

Writing what you know



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Introduction

This free course includes reading and writing activities that are geared to developing the use of memory, observation and the senses. The aim is to develop your perceptual abilities, honing your capacity to see detail in the world. You will be encouraged to start seeing the familiar in a new way and to make good use of your own personal history.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [*A215 Creative writing*](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- articulate the notion of 'write what you know'
- write 'blind' descriptions of known objects and note new observations
- have an enhanced ability to list sensory perceptions
- write short texts about a personal memory of either a place or a character.

1 Writing what you know

1.1 Using life experiences in your fiction

Creative writing courses and manuals often offer the advice 'write what you know'. This is undoubtedly good advice, yet what exactly does it mean? Many writers testify to using their life experiences – their memories and their everyday perceptions – as a source for their fiction or poetry, as well as for their autobiographies and memoirs. Yet these experiences aren't necessarily extraordinary in themselves. You don't have to have led an unusual or exotic life in order to write. You do, however, need to raise your level of perception above the ordinary. Writing what you know means being aware of your own world, both past and present, in as full a way as possible.

This course will introduce and briefly elaborate on some of the ways in which you might 'know' the world around you. By looking at the commonplace details of your life in a different way, using your sensory perceptions and learning to use your own memories, you will be exercising certain writing muscles, ones that need regular flexing. In this way you may discover you know more than you thought.

Activity 1

Write down a quick sentence in response to the advice 'write what you know'. What does it immediately suggest to you?

Discussion

You may react positively to such advice; you may be able to go off happily and make use of every last ounce of your life experience, without doubt or consternation. Or you may think: 'I don't know anything'; 'all that I know is boring'; 'nobody would want to know what I know' or 'I know too much, how could I possibly get that down in words?'

Whatever your response, the aim of this course is to broaden the meaning of such advice, so it will act as a prompt the next time you hear it, reminding you that you have numerous ways of exploiting the raw materials of your own life.

Activity 2

The purpose of this activity is to provide you with an example of how a known writer has exploited his everyday knowledge and memories in his work. Clicking on the link below will allow you to listen to an extract of an interview with Andrew Cowan, a writer and senior lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia. Below is some background information you may find of interest.

Pig was Andrew Cowan's first novel, and it won numerous awards, including the Betty Trask Award and the Sunday Times 'Young Writer of the Year Award'. Published in 1994, its meticulous realism received great critical acclaim. The novel has obvious connections to Cowan's own background – it has a Scottish grandfather and is set in a new town in decline very similar to Corby, Cowan's hometown. He has subsequently

published two other novels and at the time of the interview his fourth novel, *What I Know*, was about to be published. The novels discussed in the interview are *Pig* (1994), *Common Ground* (1996) and *Crustaceans* (2000).

Pig

When his grandmother dies and his grandfather goes into a home, teenager Danny is determined to look after their elderly pig. He and his girlfriend, Surinder secretly meet at the grandparents' house, enjoying a fragile summer idyll, a refuge from the racist neighbours and family members, brief respite from the blighted new town in which they live.

Common Ground

Ashley, a disillusioned geography teacher, chronicles the birth of his daughter, Maggie, in letters to his globe-trotting brother, Douglas. Painting an intimate picture of his relationship with his partner, Jay, the novel offers a bleak picture of inner city life, and the couple's growing need for some sort of political involvement. It comes in the form of the road-protest movement: the novel also charts the controversial birth of a road and the campaign to save the nearby Hogslea Common.

Crustaceans

Set on one day – 22nd December, which would have been his dead son Euan's sixth birthday – Paul drives to the coast, as thick snow lies on the ground. Talking to the imaginary Euan in the back of the car, he tells him the story of his birth, of his first words, and of Paul's relationship with Ruth, Euan's mother. He also tells the story of his own parents, including the unexplained death of his mother when he was a child.

Some questions to think about while you listen:

- How did the idea for Cowan's second novel, *Common Ground*, come about?
- What parts of *Pig* were imagined, what parts researched and what parts autobiographical?
- How does Cowan use everyday details in his novels?

Cowan, Andrew (1994) *Pig*, London: Sceptre.

Cowan, Andrew (1996) *Common Ground*, London: Penguin.

Cowan, Andrew (2000) *Crustaceans*, London: Sceptre.

Cowan, Andrew (2005) *What I Know*, London: Sceptre.

Click below to listen to an introduction to Andrew Cowan.

Audio content is not available in this format.

[An introduction to Andrew Cowan](#)

Click below to listen to an interview with Andrew Cowan.

Audio content is not available in this format.

[An interview with Andrew Cowan](#)

2 The everyday

2.1 Building a believable world

Writing is a perceptual art, one in which images are created via language in order for the reader to make meaning. It is therefore imperative that the writer's powers of perception are alert. Writing is a process of becoming aware, of opening the senses to ways of grasping the world, ways that may previously have been blocked. Often we take the world around us for granted, we are so immersed in habit. All of our lives contain relative degrees of routine. We go to sleep, we eat, we go to work. The things we may choose to write about will also contain repeated and habitual elements. How many times have you come across the word 'usually' in stories and novels, or phrases such as 'every day' and 'every year'? How many times do you read about meals, or other daily routines like dressing, looking in the mirror, going out, coming in? These are only a few of the many designators of habitual patterns of behaviour, giving the impression of life passing in a routine fashion. Taken out of context such details might be uninteresting, but in fact they are invariably the parts of the writing that build a world for the reader. This world is believable because it appears to have existed before the reader started reading about it and will continue on afterwards.

Activity 3

Close your eyes for a few moments and think of the room or place around you. Think of the details that you would include in any description and make a mental note of them. Open your eyes and, without looking around, write down what you thought of.

Now look at your surroundings and write a paragraph (no more than 150 words) describing them, picking out at least three things that you haven't noticed recently – things you didn't think of when you closed your eyes.

Discussion

The details you noticed may have come in various guises. You may have seen some dirt on the floor, something that isn't usually there. You may have noticed an ornament that you haven't looked at for a while, an object that's always present but not always seen. You may have picked up on the colour of a wall, the handle on a door. Some of these things will have changed since the last time you noticed them – maybe the wall colour has faded. Some things will not be quite as you thought they were – maybe you didn't remember the door handle being made of metal. It is useful to do this sort of perceptual exercise at regular intervals. In this way you will revive the way you see the world – by de-familiarising your perceptions you will reinvigorate your writing.

Here are some similar follow-up exercises that you can try when you get time.

Try the same exercise on a different, but still familiar, place. You can also try it with familiar characters in your life – describe them in their absence and then take note of the things you didn't recall.

Think of the details of a short journey – say to the shops, to work or even to another part of your home – a journey that you make regularly. Jot these details down. Now make the journey, making a point of looking for things that you haven't noticed recently. Write a paragraph about the journey using the new details.

Write a paragraph describing a simple action that you do every day – for example, washing, cooking, shaving, putting on make-up, feeding the cat. When you next perform the action, notice everything about it and afterwards note down details that weren't in your original paragraph.

2.2 Collecting and selecting

Writers are always on the alert for potential material. A notebook is an essential tool for any writer and has several functions. These range from the jotting down of observations while you're out and about to an account of daily events, your rants and raves, ideas for poems, single words, clippings from newspapers, responses to books or poems you've read, notes from research, all kinds of 'gathering'. Your notebook is for you, and it needs to contain whatever helps you or fuels your writing.

A major source of potential material is your own life – what you see, experience, think, and feel. Therefore, it is important to go about your daily business with your eyes open and all your other senses similarly alert. Accumulate details about the world around you. For instance, using an imaginary scenario, you might notice how the man along the road twitches his curtains, how he wears colour co-ordinated clothes, usually but not always green. Note the melancholic tone of his voice and how he goes to the post office every Monday at 9.30 am, accompanied by his neighbour who often wears a purple sari. You might note how they walk faster as they pass the graffiti on the factory wall and often smile at the 'Elvis lives' slogan that someone has daubed on the adjoining fence. You might note how, at the post office, they both chat to a man with a white Scottie, a dog who snarls at most passers-by when he is tied to the railings outside the shop, but not at the man and his neighbour.

By noting such details you are collecting materials that you might use later in your writing. In the imaginary scenario above, we have almost formed a narrative. At times you might do this, at other times you might be more arbitrary and fragmented in what you gather, writing down a range of dissimilar observations: the weather, a character description, an overheard turn of phrase. You don't need to make complete sentences or connect it all into a sequence; you could make a list of bullet points. In whatever form, collecting serves to revive a certain detailed way of seeing the world: how you might have grasped the world as a child.

Perception is always a selective faculty. You will not be able to see all and everything anew each and every day. However, you can use tactics to keep yourself alert: cross over the road and walk on a different side, or sit in a chair that you don't usually use. It is important to develop an investigative attitude to your own environment, to look at things from a slightly different angle, and to search for the previously unnoticed. Eventually, when coming to write your story or poem, you will realise that, like perception, writing is also selective. You will pick the details to be included and excluded: which detail acts as a useful repetition, and which detail might be redundant. You can't pick and choose if you haven't gathered enough information in the first place.

In our scenario above, for instance: the man at the post office with the dog might have fluffy white whiskers just like his white Scottie – this is a relatively significant and amusing detail. The same man might wear a plain-coloured tie, which is less interesting information. Each piece of writing that you work on will demand its own level and type of detail. Details attain significance, for you and consequently for your reader, not just

through being dramatic or unusual. Often they will attain significance because they are being noticed for the first time, because a usual or habitual perception has shifted. For instance, returning to the scenario above, every day you might walk past the graffiti on the factory wall, considering it to be an inane and messy scrawl, if you notice it at all. Then one day you see a sunrise painted behind the letters, or you might see 'Elvis lives' and realise for the first time that these words are formed from the same letters (anagrams), or that the yellow lettering matches the colour of the bedding flowers just planted by the council, or you might have a flashback of the bare concrete behind the graffiti and what the wall used to be like. It is these shifts in the way you see your familiar world that revive it. In this way writing is a process of scrutinising, looking closely at things, and then taking the observations onto a new level of perception, one in which you understand your world just a little more.

Some of the observational detail collected in your notebook might seem mundane and indiscriminate, its interest and significance not fully known even to you. Some of it might be more focused on something you are working on – an observation of a certain place or type of place. For instance, you may have set a story at a swimming pool and need to remind yourself of the smell of chlorine and the strange acoustics. Whether apparently insignificant or more focused, there is no prescription for the sort of observations you should make; they will always be personal to the individual writer.

2.3 Using your observations

The observations you make in your notebook might not always appear imaginative or pertinent to anything, but the mundane recording of events may have unlikely uses. Writing in my notebook on 15 December 1998, I observed the sky – at the coast on a murky winter's day, when the low cloud seemed to be lit by a churning, subterranean force:

the earth comes to the surface, the soil muddies the sky, clouds the air – it even turns the sea into a sandy mix ... the sea, the puddles, the rivers, the sky – all glow brown, glisten, shimmer – but not with the light of any sun.

On another occasion in the same notebook I observed a familiar river, and how the current flowed in 'one concerted way in the straights but was torn between two directions at the bends'. By struggling to express what I saw on those two separate days, the observations stayed with me, largely because I had taken time to write about them. I later combined parts of these two descriptions in a scene of a novel, *The Book of Guardians* (Neale, 2012), using the river setting to reflect the inner state of my main character, Philip Eyre:

The swell of the river had caused the current to be perplexed, flowing concertedly in one midstream direction but torn between at least two, whirling between calm and rush, in the shallows and elbows. The rowing boat bobbed and turned uneasily like a gelding on its rope. The cigarette smoke smelt different – and I wondered whether it was because we were outdoors. Now it was fragrant, balmy even, like woodsmoke in the night.

It was one of those days: the earth rising to the surface, muddying the water, overflowing into the sky and air. The world was in spate. The earth appeared to be glimmering with the density of its own substrata.

(Neale, 2012)

What you put down in your notebook can act as a mnemonic, a memory aid, reminding you of the original observation, reviving certain thoughts and emotions. In this way your notebook – as well as being a writing 'gym' where you exercise perceptual and linguistic muscles – can also act as a future resource.

3 The senses

3.1 Involving all of the senses

Becoming more aware of the everyday world around you involves more than just looking. If writing is a perceptual art then perception should involve all of the senses, not just the visual. You must also start to smell, feel, taste and hear the world you are trying to realise. So, in the made up scenario, when you see the man with the Scottie dog you might be too fearful to stroke his dog, but perhaps you could touch the cold metal bar where the dog was tied up – after he is gone, of course! You might feel the rough bark of the tree close at hand, smell the brash perfume of the washing detergent steaming out of the nearby launderette, taste the bitter dryness this causes in your mouth, and hear the wind whistle past the buildings. You might see the graffiti on the wall and appreciate that part of the street is always quiet, not even any traffic, and that there is a different smell: ammonia, it smells like fish.

By awakening your senses and becoming more conscious of the world around you, you will be enriching your grasp of that world. Once this heightened way of perceiving your environment has trickled down into your writing, your reader will benefit, getting a much fuller picture of the worlds you are creating.

Activity 4

In an indoor location write down three things for each of the following:

- sounds that you can hear;
- textures that you can feel;
- odours that you can smell;
- flavours that you can taste;
- objects that you can see.

Discussion

Having the sensory perception is one thing; writing about it is quite a different matter. We often need to use metaphor and simile to describe our perceptions. Even the most established writer struggles and strives to find phrases that can translate perception in an original and meaningful fashion. How do you write about feeling 'soaked to the skin' without using such a hackneyed phrase? How do you write about a rough surface or a bitter taste? The obvious solution is to find a comparison that fits the sensation. The rough surface becomes 'like gravel' or 'like sandpaper', the bitter taste becomes 'like lemon'. Some similes might seem a little too easy or too familiar and it is important to search for the metaphor or simile that fits your particular context.

For instance, in a story called 'The Barber's Victim' (Neale, 1995, p.68), I described a young lad, drenched by the rain, entering a new, grown-up world – a barber's shop – for the first time. After deciding against 'soaked to the skin' and several similes that seemed to me either too familiar or too odd ('drowned rat', 'dripping leaf') I wrote that he 'flapped through the red, white and blue fly strips like a grounded fish'. In this way the verb was working as hard as the simile. The use of 'flapped' revealed how awkward the character was in this setting, and the simile of the grounded fish reflected

how he was being thrown into an unfamiliar and threatening world, and wasn't now in charge of his own actions.

Your writing will always benefit from exercising your sensory awareness. You can do more of these sorts of exercises, and in a variety of contexts. If you get time you might like to repeat this activity, finding three of each of the senses in an outdoor location.

Looking back over and revising your writing should become a habit. Look over your responses to Activity 3 and check for the sensory perceptions that you have used, add some relevant ones if you need to and redraft accordingly.

3.2 Contexts

On their own, sensory perceptions don't tend to mean that much. They depend on a context in which they can be brought to life: for instance, that of a character. Such sensory perceptions as you've just listed in Activity 4 might hold more meaning if the man who twitches the curtains was the character smelling the smells or touching the surfaces; if his neighbour in the purple sari was the character hearing the noises, tasting the flavours. Sensory perceptions offer dimensions that will enrich your writing, but generally they cannot operate in isolation.

Activity 5

Read the opening of Laurie Lee's *Cider with Rosie*. Think about the following questions:

- Which sensory perceptions are used, and how are they used?
- Do the perceptions belong to a character?
- Is a place realised through the sensory perceptions?
- How is time being organised?
- Are the perceptions from one moment or many?

Click on the link below to open the start of Laurie Lee's *Cider with Rosie*,

[Laurie Lee's](#)

Discussion

Notice in *Cider with Rosie* that all the senses are activated, and how happily the childlike perception – viewing the world as if for the first time – coincides with Lee's intention: realising this particular world afresh. Amid the flurry of sensory detail there is also a tight organisation of time. Even though Lee's recall of events must be fragmentary and confused, for the purposes of his narrative he has started arranging details in coherent and logical sequence. He is three years old, it is June, he gets deposited from a cart in the grass, feels lost, alone, overwhelmed, and consequently cries, before being rescued by his sisters. In your reading, look out for such temporal organisation, and be similarly aware of it in your own writing.

4 Memory and narrative

4.1 Using memories to order narrative

The philosopher John Locke made the assertion that individual identity is inextricably linked to memory – we are only what we remember being. Memory is a central part of how we think of ourselves, and indeed a central strand of what we might know. Memory is not simply a mechanical process. It works in various ways and you will use it in various ways in your writing. If you study A215 *Creative writing*, the Open University course from which this course was extracted, you will have the opportunity to think about how to make the most of associations from your memories. Part 4 of the course focuses on ‘Life Writing’; it looks in more detail at how memory works as a narrative, and how we tell ourselves stories about our past. It will be useful to start thinking about memory and narrative now, as your memories will be of use in your poetry and fiction, as well as in your life writing. Part of what a story does is organise events in time, as Lee has done. Memory often works like this – even when you aren't intending to write your memories down but are simply thinking. So when you try to remember what you did yesterday you start perhaps by recalling some fragments – a conversation, having breakfast, going to the park. The more you think about the fragments, the more you are likely to arrange them in some sort of temporal order – like a story. I had breakfast first, then I went to the park and when I returned, that's when my mother rang. Thinking of memory as a form of narrative or story is a great asset when you come to your own writing. But it's important to consider your memories to be narratives that you can use freely. Don't feel that you have to render them exactly in an ‘as it really was’ fashion.

Activity 6

After reading the text below, click on the link supplied to read Lesley Glaister's ‘Memory: The true key to real imagining’. Look for the following things:

- How is the memory realised and written about?
- How is time organised in the memory?
- In Glaister's version of this memory, what really brings it alive?
- What use does Glaister make of her memory in her writing?

Click on the link below to open Lesley Glaister's ‘Memory: The true key to real imagining’.

[Memory](#)

Discussion

Notice how the memory is dramatised in the present tense, also how there is a shape to the telling of the memory, as if it were a fictional story with a starting point (father is invincible), a climax (father presumed dead) and a revelation (father is alive but flawed). Also note how the mix of precise detail and uncertainty (‘I don't know where – Southwold perhaps’) gives an authentic feel to the narration. Remember this in your own writing.

Also note that, according to this testimony, the content of the memory is only fleetingly used in Glaister's fiction. It is one small element, but something which is packed with resonance for her.

4.2 Raiding your past

The more you write, the more you will raid your own past. These incursions won't diminish or reduce your memories – rather those recollections can be enriched and become more fully realised. As Jamaica Kincaid says of her writing:

One of the things I found when I began to write was that writing exactly what happened had a limited amount of power for me. To say exactly what happened was less than what I knew happened.

(in Perry, 1993, p. 129)

Writing using your memories can amount to more than just reciting the facts. If you take A215 Creative Writing, you will look at a Jamaica Kincaid story in Part 2, the 'Writing fiction' section, and can then consider what her particular mix of fiction and autobiography might look like. For now, it's important to realise that you will not betray the truth of any particular memory by failing to stick steadfastly to certain details, or by changing elements, or by not having a total recall of events.

There may be times when you will wish to use episodes or elements from your life experience more or less directly. Often you will use just fragments of your own past. You might like to use a single aspect of a character, or a place, for instance. You might like to use a turn of phrase that your grandmother used; you might focus on the feelings of being lost on the first day at a new school. There is no rule for how much or how little you can use.

Activity 7

Using the present tense, like Glaister does, write about a personal memory of either a place or a character in your notebook.

Make it brief, 250 words or so, but try to get as many sensory perceptions as possible going, and try to fix the memory in time, as Glaister does, so it is just one moment. Include everyday details and don't be afraid to admit one or two uncertainties.

Discussion

This activity doesn't ask you to change anything from the way you remembered it, but you might have found yourself inventing things – some sensory perceptions, for instance. It is impossible to notice every little detail about an event or moment, let alone be able to recall such detail from the past. It is inevitable that you will invent even in this limited exercise. That invention should be welcomed, not resisted; it will always be guided by what you do know about the event.

Conclusion

'Writing what you know' is a large and rich project, one that provides an endless resource, and one that can be undertaken in all the types of writing discussed in this course – poetry, fiction and life writing. The skill lies in reawakening your senses to the world around you, and then using what you find with discrimination. By realising the potentials of your own life experience, you will be collecting the materials necessary in order to write. 'Writing what you know' can amount to a lot more than you may have first bargained for. It doesn't mean that you are limited solely to your own life story. Neither does it mean you have to be entirely true to your memories. Often a different kind of truth will emerge from the activity of writing about elements of your past and your everyday life. In this way, writing about what you know is a route to a different understanding of your own experience, and therefore also a route to finding out what you don't know.

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