

## Creative writing and critical reading



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## Introduction

This free course, *Creative writing and critical reading*, explores the importance of reading as part of a creative writer's development at the postgraduate (MA) level. You will gain inspiration and ideas from examining other writers' methods, as well as enhancing your critical reading skills. A diverse range of examples will cover the genres of fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry and scriptwriting. You will be able to listen to professional writers discussing the creative process in relation to their reading habits. You will also have the opportunity to apply the insights you have gleaned to your own writing, by producing a short creative piece in your chosen genre.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [MA in Creative Writing](#).

# Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand the importance of reading as part of a creative writer's development
- engage analytically and critically with a range of literary and media texts
- recognise how critical reading supplies writers with inspiration and ideas
- understand through writing practice one or more of the genres of fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry and scriptwriting
- engage with postgraduate modes of reading and writing practice.

# 1 About critical reading



**Figure 1** Reading as a critical reader

It is impossible to be a good writer without being a good reader first. But what do we mean by 'good'? Writers go to books for various reasons, whether for guidance and inspiration, or to understand something better: about writing, life, or both. Perhaps the key to 'reading as a writer' – in other words, reading with a writerly eye – is being able to understand a text as its constituent parts while still appreciating it as a whole.

Reading the work of a variety of different authors is invaluable for expanding your awareness of what a text can be and do. Reading provides not only inspiration and useful exemplars – of methods, subjects and styles – but also a context within which to develop your own voice and individuality as a writer. This kind of critical reading and thinking will enhance your practice of creative writing; the more you learn about how texts operate, the better equipped you'll be as a writer.

Reading as a writer, also known as 'critical reading' or 'close reading', involves analysing how a piece works and how an author achieves particular effects. For instance, when reading a short story, you might consider how the writer uses elements like point of view, tone, and structure to generate tension or create a compelling ending.

Think about why the author made certain choices in their piece, and what the outcomes of those choices are. Remember: texts are not simply given. They are the result of countless decisions on the writer's part. Some of them might be instinctual and might not seem like conscious decision-making to the writer, but a great deal of them will also be the result of painstaking deliberation. We might not be able to know an author's personal intention, but we can analyse what effect their choices have on us.

## 2 Reading and creative writing



**Figure 2** Once upon a time ...

In this first activity, you will reflect on how reading a particular text influenced or inspired your own creative writing. (Or, if you choose the genre of scriptwriting, you may reflect on how viewing or listening to a particular work of film, stage or radio influenced your writing.)

### Activity 1 (writing activity)

First, think of a particular text or media work that has influenced you as a writer. What aspects of it relate to your own work? For example, you might consider a certain poem sequence to be an influence on your approach to the sonnet due to its use of regional dialect and nontraditional form; or you might feel that a particular film was the example that inspired you to write a script featuring three 'acts', each showing the same events from a different character's point of view.

Jot some notes on this topic in the box below.

*Provide your answer...*

Drawing on your notes, now write a short critical reflection in prose (around 500–750 words) in the box below, relating your chosen text or media work back to your own writing and reflecting on what you can take from it as a writer (whether positive or negative). Be as specific as possible within the length limit.

*Provide your answer...*

### Discussion

Good writers are good readers. By analysing how something you have read has influenced your own work, you can see how important critical reading is to the practice of writing.

## 3 Reading as a writer

In this section, you will engage critically with one or more texts or a radio play in order to practise close reading. You can choose from the following genres:

- Option 1: Fiction
- Option 2: Creative nonfiction
- Option 3: Poetry
- Option 4: Scriptwriting

### Option 1: Fiction

When reading a novel or short story critically, there are numerous elements that you can focus on. These may include, but are not limited to, aspects such as:

- point of view
- character
- style (including rhythm, sentence structure, imagery, idiosyncrasies)
- voice or tone
- structure
- plotting
- themes.

For instance, if thinking about a writer's style, you might keep an eye out for recurring habits and traits. How long are the sentences? Is there a noticeable rhythm to the prose? Does the writer use a lot of simile and metaphor or are they more sparing? And what possibilities do these present for your own prose?

As another example, you might take a thematic approach, looking for how other writers treat themes similar to those that you're interested in. Do they take an earnest or ironic approach to their subject matter? Is their tactic to be matter of fact, or do they dramatise their ideas? Whom do the ideas in the text seem to belong to (the narrator, or one or more of the characters)?

#### Activity 2 Fiction

Now read this extract from the beginning of a novel: [Salman Rushdie, \*Midnight's Children\* \(2008\)](#)

Here we are introduced to a first-person narrator reminiscing about his life. Consider the following questions:

- How would you describe this writing style?
- What are its chief characteristics (e.g., sentence structure, language choice, and imagery)?
- How would you describe the tone?
- What kind of relationship do these stylistic choices strike with the reader?

Jot down your thoughts on these, or any other elements of the piece, in the box below.

*Provide your answer...*



### Discussion

The tone of Rushdie's narrator is comic and maybe even a little ironic. He is constantly interrupting himself and qualifying what he says. He immediately pulls us in with his exuberance, while at the same time raising questions about his reliability. The bustle and drama of his life is mirrored in the chaotic liveliness of the prose, with its long sentences and lyrical qualities. This is very much the opposite of a minimalist writing style.

The narrator's voice is in some respects colloquial, but in a stylised manner. There is a jazzy improvisation and earthiness coupled with a pronounced literary flamboyance. It is a loud, generous style. Rushdie wants to indulge the reader and draw us in. The narrator's tone is both playful and confessional.

## Option 2: Creative nonfiction

When reading a work of creative nonfiction critically, there are numerous elements that you can focus on. These may include, but are not limited to, aspects such as:

- style (including rhythm, sentence structure, imagery, idiosyncrasies)
- voice or tone
- structure or organising principles
- plotting
- themes
- use of rhythm, simile and metaphor.

For instance, if thinking about a writer's style, you might keep an eye out for recurring habits and traits. How long are the sentences? Is there a noticeable rhythm to the prose? Does the writer use a lot of simile and metaphor or are they more sparing? And what possibilities do these present for your own prose?

As another example, you might take a thematic approach, looking at how other writers treat themes similar to those that you're interested in. Do they take an earnest or ironic approach to their subject matter? Is their tactic to be matter of fact, or do they dramatise their ideas? How do they let other people's voices in: do they use quotation, allusion, dialogue, or any other strategies?

### Activity 3 Creative nonfiction

Now read this extract from a creative nonfiction essay: [Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah, 'If he hollers let him go'](#).

Jot down the things that you notice about it, ranging from its technical aspects to whatever strikes you as interesting, in the box below. What are the distinctive features of Ghansah's style and how do these contribute to her overall voice? What effects do you have?

*Provide your answer...*

### Discussion

Ghansah's prose has several identifiable characteristics. Note how in the first few paragraphs we get very specific, local details woven into factual reportage; how she effortlessly combines the personal and the journalistic (like when she moves from *New York Times* quotes to a personal anecdote about a party to illuminate her point about Chappelle's popularity and appeal); how she juxtaposes stylistic flourishes with research and quotations threaded throughout the piece; and her frequent use of interpolation and parenthesis. She also likes to directly address her reader, so that we get the feeling of being in a personal conversation: 'Say it with me now.'

All of these features help create a very principled voice – a voice that can permit different sides of an argument to have their space while implicitly suggesting the author's own position. And often the suggestion of Ghansah's position expresses conflictedness as much as self-certainty. This gives her voice a sincerity and authenticity that is embodied by her varied style.

## Option 3: Poetry

When reading a poem critically, there are numerous elements that you can focus on. These may include, but are not limited to, aspects such as:

- voice and tone
- structure and form; layout on the page
- imagery; subject matter or theme
- development or progression over the course of the poem
- diction; figurative language; use of multiple registers (styles of language)
- use of repetition, rhythm, rhyme
- subtext, or what isn't explicitly said.

Think about the decisions behind the making of the poem. Why did the author write it, and why was it written in this specific way? In other words, why has the author employed these elements in the poem – what effect do they have?

As another example, you might take a broader approach, looking at how the author treats a particular theme or subject matter. Do they take an earnest or ironic approach? Is their tactic to be matter of fact, or do they dramatise their ideas? In what other contexts can the poem be placed – stylistically, formally, historically, socially?

### Activity 4 Poetry

Now read the following poem: [Fleur Adcock, 'A Surprise in the Peninsula' \(2000 \[1971\]\)](#)

What do you consider its key qualities or elements? What effect do they have on you as a reader? Jot down your thoughts in the box below.

Provide your answer..

### Discussion

The following excerpt from an essay written by the critic and poet Ruth Padel provides answers to these questions.

The detached, sceptical-formal part of Adcock's voice has an amused moral authority; underneath, the poem is charged with danger. Here, we are in thriller territory: bad-dream-land, film noir. A territory of not-knowing, of being surrounded by danger as a 'peninsula' is surrounded by water. [...]

The voice through whom we see this world is as sinister as anything outside. What does this 'I', so alone and objective, so acquainted, apparently, with violence, and yet so in need of protection (which in gangland has a specific technical meaning), get up to in the day? What is 'I' doing here, what has this I achieved when it's 'time to leave'? [...]

[The poem's] resonant first line is answered by the last: we move from 'in' ('came in') to 'out' ('I drew out'). The only actual glimpse outside we ever have is through that 'bullet-hole'. [...]

Most sentence-endings and closures come somewhere inside a line. Not all: 'remained', 'map', 'moonlight', 'gone' and 'gift' are sudden resting points in this confused sinister world which deprives you of that finding a pattern which rhyme represents. (Rhyme is traditionally paired with reason, but this poem is not going to hand you much of that.)

(Padel, 2002, pp. 135–7)

## Option 4: Scriptwriting

Reading critically as a scriptwriter involves 'reading' performances. With a notebook at hand, you should watch and listen to as much work as you can, particularly in the medium in which you want to write (film, stage or radio plays). Reading as a scriptwriter also means immersing yourself in the scripts of dramatists, looking at the ways in which drama is constructed and learning how it functions.

Reading a performance involves analysing a film or play, focusing on particular narrative elements. But you can also assess the semiotics of the drama – what is perceived as meaningful in the seen and heard aspects of performance; how some elements are repeated; how small objects, images, and parts of the set can come to signify meaning on several different levels.

When reading a performance and/or script critically, there are numerous elements that you can focus on. These may include, but are not limited to, aspects such as:

- characterisation and back story
- dramatic action vs. exposition
- structure; scenes; the handling of time
- dialogue; voice over (if any)
- use of stage directions, actions, sound effects
- types of set and use of props
- planting information with a later pay-off; subtext.

### Activity 5 Scriptwriting

Now listen to this excerpt from a radio play, which consists of its final scenes, and then read the transcript of it either by clicking on 'Show transcript' or by accessing this PDF: [The Day Dad Stole a Bus transcript](#).

Audio content is not available in this format.



Audio 1 Péricles Silveira, *The Day Dad Stole a Bus* (2016)

Consider how the writer achieved a resolution to this play. Were you confused or did you feel confident about what was happening, even though you had not listened to the preceding scenes? Jot down your thoughts on these, or any other elements of the piece, in the box below.

Provide your answer...

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### Discussion

In Silveira's play, there is a gesture towards the end-action of the play (with Dad's coat), but also a sign of life going on after the play's ending with the reference to playing hide-and-seek 'tomorrow'. Also note the deft balance between dialogue and the narrator's exposition, and how the characters are differentiated through the way they speak. Silveira uses relatively simple language to create authentic yet lively dialogue.

It helps to use a non-chronological or nonlinear approach like this in your critical reading of performance and script – for example, picking out how individual scenes start, how they end, how dialogue works in social settings, how monologues operate. Reading specific sections in isolation reminds you that a script has to have a structural coherence even in its smallest units.

## 4 Writers on reading

In the next activity, you will listen to members of the Creative Writing course team at The Open University talking about their critical reading habits and strategies. Is there anything you can take from their approaches and apply to your own reading?

### Activity 6 (listening activity)

Listen to the first audio, which features Ben Masters, Derek Neale and Sally O'Reilly.

Audio content is not available in this format.



Audio 2

Then, listen to the next audio, which features Jane Yeh, Siobhan Campbell and Jo Reardon.

Audio content is not available in this format.



Audio 3

Jot down any of the ideas discussed that interest you, or your thoughts about and responses to these discussions, in the box below.

*Provide your answer...*

Transcripts for these audio recordings are also available here:

[Audio 2 transcript](#)

[Audio 3 transcript](#)

## 5 Writing in practice

In this final activity, you will have the opportunity to apply the insights and approaches you have gleaned from 'reading as a writer' to your own writing, by producing a creative piece in your chosen genre.



**Figure 3** Having a go at writing

### Activity 7 (writing activity)

Choose one of the following four genres in which to write your creative piece: fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry or scriptwriting.

In your chosen genre, pick a single text you have read (or media work you have listened to/viewed) that inspires you. It can be the same text or media work you wrote about earlier, for the activity in Section 2 Reading and creative writing, or a different one.

Identify some element(s) of the text or media work that you want to try applying to your own writing. This can be anything – for example, point of view, diction, subject matter or theme, form or structure. Jot down some notes on this in the box below.

*Provide your answer...*

Drawing on your notes above, write a short creative piece that makes use of or incorporates the elements you just identified. For fiction, creative nonfiction, or scriptwriting, aim for around 1000 words or 4–5 pages; for poetry, around 40 lines or 1–2 pages. You can complete this however you like – whether that's using the text box below, a word processor, or writing on paper.

*Provide your answer...*

## Conclusion

You've now come to the end of this free course, *Creative writing and critical reading*.

Reading critically should be a central part of your writing practice. Seeking out work by other writers that intrigues, inspires, or provokes you is not simply useful but offers a never-ending source of pleasure. Reading, like writing, is a lifelong activity.

A crucial step in reading as a writer is relating your reading back to your own writerly practice. However, try not to be too utilitarian about it. Don't just limit yourself to books or media works that you think will be of immediate use to your latest project – reading as a writer involves following your nose and being open to surprise as much as it does seeking particular things out. In the end, reading widely and thoughtfully will help you develop your own personal aesthetic and voice.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [MA in Creative Writing](#).

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