – or perhaps the first time since you left school – this book gives you the grounding you need. You can start at the beginning and work your way through to the end.
- » If you have a great idea and some experience of writing but have got bogged down, this book can help you to get unstuck. You can select the areas in which you feel you need guidance and read those first.
- » If you've written a lot and sent your work out but you don't seem to be getting anywhere, this book can help you ask the right questions about what you've written and find the right answers.
- » If you want information about how to get your work into print, this book has the information and tips that you need to approach agents, newspapers, theaters, film studios, and different kinds of publishers.

This book uses various typefaces to highlight different bits of information. For example, I use *italics* when a term is first defined, **bold** for a key term in a bulleted list and monospace for website addresses.

You also see gray boxes from time to time. These *sidebars* contain information that you may find interesting but isn't essential to understanding the text. So, you can read them if you want to, but you aren't going to miss anything crucial if you skip them.

Foolish Assumptions

In writing this book, I make some assumptions about you – the person who's reading this book. I assume that you:

- » Enjoy reading books and magazines or watching films and plays, and that you think about what you read and watch.
- » Have a fairly serious intention to learn about and do some writing.
- » Have a reasonable amount of self-discipline and are prepared to create some time to write.
- » Don't expect to write a work of genius right away and make a million from the first piece of writing you attempt.

Icons Used in This Book

The little drawings in the margins, called *icons*, highlight information that's especially interesting, important, or both.



TIP

Helpful advice, including time- or hassle-saving shortcuts, is highlighted with this on-the-target icon.



REMEMBER

This icon indicates important information to keep in mind while you're reading a chapter or for the rest of your writing life.



WARNING

Information highlighted with this icon helps you to avoid mistakes and points out approaches that can get you in trouble.



EXAMPLE

This icon marks samplings of points I explain in the text. Sometimes an example makes an explanation come to life.



EXERCISE

These exercises help get you writing and encourage you to try out some of the techniques I talk about.

Beyond the Book

In addition to the abundance of information and guidance related to creative writing that I provide in this book, you get access to even more help and information online at Dummies.com. Check out this book's online Cheat Sheet. Just go to www.dummies.com and search for "Creative Writing For Dummies Cheat Sheet."

Where to Go from Here

You have several options at this point:

- » You can flip through the chapters and read something that interests you, which highlights an area that you're having problems with, or covers an aspect of something that you're working on.
- » You can start by reading the contents and selecting those parts of the book that seem most relevant, while skipping any areas that don't seem useful to you at the moment.
- » You can start at the beginning and read through to the end. Don't worry if you pay greater attention to some bits than others – your focus clearly depends on which kind of writing you're most interested in.
- » You can keep it on your desk and use it as a reference book, to refer to frequently while you're working on your writing.
- » You can take this book and use it any way you choose, such as picking chapters at random, reading it from back to front, using it to sit on while you meditate, or even throwing it across the room if you're feeling frustrated with your writing. Don't worry – we've all done it!

Whatever you choose to do with this book, I hope you find it useful. Enjoy!

1

Getting Started

IN THIS PART . . .

How to hone your writing skills

Determine the kind of work you want to write

The tools you need on hand

Find a place to write and a time and a routine that suits you

- » Finding out why you want to write
- » Discovering what sort of writing is for you
- » Developing your talent

Chapter **1**

You and Your Writing

Creative writing starts with you – with your imagination, personality, and interests. Only you know what you want to write about and how you like to work. Only you can choose to spend time working at your poetry or prose to help your words communicate to others.

People often ask, can everyone write? Well, (almost) everyone can write, in the sense of creating a sentence and then stringing another after it, and so on. However, in contrast with other artistic skills, such as playing the violin or painting in oils, or crafts such as pottery and carpentry, people sometimes fail to realize that writing for an audience – writing to communicate to others – also requires study, hard work, and practice.

We all spend our lives telling stories, and in that sense, everyone does indeed have a book in them – or, if not a whole book, then at least a tale or two – but that doesn't mean to say everyone is prepared to work at it in such a way that, as a piece of art, it communicates itself to other people.

This book gives you all the tools you need to take yourself seriously as a writer and develop your craft as best you can. And this chapter is a great place to start because it encourages you to embark on a journey of discovery and to develop the attitude you need to carry your chosen task through to the end.

Focusing on Writing as Well as You Can

A world of difference exists between writing for yourself and writing for others. Both are perfectly valid and can be approached in much the same way. Whether you're aiming to record your experiences for your children, to write for therapy or personal development, or to get a novel published, you want to write as well as you can. Doing so doesn't mean you need to think of yourself as a genius, but it does involve stretching yourself and learning as much about writing as you can.

When you start writing, don't think too much about whether your work will get published. After all, on passing your third grade violin exam, you may congratulate yourself on having got so far, but you wouldn't rush off a letter to Carnegie Hall to ask if you could put on a solo recital. Considering other people's opinions of your writing – whether they like it, or will be interested in it, or whether it will suit the current market – is death to true creativity.



EXAMPLE

J. R. R. Tolkien spent years writing a history of an imaginary country, inventing languages and mythology and timelines and maps, purely for himself. He never thought anyone else would be interested in it. When his publishers asked him for a sequel to *The Hobbit*, he used this material as the basis for *The Lord of the Rings*, a work that went on to become one of the best-selling novels of all time. Completely unexpectedly, something in the deep recesses of Tolkien's imagination connected with a vast number of people, all over the world. Yet at the time his publisher, Stanley Unwin, was so convinced the novel wouldn't sell that he cynically offered Tolkien a profit-sharing deal – because he believed no profits would accrue!



REMEMBER

By digging deep into yourself and your imagination, you can find the theme that you really want to write about, that gives you the greatest pleasure, and presents you with the greatest challenge – and paradoxically this subject is most likely to be the one that most interests others. So write for yourself and forget about what other people think until much, much later in the process.

Examining Why You Want to Write

Before you begin to write, ask yourself why you want to do so. If the reason is that you think writing's the easiest way for you to become rich and famous, a bit of a reality check is in order. Every year more than two million books are published in the US alone. Admittedly this total includes everything from computer

manuals and academic tomes, through cookbooks and knitting manuals to celebrity memoirs and mainstream fiction, but it still represents a huge amount of competition.

In addition are all the *backlist titles* that have been in print for years and are still selling. Of these books, very few sell in sufficient numbers to make anyone much money. In the fiction market, a handful of bestsellers make over half the income, leaving a lot of writers making very little money at all.

Of those books in print, very few are by writers who are household names. To achieve that degree of recognition, your book needs to be filmed, short-listed for the Pulitzer or The Booker Prize, picked by Oprah Winfrey, or become one of those rare runaway bestsellers that everybody dreams about but hardly ever happen.



WARNING

Most writers earn very modest amounts, and the majority have other sources of income from work or supportive partners. So if money and fame are your main motivation to write, you're likely to be extremely disappointed.

Here, however, are some good reasons to write:

- » Something is nagging away at you that you need to write down, an event from your life, perhaps, that has haunted or puzzled you.
- » You keep hearing a character's voice in your head, and you want to find out who it is.
- » A situation keeps coming to mind – *what if* this were to happen, how would I feel, what would I do? – and you want to explore it.
- » You always loved writing stories at school and realize you'd like to feel that pleasure again.

These are all good reasons to write because the impulse is coming from you. This impulse isn't dependent on anything outside yourself that you can't control, such as the vagaries of editors, or the whims of newspaper reviewers, or prize judges, or the economic situation at the time your book is published. Your desire to write is dependent only on your imagination, commitment, and willingness to learn and develop your craft.

Various theories are propounded about why people write – as a wish-fulfilment fantasy, a form of therapy, or a way of achieving immortality and living on after death – and any of these might apply to you. But, ultimately, *you want to write because you want to write*. And you have to want to. No one's holding you hostage and demanding that you produce your masterpiece. Enough written work already

exists in the world, and people can probably do without your contribution. But then, as the famous choreographer and dancer Martha Graham said:

There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is nor how valuable nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open.

(AGNES DE MILLE, MARTHA: THE LIFE AND WORK OF MARTHA GRAHAM)

Identifying the Kind of Writing You Want to Do

When you start writing you may not have a clear idea of the kind of writing you want to do. Or you may know exactly what genre you want to write in to be writing for a very specific audience.

Considering different genres

The best and most practical definition of “genre” I have come across is “where books are shelved in a bookstore” You will see that books are arranged by broad categories such as “fiction” and “nonfiction” but each of these will be divided into main genres – in fiction you will find categories such as literary, historical, crime, romance, science fiction, horror, short stories – and under nonfiction you will find for example memoir, biography, travel writing, political and current affairs, health and psychology, and how-to books.

You will also find separate sections for poetry, children’s books (both fiction and nonfiction), and in some stores, magazines, and newspapers.

Nowadays, book genres tend to blend into one another, so that you could have a collection of short travel stories that include a large amount of memoir, or a science fiction novel that is also a romance, or a supernatural crime thriller. Although genre is important – it’s how publishers classify books and where bookstores shelve your work – I think it’s important to write what you want without being too fixed on what genre it is. Writing in a particular genre is important, but the book world is also always looking for something new that breaks boundaries!

Confirming your favorite form of expression

If you're drawn to a particular form of expression, then go with it. Some people like to work in miniature, others love the grand gesture – temperament decides. If you love children and reading aloud to them, or have a story in mind for your own children or grandchildren, then go ahead. Many of the best children's stories have started that way. Or if you love a grand canvas and big novels with sub-plots, twists, and turns, go for that. Don't let other people talk you out of your natural way of writing.



REMEMBER

Thinking, “I really want to write poetry, but no market exists for it, so I'll write a novel instead”, is unhelpful. You may turn out to be a very fine poet but struggle as a novelist.



EXERCISE

If you don't know what kind of writing you want to do, just try out various forms. Jump right in and write whatever comes up. If you feel that you'd love to write but don't have any ideas, then just open yourself up to people and situations around you. For example:

- » **Sit in a coffeeshop and watch the customers.** Invent a story about who they are, where they come from, why they're there, who they're thinking of, what they want.
- » **Look at your daily paper or news website.** Pick a small item from the News in Brief section; use it as the basis for a story.
- » **Go into your garden.** Find a flower, tree, or view and describe it. Turn the writing into a poem.
- » **Find an old photograph.** What does it make you think of? What does it remind you of? Where does it take you in your imagination? Write down your thoughts.

As to the form your writing takes, no rule states that you can't write both prose and poetry – many writers do. Don't worry about length when you start; sometimes you start writing a short story and then discover after 20 pages that in fact the tale's so long and complex that it justifies a novel. Or, conversely, you may start what you think will be a novel and discover that it peters out after two or three chapters and doesn't have enough material to amount to more than a short story.

Don't worry too much about your audience either; you may start writing for young children and then find your material is actually adult fantasy. None of these details – length, form, or audience – matter. Just write, and let the material take you where it will. You can always go back and change elements later.

Discovering Your Own Specific Talent

Most of us have a particular talent for something – and the same applies to writing. Some writers love plot; they enjoy working out timelines, organizing different strands of their story, and weaving it all together. They plot their story on index cards or use a computer program to map it out.

Other writers love description; looking at something and finding the best way to capture it in words, and using images to convey its essence to the reader. Some have an ear for dialogue, for how people speak, accents and dialects, and for the silences that lie between the words. Some writers have a wonderful visual sense; others an ear for the rhythm and sound of words.

When you start out writing, you really may not know what you're good at. Trying something new is the only way to find out. Don't rely on the same techniques that worked for you when you were at school, or when you were working in an office, or that you use in notes or emails to friends. Stretch yourself. Try different ways of writing. You'll never discover that you're brilliant at writing dialogue if you never try it, or that the first-person voice gives you huge freedom, or that your story works much better if you set it in a different time or place. You'll never find out that you're a poet if you never try to write a poem.



REMEMBER

As you write, keep these principles in mind:

- » Trust yourself.
- » Write what you want.
- » Try out new ways of writing.
- » Don't expect to write brilliantly right away.
- » Learn from other writers.
- » Be prepared for surprises.

Practicing Your Writing

Creative writing's a skill, and if you work at it, you'll improve – becoming a good writer is as simple as that. Writers also use a range of techniques, which you too can learn.

LOTS OF PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Anders Ericsson studied violinists at the Berlin Academy of Music in the early 1990s. His study concluded that a violinist had to practice approximately 10,000 hours to become really good.

Strikingly, Ericsson and his colleagues couldn't find any violinists who were *naturals* – musicians who became outstanding performers without practicing for the hours that others did. Nor could they find what are sometimes called *grinds* – people who practiced harder and longer than everyone else and yet didn't succeed. Every student who put in the hours played at a high level.

Now, 10,000 hours of writing is an awful lot – if you wrote for, say, five hours a day, five days a week, 50 weeks a year, it would take you eight to nine years to put in that many hours.

In practice, of course, many successful writers have written less than this – and other writers may have written more without ever getting into print. However, without doubt, the more you write, the better you become at it.

Part of the problem with writing is its solitary nature. When you're working on your own, a strong possibility exists that you'll be reinventing the literary wheel. Through long hours and hard work you may stumble on the truths that other writers have discovered long before you. By talking to other writers, reading books, and perhaps going to creative writing courses, you can save yourself a lot of time and trouble.

Putting in the hours

No substitute exists for finding time to write. Whether playing the violin, excelling at tennis, or developing computer software, all the outstandingly talented people put in a great many more hours than their less successful peers.



REMEMBER

You have to really want to write. Writers become writers by writing, not by wanting to write, thinking about writing, talking about writing, or planning to write!

Reading and re-reading

What teaches you most about writing is reading. Reading is so important because it demonstrates what you're trying to do; you unconsciously absorb the rules of narrative when you read, and how the author achieves certain effects. Some

writers don't read because they say they're afraid of being influenced by other writers. In practice, you're more likely to find that you've inadvertently done what someone else has if you aren't aware of others' work.

If you're attempting to be a writer, try reading more slowly – reading with more attention. When you come to a passage where you can actually smell the cabbage soup on the stairs, where time seems to have slowed right down and your heart is beating extra fast, stop and look back; try to figure out how the author achieved this feat. You are, after all, just reading words on a page. If a character walks into a room and you can see the whole scene before you like a photograph, or if you feel you know a character inside out, how she thinks and behaves – again, stop and look back. Look at the words the writer used, what they did to convey this sense of reality. Or if you read a poem and find that you're crying or suddenly feel happy, or realize that you're seeing something in a new way – again, re-read the poem to see why this has happened.



TIP

In order to see how a piece of writing is put together and learn from the techniques the writer uses, re-read a short story or novel that you've read before; not so long ago that you've forgotten it or so recently that you remember it in detail. Choose a book that you remember in outline and, in particular, how it ends.

When you first read a book, you often gulp it straight down just to find out what happens; the second time you don't do that because you already know. Already knowing what's going to happen can help you to see how the writer prepared for it, how they slipped in hints or how they concealed something important to keep you guessing. Re-reading in this way really helps you learn how a narrative works.



REMEMBER

Read, read, and read some more! Whether you choose news articles, blog posts, advertising slogans on the back of cereal boxes, classic novels or contemporary pulp fiction, reference books or letters and journals, read widely – and think about what you're reading and the effect the words you read have on you. Try to distinguish between good writing and bad writing, and read more of the good stuff!

Overcoming Common Writing Obstacles

When you sit down to write, you often find that a whole host of concerns distract you. First, you become aware of all the chattering that goes on in your head, and the long lists of undertakings to do that you feel you should do before you can justify the time spent on writing. Second, you may become uncomfortably aware of being alone, of having to manage without any help or input from anyone else. Third, you may suddenly discover that when you finally get the chance to write, you don't know what to say, or you can't put it into words.