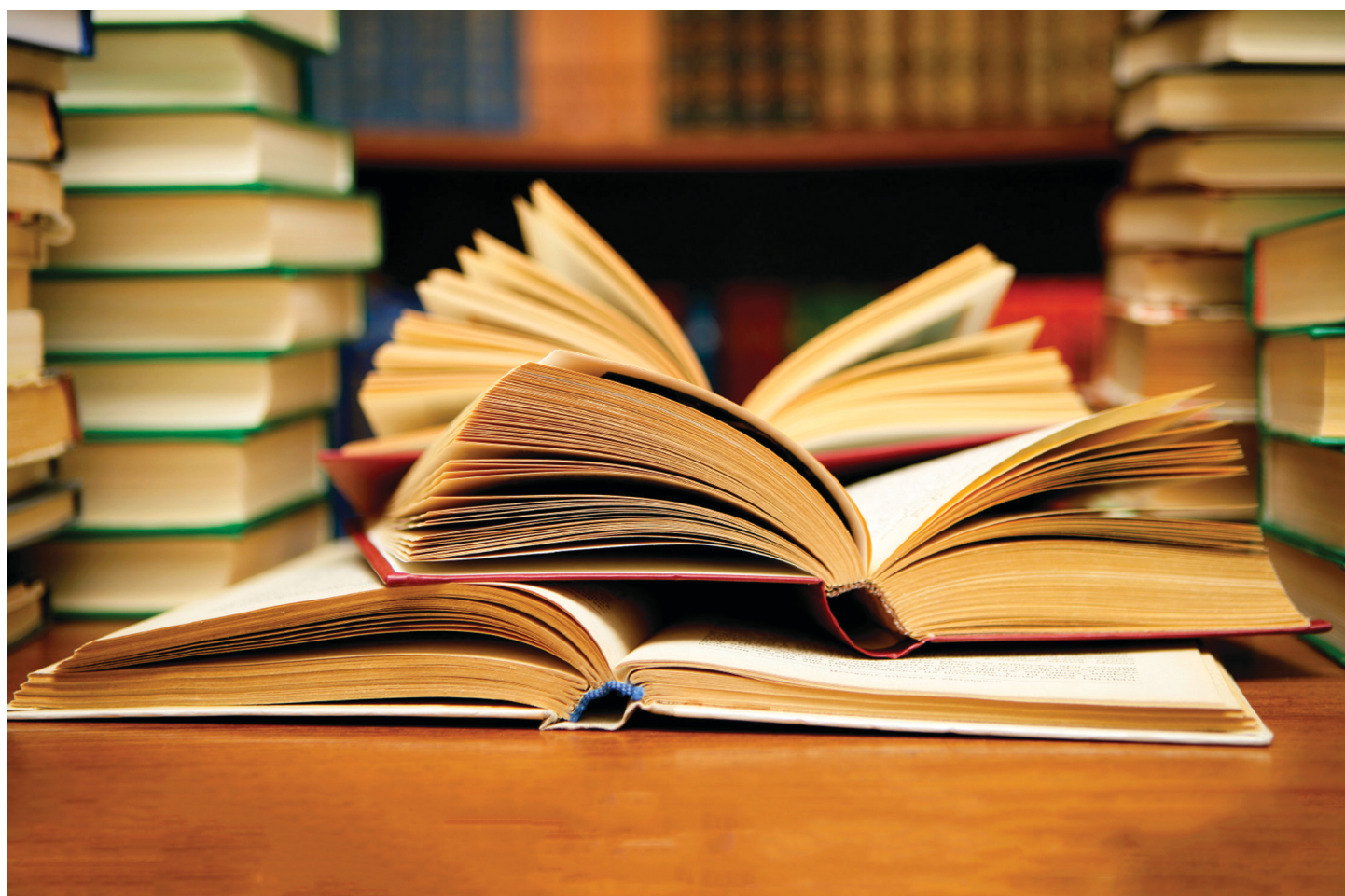


Start writing fiction: characters and stories



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Week 1: Starting to write fiction

Introduction

Welcome to this free course, *Start writing fiction: characters and stories*. Start by watching the introductory video from course author, Derek Neale.

Video content is not available in this format.



Start writing fiction: characters and stories focuses on a skill which is central to the writing of all stories and novels – creating characters. You'll hear from a variety of writers talking about how they started and how they created their stories and characters. You'll learn the benefits of using a writer's notebook or journal, how to read like a writer and how to edit, as you start writing your own stories.

Derek Neale is your guide through the course. A novelist and short story writer – his latest novel is *The Book of Guardians* – Derek has recorded many interviews with novelists, playwrights and biographers about their approach to writing. He'll introduce each week, reminding you of what you've learned and mentioning the highlights of the week ahead. The [course map](#) gives an overview of the course.

Each week's work is designed to take about three hours – but if you want to develop your skills as a writer you may well spend longer than this. Even just a short paragraph can

take a while to get right – though sometimes, of course it can work more or less immediately. How long you spend on the writing exercises is up to you – but you will develop best as a writer if you recognise that writing can't usually be done quickly, it's something you need to live with and return to again and again. This course is designed with that in mind.

Here's a run-down of features that have been developed to help you study. The course is designed to run on desktops, tablets and mobile devices; however, some of the material is quite detailed and using a larger screen will enhance your experience. Materials are best viewed running the most up-to-date software available for your device and using the most recent version of the web browser.

Downloads

From time to time you'll see downloadable PDFs as links within the text. These are provided to help your learning. They include extracts and information sheets that you may want to save for future reference.

Quizzes

Some of the weeks include a quiz about an extract you will have just read. The final week has a quiz to help you review your learning.

Sharing your work

This course previously incorporated a forum where you were able to share your writing, and evaluate the writing of others. Following changes in 2018 to data protection regulations, it has been decided to remove this forum from the course. But it is still highly beneficial for a writer to share their work with peers, to receive feedback, and to evaluate others' work. You might consider finding somebody you can engage with on this level, maybe a friend or colleague or family member who would like to read your work and give you their thoughts. Perhaps you already know some other writers you can exchange ideas with. There might be a local writing group in your area, or otherwise an online group set up for this purpose. Finding some fellow writers and sharing work can be an invaluable exercise, both for obtaining some feedback on your writing, and for practising your critical skills by evaluating the writing of others.

At times in this course you are encouraged to make use of your memory and experience in transformative ways. It can be exhilarating to make use of personal observations and history in writing your fiction. But it is sensible not to share writings that are deeply personal during the course unless you are certain that you will not mind them being discussed impersonally and evaluated as artistic products rather than as slices of your life.

In your writing and any online discussion it is important not to reveal personal details about yourself that might place you at risk.

1.1 What is fiction?

Video content is not available in this format.



Fiction is all about characters. Make the best of everything you already have and know – **your** unique 'material' and 'equipment' for creating characters:

- your experiences (including your reading experiences)
- your memories and personal history
- your feelings and desires
- your language, imagination, observations and ideas.

1.1.1 Fact and fiction



Figure 1

Trying to write both fact and fiction can help you realise the relationship between the two.

Activity 1.1 Can you tell fact from fiction?

1. Write a paragraph (50 to 100 words) containing one fact and three fictitious elements. You can write about yourself, about your interests, about history – about anything you like. Then try the reverse – write a paragraph containing three facts and one fictitious element.
2. Try this exercise with any other writers you know, and swap your paragraphs. Can you spot where the fictions are and where the facts are? Ask these questions:
 - Is there anything that distinguishes the fictitious elements?
 - Are there common elements that you and your fellow writers write about as ‘facts’?
 - Do any of these passages suggest stories to you?

1.1.2 What can you see?

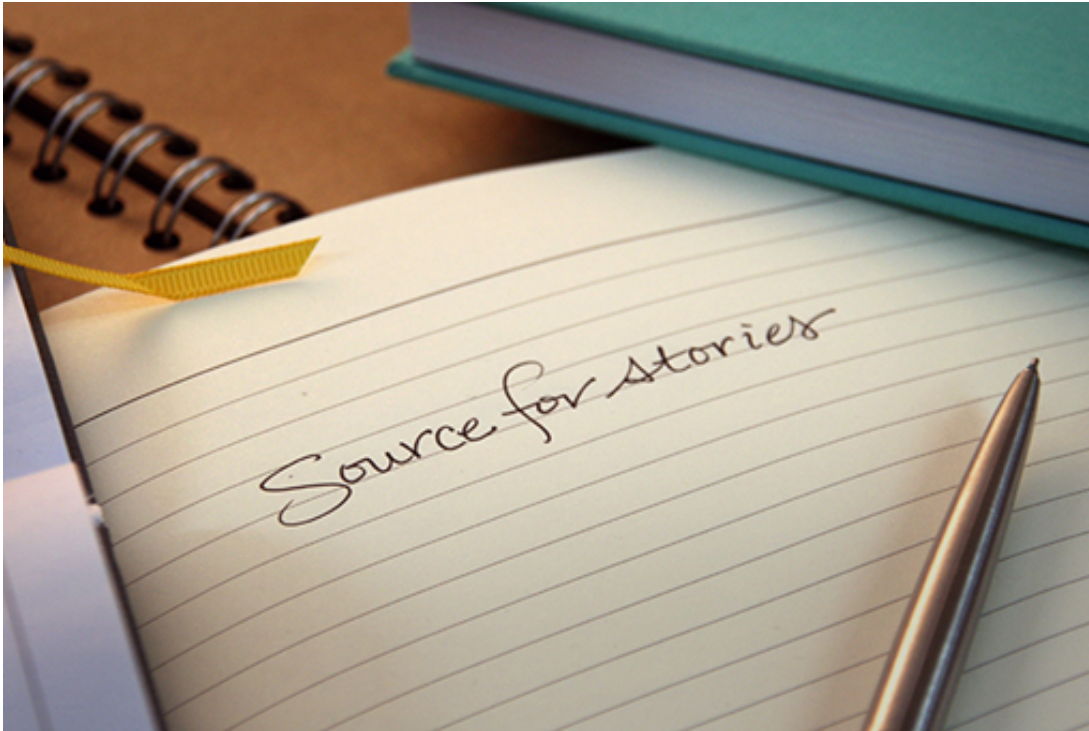


Figure 2

Fiction thrives on elements that are factual or seem factual; it traditionally contains much information which appears real and normal.

What did you find from writing the fact and fiction paragraphs, and from reading any others?

You may have seen or heard game shows with a similar premise – panel members talk imaginatively and often comically about themselves, or an object or a moment from history, trying to smuggle through facts that the other panellists don't notice. The fun thing is that the truthful things are often the elements that sound most invented. But common factual details are of use in stories too.

Writing what you know is all important to the would-be fiction writer. Your source material doesn't have to be exotic, or fantastical. The most mundane details from everyday lives can provide the most fruitful source for stories. And sometimes the mundane mixed with the fantastical can be amusing too.

1.2 Creating your own space



Figure 3

Start a 'writer's notebook' to collect facts and fictions, observations from everyday life and things you imagine.

Your notebook, or journal, should be with you at all times so that you can jot down anything that strikes you as interesting or unusual, and anything you might want to remember to come back to later.

Your notebook will become a secret testing ground, for trying out ideas, phrases, mini-stories and scenes, bits of dialogue – all in complete freedom, with the knowledge that if things don't work, no one sees these trial runs but you. Over time, your notebook will prove invaluable. It's especially useful for noting down characters that you might want to develop later.

Make notes in a way that suits you, so that you can do it wherever you are – on trains, buses, in cafés, at home or work. Make your notebook a place you like going. You might use:

- a traditional school exercise book
- a hardback notebook with plain paper
- lined paper collected and ordered in a file
- your tablet, smart phone or laptop.

The only rule is to use whatever works best for you. You'll return to your writer's notebook in greater detail later, but start to use it right away.

1.2.1 Keeping track of useful details

Taking note of details of the appearance of people who take your interest should become a habit – people you see on the street, or in other venues.

Write down, in your notebook or journal, any interesting and unusual details that strike you about any of the characters from the following video. (Please note that there is no speech in this video.)

Video content is not available in this format.



These notes may help you to create characters you will be imagining and writing about in the weeks to come. They may, at some point, form the basis for a short story.

1.2.2 Reviewing your notes



Figure 4

It's important to review the details and ideas you collect in your notebook.

Read the notes you made after watching the video. Did you concentrate on physical details? Did you note any details of clothing or expression?

Now open all your senses, and take notice of things around you in everyday life. Concentrate not only on what you see but also on sounds, smells and touch.

This should become a habit – a way of seeing the world. Always reflect on the notes you have taken in your journal.

Did you note things you heard – the way people speak or a squeaky or breathy voice?

Did you note any smells – like a distinctive perfume, or the smell of fried fish on someone's clothes?

When reflecting on your notes, highlight any details you find especially interesting and to which you might want to return, to work on in more detail later.

1.3 Why writers write



Figure 5

There are all sorts of reasons why people start to write. Throughout this course you will listen to established writers speaking about their work.

Here are a number of novelists talking about how they began to write. You will hear Alex Garland, Michèle Roberts, Tim Pears, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Monique Roffey and Louis de Bernières.

Audio content is not available in this format.

As you are listening, consider:

- How did these writers come to write?
- Why did they start to write?
- Were there any similarities in their respective journeys towards writing?

You'll reflect on your thoughts in the next section.

1.4 The writing journey starts



Figure 6

It's helpful to listen to what other writers have to say about the wish to write, but it is also important to listen to yourself too.

Activity 1.2 Why write?

Does any of what the novelists say in *Why writers write* resonate with your own feelings and experiences of why you want to write?

Note down some of their responses in relation to your own motivations and reasons for wanting to write. Ask yourself:

- What were the similarities in their respective journeys towards writing?
- How much did fact mix with fiction in the way their own life experience and personal circumstance influenced them as writers?
- What elements of your life experience and personal circumstance do you think might influence your writing?

1.4.1 Developing a character from your notebook



Figure 7

Review the notes you've collected in your notebook to find a character to develop further.

Activity 1.3 Writing a character sketch

Pick a character. If you've collected, in your notebook, details about people you've spotted or spoken to during this week, pick one of these characters. Alternatively, you can pick one of the characters from the opening video, Keeping track of useful details.

Write a short character sketch – no more than 200 words – in which you concentrate on appearance and any particular mannerisms you noted.

You will come back to this later so save a copy on your computer or device.

1.4.2 Reading characters



Figure 8

Reading other novels and stories to see how characters appear is one of the most essential preparations you can undertake.

Take a look at these character sketches from George Orwell's *Burmese Days* and Zoë Heller's *Notes on a Scandal*. Note down how you think the writers are managing to portray character. The extracts are also available as a [PDF](#) for your convenience.

The first thing that one noticed in Flory was a hideous birthmark stretching in a ragged crescent down his left cheek, from the eye to the corner of the mouth. Seen from the left side his face had a battered, woe-begone look, as though the birthmark had been a bruise – for it was a dark blue in colour. He was quite aware of its hideousness. And at all times, when he was not alone, there was a sidelongness about his movements, as he manoeuvred constantly to keep the birthmark out of sight.

(Orwell, ([1934] 1967), p. 14)

The first time I ever saw Sheba was on a Monday morning, early in the winter term of 1996. I was standing in the St George's car park, getting books out of the back of my car when she came through the gates on a bicycle – an old-fashioned, butcher-boy model with a basket in the front. Her hair was arranged in one of those artfully dishevelled up-dos: a lot of stray tendrils framing her jaw, and something like a chopstick piercing a rough bun at the back. It was the sort of hairstyle that film actresses wear when they're playing sexy lady doctors. I can't recall exactly what she had on. Sheba's outfits tend to be very complicated – lots of floaty layers. I know she was wearing purple shoes. And

there was definitely a long skirt involved, because I remember thinking that it was in imminent danger of becoming entangled in her spokes. When she dismounted – with a lithe, rather irritating, little skip – I saw that the skirt was made of some diaphanous material. Fey was the word that swam into my mind. *Fey person*, I thought. Then I locked my car and walked away.

My formal introduction to Sheba took place later the same day when Ted Mawson, the deputy head, brought her into the staffroom at afternoon break for a ‘meet and greet’.

I was off in a far corner when Mawson ushered Sheba in, so I was able to watch their slow progress around the room for several minutes, before having to mould my face into the appropriate smile.

Sheba’s hair had become more chaotic since the morning. The loose tendrils had graduated to hanks and where it was meant to be smooth and pulled back, tiny, fuzzy sprigs had reared up, creating a sort of corona around her scalp. She was a very thin woman, I saw now. As she bent to shake the hands of seated staff members, her body seemed to fold in half at the waist like a piece of paper.

‘Our new pottery teacher!’ Mr Mawson was bellowing with his customary, chilling good spirits, as he and Sheba loomed over Antonia Robinson, one of our Eng Lit women. Sheba smiled and patted her hair.

Pottery. I repeated the word quietly to myself. It was too perfect: I pictured her, the dreamy maiden poised at her wheel, massaging tastefully mottled milk jugs into being.

(Heller, 2003, pp. 11–13)

1.4.3 Week 1 quiz

The following quiz will encourage you to think further about developing characters, but it will also encourage you to read as a writer.

Complete the [Week 1](#) quiz now.

Open the quiz in a new window or tab then come back here when you’ve finished.

1.4.4 Comparing your characters

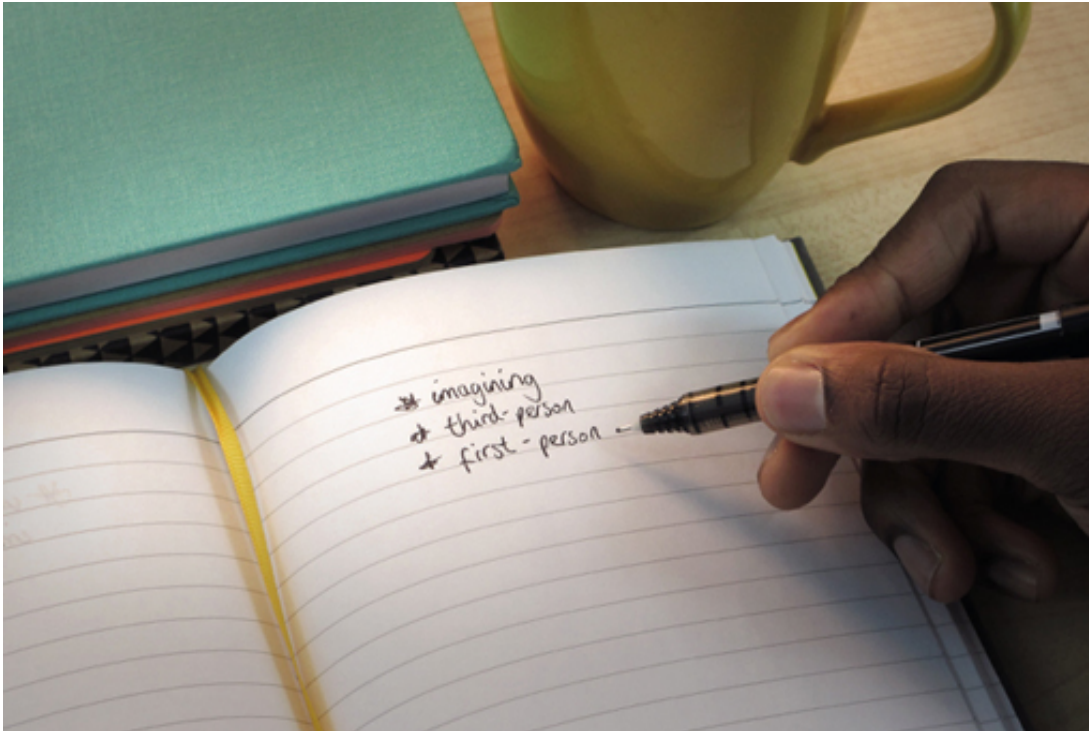


Figure 9

Can you use any of these methods in your stories and with your characters?

Having looked at the characters and ways of revealing characters in the passages from *Burmese Days* and *Notes on a Scandal*, go back to your character sketch and add any elements – for instance, details of appearance or behaviour – which you think might bring the character to life for your reader.

- Consider the ways in which your reader might be getting involved in the invention and imagining of your characters.
- Orwell uses third-person narration, and focuses on one physical aspect of Flory to create a picture of his psychological state.
- Heller uses first-person narration, which means we are dealing with two characters – the character being described, and the character doing the observing and describing. This adds an intrigue about the relationship between the two characters.
- Neither method is better than the other – they are just different approaches. Check whether you are using third or first person narration.
- Remember that your reader will always have to participate in the imagining of your characters.

1.5 Summary of Week 1



Figure 10

At the end of the first week of *Start writing fiction*, you've explored the differences between fact and fiction, begun to look at how characters are developed and heard from some successful writers on how they started to write.

You've also started your own notebook – hopefully you've already experienced how keeping a notebook can help your development as a writer.

In Week 2, you'll think about what inspires you to write, what you can learn from other writers and how to start writing. You can move on to Week 2 now.

If studying this week of *Start writing fiction* has inspired you, take a look at the area specifically created for you to explore more about writing fiction on [OpenLearn](#).

Week 2: The habit of writing

Introduction

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A writer's journal will help you establish a writing habit and could also help you launch into projects.

Writers often worry about how to get started. The first step is the same for any writer, novice or otherwise – you start with a blank page or screen. Which is why your notebook is such an important resource for ideas.

You may also find that props or particular working methods make writing easier for you. So, this week, you will be exploring and developing your own rituals.

2.1 Writers' rituals



Figure 1

What rituals and methods do other writers use? Some of these might be of benefit to you. Listen to these novelists talk about the methods and practices they find useful, including the writer's notebook, and morning pages. The writers are Michèle Roberts, Monique Roffey and Alex Garland.

Audio content is not available in this format.

As you listen, think about the following questions, and note your answers down.

1. What approaches are most suited to you?
2. Which approaches are least suited?

2.1.1 What works best for you?



Figure 2

There's no right way to write; only the one that's best for you. This will be a matter of trial and error.

- Do you work best late at night, or early in the morning? Do you prefer silence or does music help?
- Do you need coffee?
- Would you want to write in bed (some writers do)?
- Would a café or library be better for you?

Experiment to find out what works for you. Use your writer's notebook when trying these methods. Reflect on what suits you best. You may find that you are quite fussy and need special conditions. Or you may find that you are suited to more than one situation or approach.

As you've heard from Roberts, Roffey and Garland, everyone is different and it is up to you to discover the conditions that suit you best.

2.1.2 Imagining writing spaces

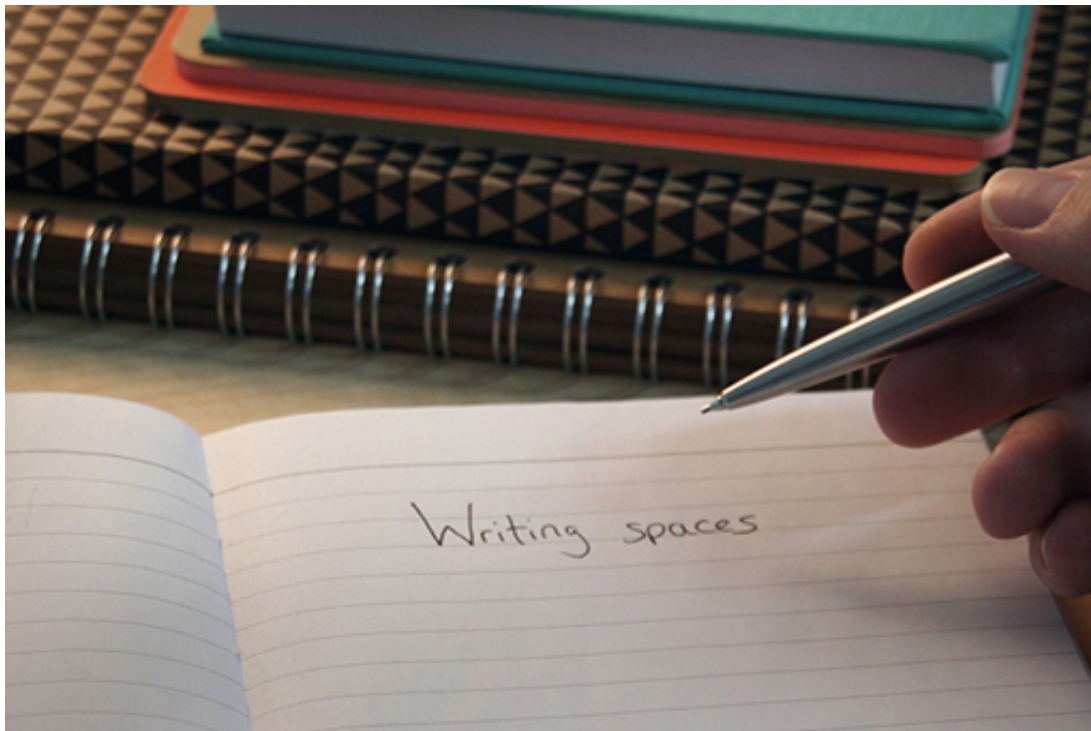


Figure 3

Trying to picture the worst place for you to try to write can help you realise what your best venue might be.

Activity 2.1 Two writing venues

Imagine two different venues for writing – one that seems most suited to you, and one that you would find bizarre or too difficult. Write a paragraph describing two writers at work, one in each of the venues.

Share your paragraph with others, and if you have some fellow writers, read and discuss what they've produced. Showing your work to others and discussing it is an important part of the writing process.

Remember:

- Sharing your work with fellow writers is essential. You need to know how your work comes across to others.
- You also need to develop the skill of reading your own work critically; looking at the writing of others can help you to do that.
- We can all see more easily what works and what doesn't in work that isn't our own.
- Start to get used to making helpful comments to your fellow writers in which you tell them what you like about their writing, but also what you think could be improved. Gradually, you will find you can start to do this with your own writing too.

- In this instance you can comment on how vividly you saw the writers at work in the various settings. Could you picture the scenarios?
- This is only a paragraph – you will soon be commenting on longer pieces of writing. Take a look at the [Feedback guidance PDF](#) for information about how to go about discussing the work of your fellow writers.

2.2 Observation – the importance of detail

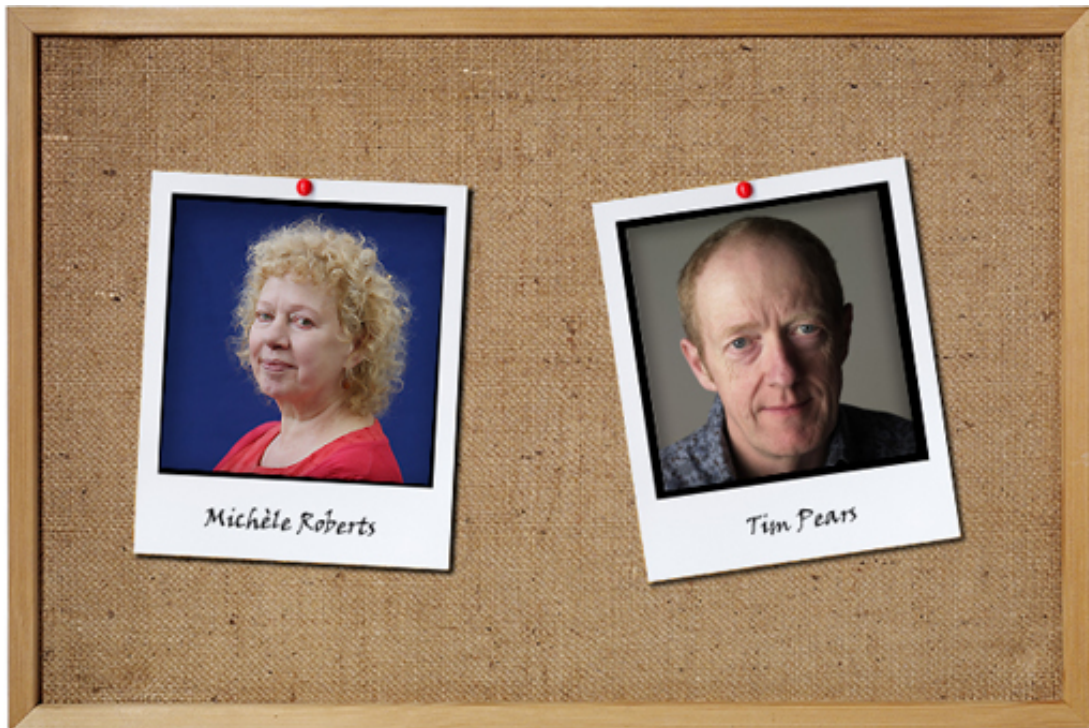


Figure 4

Learning from other writers is important for every writer, not just those starting out. Each of us sees the world from a unique perspective and observing and describing every detail will give a fresh insight to your writing.

Activity 2.2 Michèle Roberts and Tim Pears on the importance of detail

Listen to Michèle Roberts and Tim Pears and make notes on the following points.

- What do you think is the importance of detail to their storytelling?
- What sort of detail are they talking of?
- What effect does it have?

Audio content is not available in this format.

2.2.1 Heightening your observations



Figure 5

Developing your powers of observation and including a high level of detail can affect your writing style – for the better.

- Read back through the notes you have made so far and the character sketch you wrote in Developing a character from your notebook.
- Now try to add to your notes and sketch, making your observations as detailed as possible. Think back to the person you observed and see if you can remember more precise details about that person.

This closer scrutiny and attention to detail might also spark ideas for a story.

2.2.2 Learning from other writers



Figure 6

Learning from other writers is something all writers do, not just new writers. There are great benefits from reading. Seeing how someone else has written a description and brought a character to life can help you to see how you might tackle it yourself.

You have seen this already with the extracts from George Orwell and Zoë Heller that you read in Reading characters. Now take a look at these extracts from Graham Greene and Kate Atkinson. Note in your journal the main ways of portraying character that each writer uses. The extracts are also available as a [PDF](#) for your convenience.

I got to think, he repeated to himself. I got to think. He opened the street door and went out. He didn't even wait to fetch his hat. His hair was thin on top, dry and brittle under the dandruff. He walked rapidly, going nowhere in particular, but every road in Brighton ended on the front. I'm too old for the game, I got to get out, Nottingham; he wanted to be alone, he went down the stone steps to the level of the beach; it was early closing and the small shops facing the sea under the promenade were closed. He walked on the edge of the asphalt, scuffling in the shingle. I wouldn't grass, he remarked dumbly to the tide as it lifted and withdrew, but it wasn't my doing, I never wanted to kill Fred. He passed the shadow under the pier, and a cheap photographer with a box camera snapped him as the shadow fell and pressed a paper into his hand. Spicer didn't notice. The iron pillars stretched down across the wet dimmed shingle holding up above his head the motor-track, the shooting booths and peep machines, mechanical models, 'the Robot Man will tell your fortune'. A seagull flew straight across towards him between the pillars like a scared bird caught in a cathedral, then swerved out into the sunlight from the dark iron nave. I wouldn't grass, Spicer said, unless I had to He stumbled on an old

boot and put his hand on the stones to save himself: they had all the cold of the sea and had never been warmed by sun under these pillars.

(Greene, [1938] 1975, p. 85)

Victor met Rosemary when he had to go to the casualty department at Addenbrooke's, where she was a student nurse. He had tripped down some steps and fallen awkwardly on his wrist but he told Rosemary that he'd been on his bike when he was 'cut up' by a car on the Newmarket Road. 'Cut up' sounded good to his ears, it was a phrase from a masculine world he'd never managed to inhabit successfully (the world of his father), and 'the Newmarket Road' implied (untruthfully) that he didn't spend his whole life cloistered in the limited area between St John's and the maths department.

If it hadn't been for this chance hospital encounter, accidental in all senses, Victor might never have courted a girl. He already felt well on his way to middle age and his social life was still limited to the chess club. Victor didn't really feel the need for another person in his life, in fact he found the concept of 'sharing' a life bizarre. He had mathematics, which filled up his time almost completely, so he wasn't entirely sure what he wanted with a wife. Women seemed to him to be in possession of all kinds of undesirable properties, chiefly madness, but also a multiplicity of physical drawbacks – blood, sex, children – which were unsettling and other. Yet something in him yearned to be surrounded by the kind of activity and warmth so missing in his own childhood, which was how, before he even knew what had happened, like opening the door to the wrong room, he found himself taking tea in a cottage in rural Norfolk while Rosemary shyly displayed a (rather cheap) diamond-chip engagement ring to her parents.

(Atkinson, 2005, pp. 22–3)

2.2.3 Week 2 quiz

The following quiz will encourage you to think further about learning from other writers.

Complete the [Week 2](#) quiz now.

Open the quiz in a new window or tab then come back here when you've finished.

2.2.4 Comparing characters again

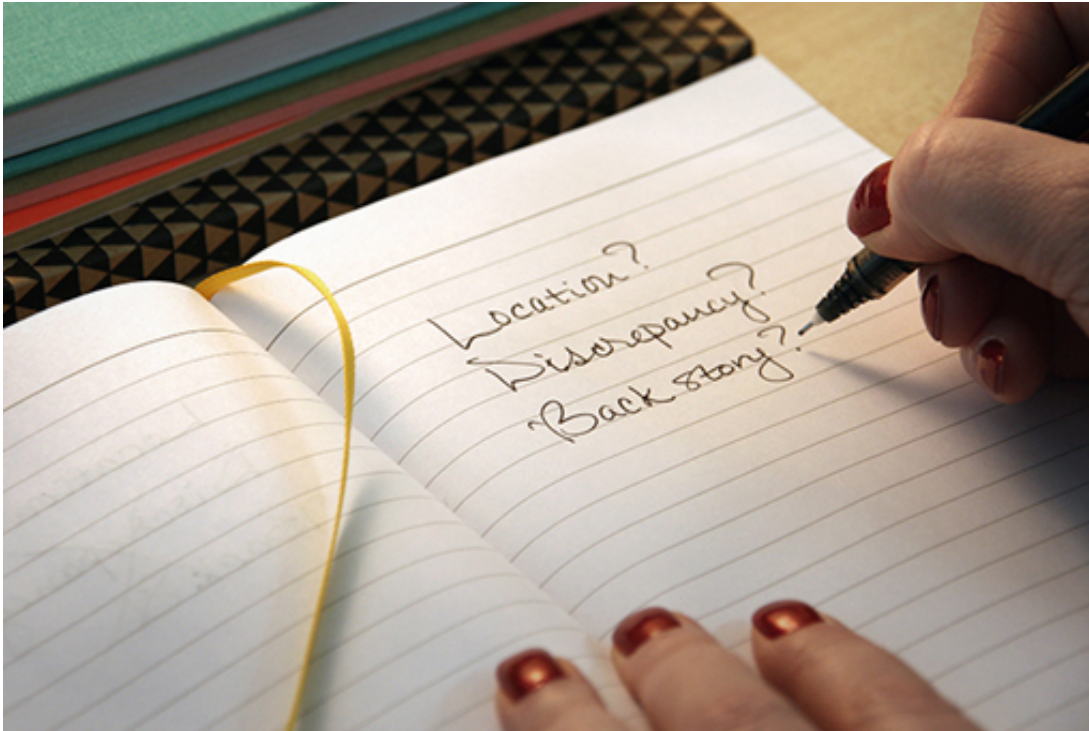


Figure 7

Reading other writers is an essential part of your own development as a writer.

You have seen different approaches to character portrayal in the extracts from Orwell and Heller, and as well as in the extracts from Greene and Atkinson.

Now reconsider your character sketch:

- Is there an opportunity to add the thoughts of your character?
- Can you situate your character in relation to a particular location?
- Does what your character says in their dialogue tally with what they think, or is there a discrepancy?
- Can you smuggle in some details about your character's back story, their life prior to when we meet them?
- Can you try to infer how your character acts in the world – for instance, are they overwhelmed or in some sense out of control (like Spicer in the Greene extract) or are they hapless (like Victor in the Atkinson extract)?

There are, of course, many more options for how a character might operate in the world – they might be optimistic, miserly, whimsical, stoic. There are many other possibilities.

It is important that you now build a habit of reading to see how other writers have revealed their characters. Don't rely on these two readings, or on the previous two. Look for the way characters are revealed in all that you read. You can choose your own sources and examples; read as much as you can.

2.2.5 How can I be original?



Figure 8

The more you read, the more you will learn about the various techniques of portraying characters. But on occasions an anxiety can arise from your reading: how can I possibly be original?

Originality

Originality for its own sake often results in ‘false’ writing: real people are seldom either so self-conscious or remarkable that they think and speak in entirely new ways. On the other hand, attempting to convey or describe something as accurately as possible will very often result in striking or fresh-sounding expressions.

Observing precisely how something appears to you, or how it might appear in the eyes of one of your characters, will often result in you writing something original. How? Because every person observes or perceives things – the world, themselves – in a different way.

Does it matter if you don’t know many interesting words?

The language you already know and use is vital: it’s a thumbprint of who you are. All the words you already know are potentially interesting, if used well, and all have interesting origins. Where they come from can say a lot about what they mean. Use a good dictionary so that you can find out where ‘ordinary’ words come from, and see what other meanings they might have.

- Get into the habit of looking through your dictionary whenever you can, noting in your journal words you like and word-derivations that are interesting to you.
- Think about words you particularly like and why. Keep a note of them, where they derive from, and why you like them. They needn't be 'exotic' words, but perhaps ones you liked because you heard them used in a surprising context.
- Be wary of using large, Latinate or multi-syllabic words gratuitously. Make sure that such words earn their place in your story. If in doubt, use the shorter, more commonly used word.
- Be wary of using hackneyed terms or phrases, clichés and the types of phrases that are too familiar.
- Start to keep a note of words you hear in conversation, and in everyday life: the phrases, words and speech patterns people use.

Plain language, deeply understood, is ample to convey the most sophisticated and complex meanings. Often 'ordinary' words are made vivid and memorable by appearing in unexpected places, or by being used in surprising ways.

2.2.6 Familiar words in unfamiliar places

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are ordinary words Thin
and
loose

Where have you noticed ordinary words used in interesting or surprising places?

The sea fog began to lift towards noon. It had been blowing in, thin and loose, for two days, smudging the tops of the trees up the ravine where the house stood.

(Pritchett, V. S., 1980, p. 3)

In this passage, the writer V.S. Pritchett is describing fog in an unfamiliar and unexpected way – but does so using ‘ordinary’ words to create a fresh and imaginative picture.

Try describing something familiar with one or two ordinary words that you wouldn’t normally use in that context.

2.3 The blank page



Figure 9

A blank page can seem daunting. You can prepare by taking time to research and review your notebook. Then start writing – but remember, sometimes the best inspiration comes after the first few pages.

Your 'preparation time' might be:

- **Gathering information or research:** check that you know enough about a character or place or period before you begin to describe them or it.
- **Visualisation:** perhaps your story stems from a single image? Focus on that; turn it over in your mind. You might not know where it came from or why, or even what it means. Composing a story around this image might be your way of 'unpacking' it, and discovering its significance through writing about it.
- **Regarding length:** have in mind an approximate idea of the length you imagine your story will run to, before you write it.
- **Considering shape:** will there be much dialogue or description? Will the story be divided up in any way, perhaps into sections or scenes?

2.3.1 Searching your notebook



Figure 10

Your notebook is a great place to prepare to write. You have already made notes on people you have observed, and you have written, edited and augmented a character sketch.

Activity 2.3 Developing characters into stories

Look back through your notebook and see whether you can imagine any of these characters forming the basis for a story. If you can, see whether you can apply any of the pointers (research, visualisation, length and shape of story) to the idea.

Note down any ideas you have for how you might develop a character into a story, or any questions you have about how you might shape your story. If possible, discuss your ideas with others, and discuss their ideas too.

2.3.2 Should I wait until I'm inspired?

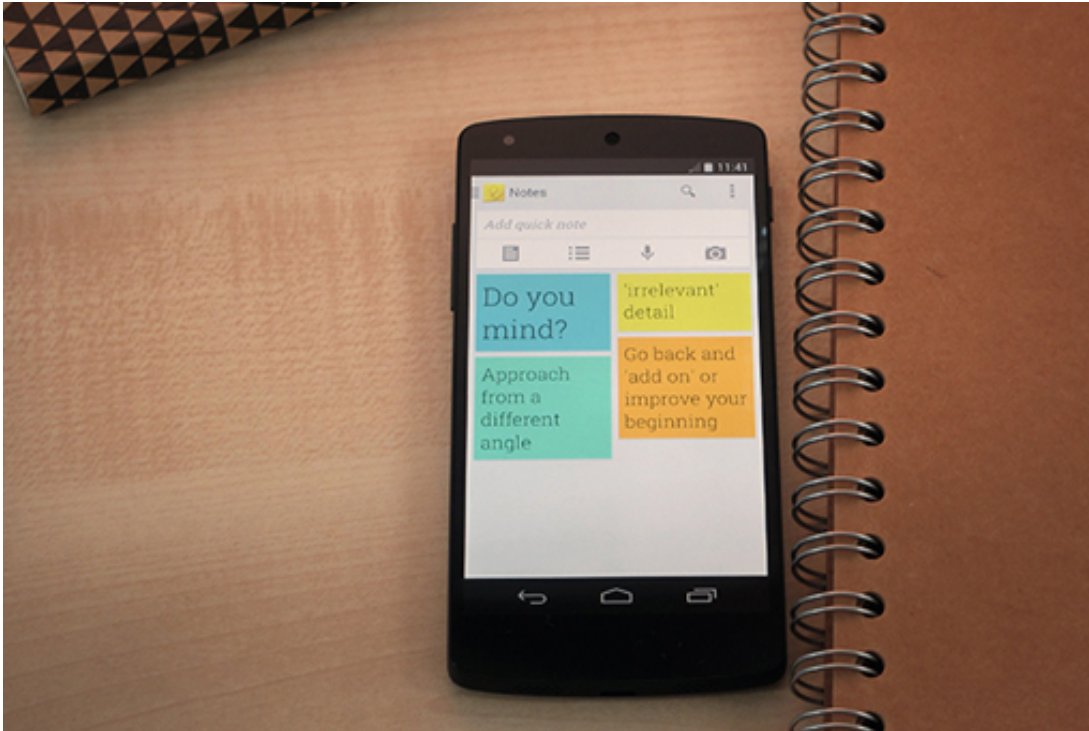


Figure 11

Sometimes, the best inspiration comes after the first line, or more likely still, after writing a few pages.

Inspiration is very often the result of habit, of getting into a rhythm of work, and of setting yourself goals of how much and about what you wish to write each day. Oddly enough, the determination that you will finish a particular piece of work is a great source of inspiration. So set yourself a realistic goal each time you sit down to write. Find out how much you are comfortable writing each day. Achieve that. Then extend it and try to double your output.

Remember: decide where you're going before you set out. If you end up somewhere else, simply ask: do you mind? It might be a good thing to have strayed from the path. Assess this once the work is done.

Don't wait until you have the perfect first line. In practice, it often transpires that perfect first lines no longer fit with the story once it's written out. Instead, try to think of your opening line as being simply like a doorway that you must pass through to get into the 'room' of your story. The doorway is much less important than what's inside the room – focus on that. If you find yourself 'seeing the whole story at once', and you're unsure where to begin, concentrate on one particular detail and start there.

Example: You want to write about a young man and his girlfriend. He's just realised he's in love with her, and is going to say so, but you think that having him just saying 'I love you' will sound a bit flat. So, think about how else you could approach it. You could:

- begin with him trying to decide which shirt to wear
- begin when he's stuck in conversation with someone else, and can't get away. He has something important to say, and yet a friend is talking to him about football
- begin after the actual moment of him telling her 'I love you'

- tell it from someone else's point of view – for example, one of the boy's friends, overhearing him, or the girlfriend herself.

In this way, focusing on an apparently 'irrelevant' detail might be the perfect way in to your story:

- a plane flying overhead as he speaks, drowning out his words
- a piece of lettuce stuck between her teeth that makes him smile
- a gang of schoolchildren who loiter close by, making him self-conscious.

Peripheral details like this can have the effect of making the scene seem more believable: real life is full of such details and delays, obstructions to the main story unfolding.

2.3.3 Finding a voice

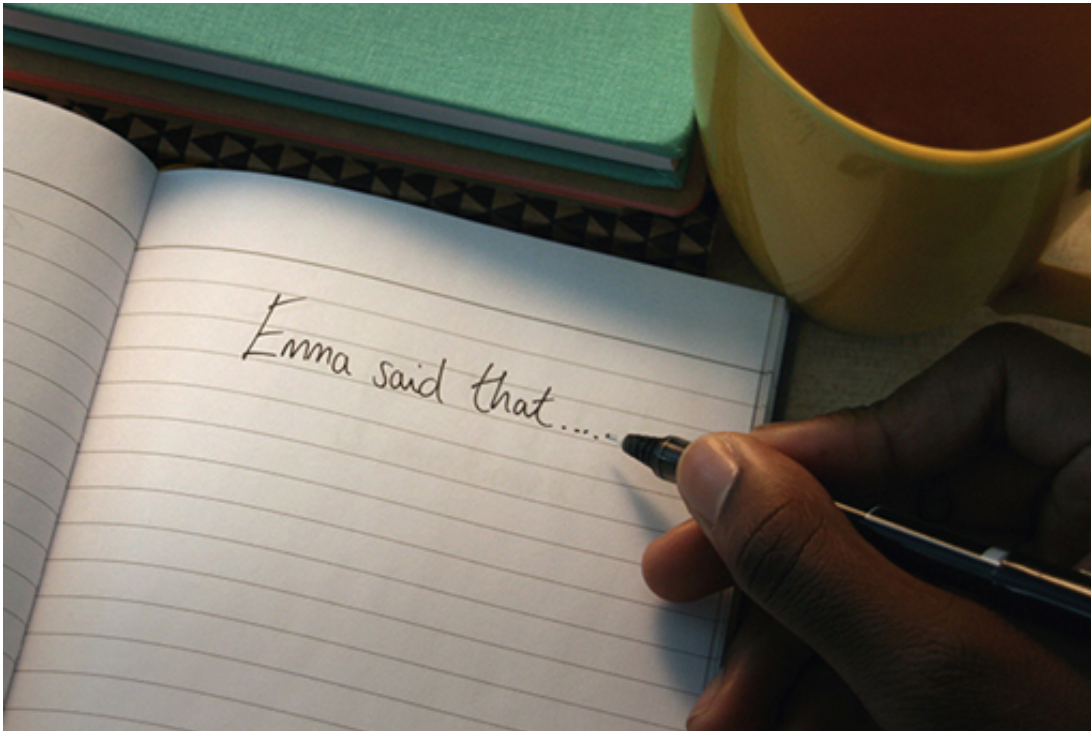


Figure 12

Writing is no more complicated than someone's voice, telling a story. Different strategies are available to you for getting started. You can use prompt phrases, for instance. These can also lead into approaches to editing.

In the next activity you will explore ideas for how to get started with a story and also how you might approach editing the story.

Activity 2.4 Strategies for starting a story

- Immediately, without thinking where it might lead, write approximately three lines that follow on from the phrase 'Emma said that ...'
- When you've finished, cut 'Emma said that'. Notice how little has been lost: you're still left with whatever Emma said.

You can use whatever names you want. Here's an example: 'Joe said that it was always the nice girls who hated him. They took one look and ...' This would become: 'It was always the nice girls who hated him. They took one look and ...'

When you have trouble starting a piece of writing, it might be helpful simply to begin with a formulation, as shown in the activity above, that you can cut later on. Simply use the name of whoever is telling the story, or whichever character it's about. In this way, you can think of writing as no more complicated than someone's voice, speaking – just 'telling a story'.

2.3.4 More starting plays



Figure 13

There are many other tactics you can use to help you to launch into your writing.

For instance, begin with 'I remember', write three lines to follow on from that phrase. For example: 'I remember that last week there were thunderstorms. It rained and was grey right up until Friday evening.'

Delete the initial phrase and you would be left with: 'Last week there were thunderstorms, right up until Friday evening.'

There are numerous other starting phrases, just to get you launched. These are grammatical formations which you might then go back to edit out, if you so wish.

Did you find the phrases suggested so far ('Emma said' and 'I remember') useful as prompts? Did they help you to attain a voice for telling the story? Think about some other opening phrases you might use to get you started, and note these down.

2.3.5 Ideas for a story

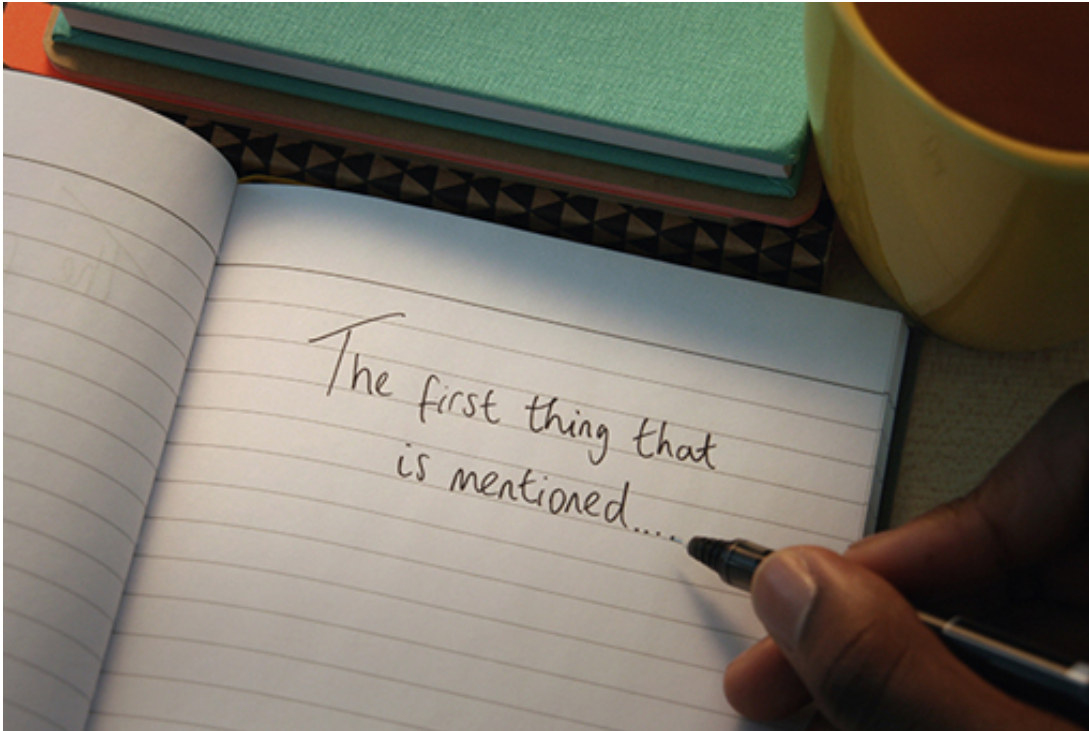


Figure 14

Writers often worry that they won't be able to think of ideas for a story, but ideas can come from anywhere.

Activity 2.5 Ideas from the radio

Turn on the radio and take note of the first thing that is mentioned. Use it as the basis for either the start of a story or an entire story – whichever, it should be no more than 500 words. Imagine a character, someone who is central to what the story is about. Try to use clear, vivid language so that your reader can see the character. Use some of the characterisation techniques we have talked about so far:

- physical description
- thoughts and inner life
- personality
- where the character is located
- the character's back story
- how the character acts in the world.

You might not wish to include all of these various aspects in your story but you might like to know something about them nonetheless.

And if you wish, to help to get you started, use some of the starting tactics suggested in Finding a voice and More starting plays ('Emma said', 'I remember' – or any other similar starting phrase.)

Write this story in your notebook, on your blog or in a Word document on your computer. You'll come back to this story in Week 3 and improve it by reviewing and redrafting.

2.4 Summary of Week 2

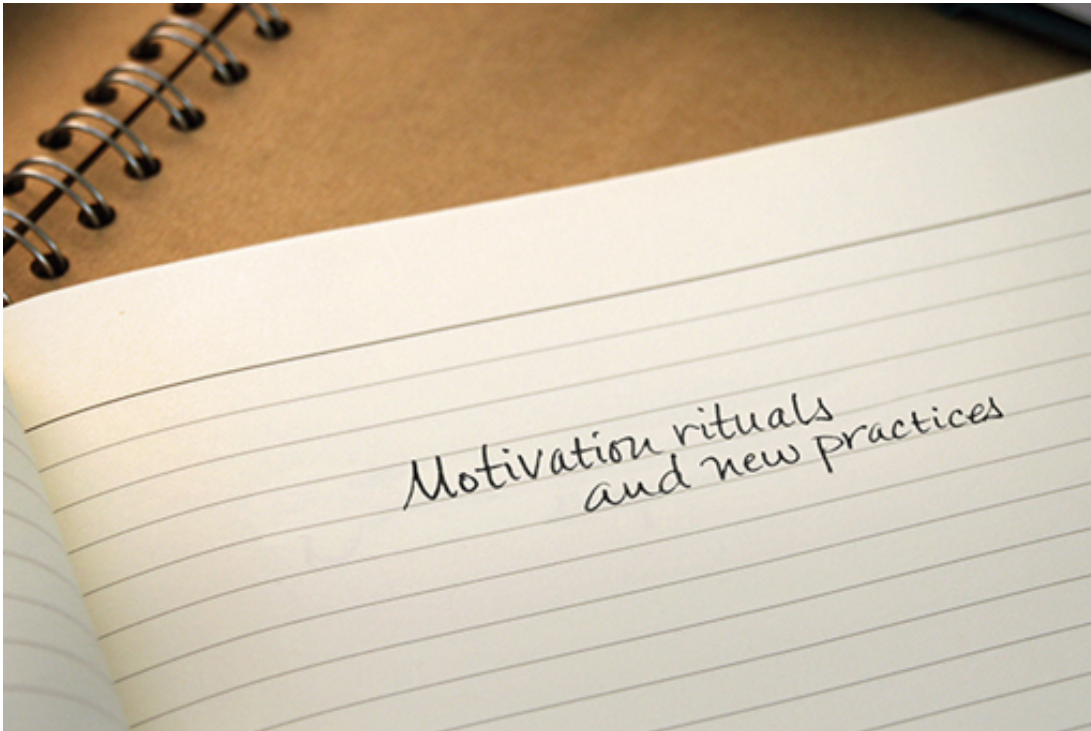


Figure 15

What inspires you to write? At the end of Week 2, you will have thought about your motivation, rituals and maybe tried out some new writing practices.

As you embark on your first story (or start of a story) for the course, remember what you've learned about character and about how you can be original in your writing. Do some research if you need to – it is important for creating authenticity in your writing.

In Week 3, you'll come back to the story and learn about the importance of editing and gathering feedback from others. You can move on to Week 3 now.

If studying this week of Start Writing Fiction has inspired you, take a look at the area specifically created for you to explore more about writing fiction on [OpenLearn](#).

Week 3: Writing is editing

Introduction

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Editing is all important. Most writers spend as much, or more, time editing and redrafting as they do writing first drafts. But you can't edit without first of all getting that first draft down.

Once you have a first draft, you have something to improve on. This is where you can rethink what you've done. Change whatever you like. Say things differently, or clarify where necessary. You can improve your writing.

3.1 Reviewing and redrafting

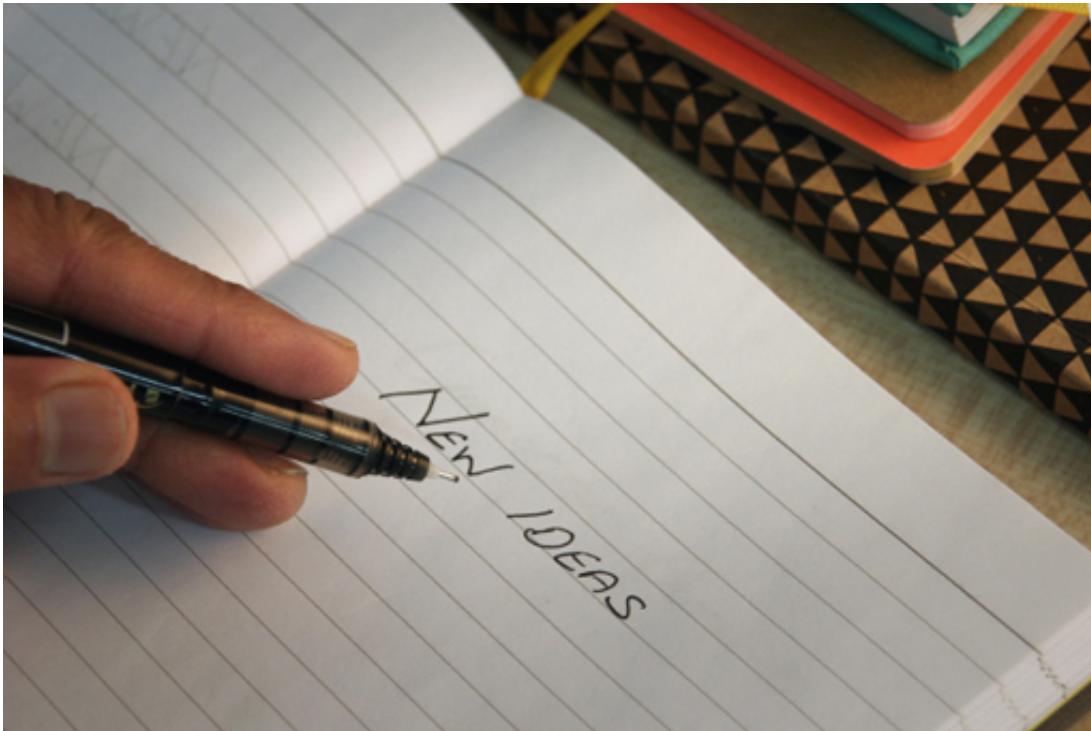


Figure 1

Rereading, reviewing and rewriting your work are crucial and often ongoing activities.

Reread the story that you wrote in Activity 2.5 at the end of Week 2, prompted by something heard on the radio, and check what you've written. Try reading it aloud, as that can help you to become aware of things in the writing, such as its rhythm, elements that you don't notice when you are reading it silently.

Can you see ways in which you could bring the character (or characters) more to life?

Rewrite the story incorporating your new ideas.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Do the characters come across vividly?
- Is any of your word usage surprising? Does it help the reader to 'see' the characters?
- Now that you look at it again do you think any of the descriptions are predictable and dull?
- Are any of the words and phrases you have used too familiar?

3.1.1 Reading work in progress



Figure 2

Remember that you can get your ideas for future stories from all sorts of sources. For example:

- the radio, as you've done with your recent story
- a newspaper article or headline
- a fragment of speech overheard
- a childhood memory
- a smell
- an image
- story prompts from the [Prompt Cloud PDF](#).

Reflect on the following questions, with regard to your radio story:

- Did you think what you wrote was a story?
- What made it a story?
- Did it have a structure?
- How did you go about portraying characters?

We will talk more about what makes up a story, but for now think of it as a narrative with a beginning, middle and end.

3.2 What is editing?

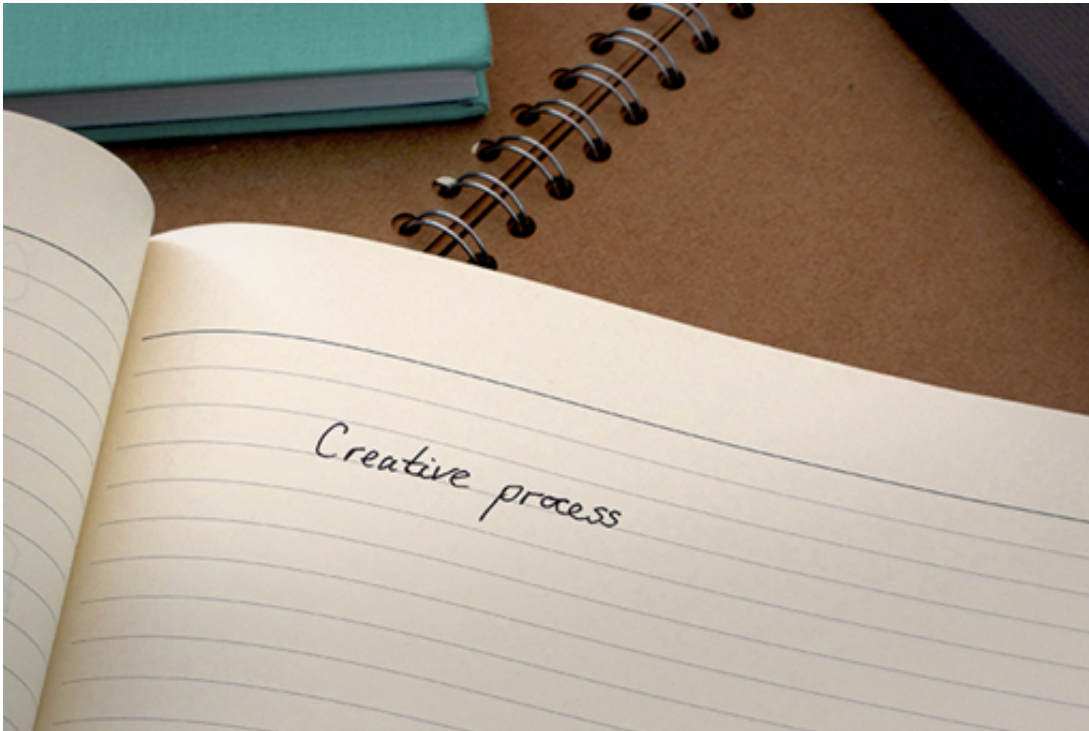


Figure 3

Editing is an important part of the creative process. You will learn some hints and tips for editing your work: when to look at the big picture, when to look at the detail, and when to share your edited writing.

A writer is simply a word for a person who writes. That's all it takes to 'qualify' as a 'writer'. But remember, published stories and novels very seldom emerge fully formed, or perfect, as if by magic. They have undergone many transformations before they reach the shelves. They are rarely, if ever, the raw expression of a writer's output.

The short story writer V.S. Pritchett habitually wrote first drafts that ran to ten times the length of his final draft. This underlines the integral role that editing plays in the business of writing. A draft is just that, and can be revised up until the moment it is ready for publication.

To start writing fiction also means to develop your faculty of self-criticism. A great part of writing fiction is knowing how, why and when you should edit your own work. This is just one of the points at which honesty enters the equation of writing. The more ruthless you can be about your own work, the better it will be.

3.2.1 Editing is your friend

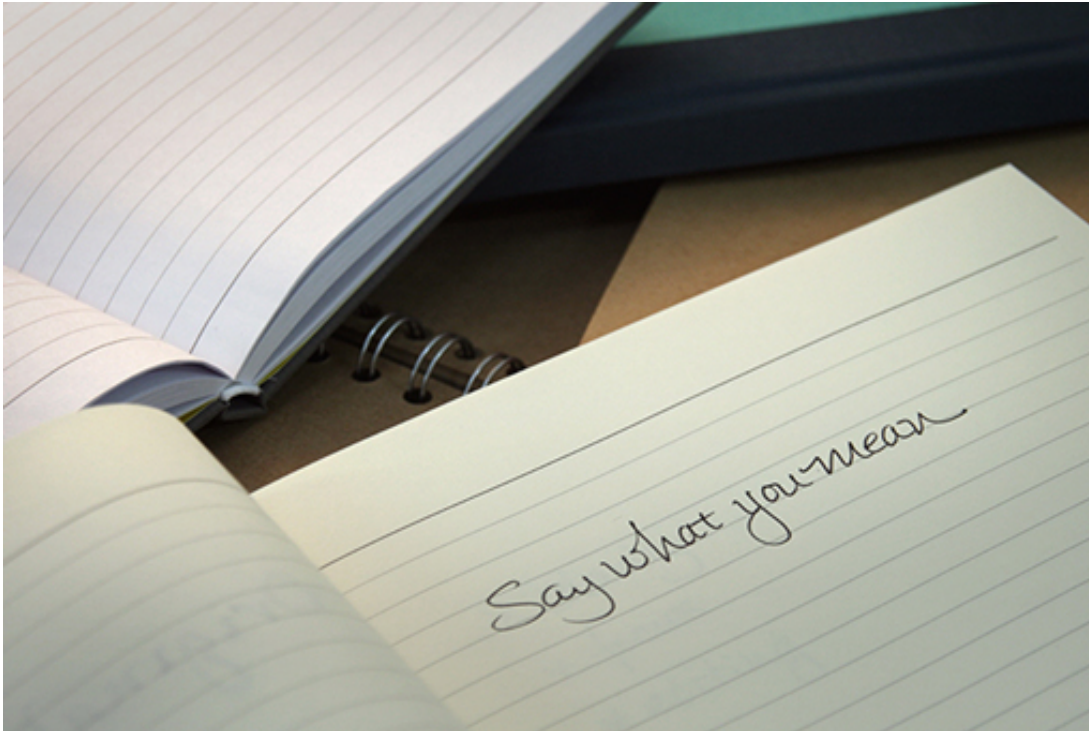


Figure 4

So, what counts as editing and when should you do it?

It's important to balance 'editing' against 'self-censorship'. To write in perfect freedom – to express yourself without self-censorship – is one of the most important aspects of writing fiction. Your aim is to tell a story as you think it should be told, to the best of your ability. Editing, once that piece of work is done, is simply a way of clarifying that intention, of saying more clearly what you mean to say.

For example, you write what you think, at first, is a wonderful opening paragraph. You are very proud of it, understandably so: it is a fine piece of writing. But by the time you've finished the piece, something doesn't 'ring true' about those opening lines. 'But they're so good!' You can't bear to part with them. Ask:

- Do they belong in that story, for sure?
- Are they really what you meant to say, or do you just like the way they sound?

Be ruthlessly self-critical and scrupulously honest at moments such as this. You will develop the ability to say what you mean (and not just like what you say: 'showy' writing is much easier to achieve than good writing).

Remember, editing is your friend! An average piece of writing can become a good piece, with good editing.

3.2.2 Editing practice

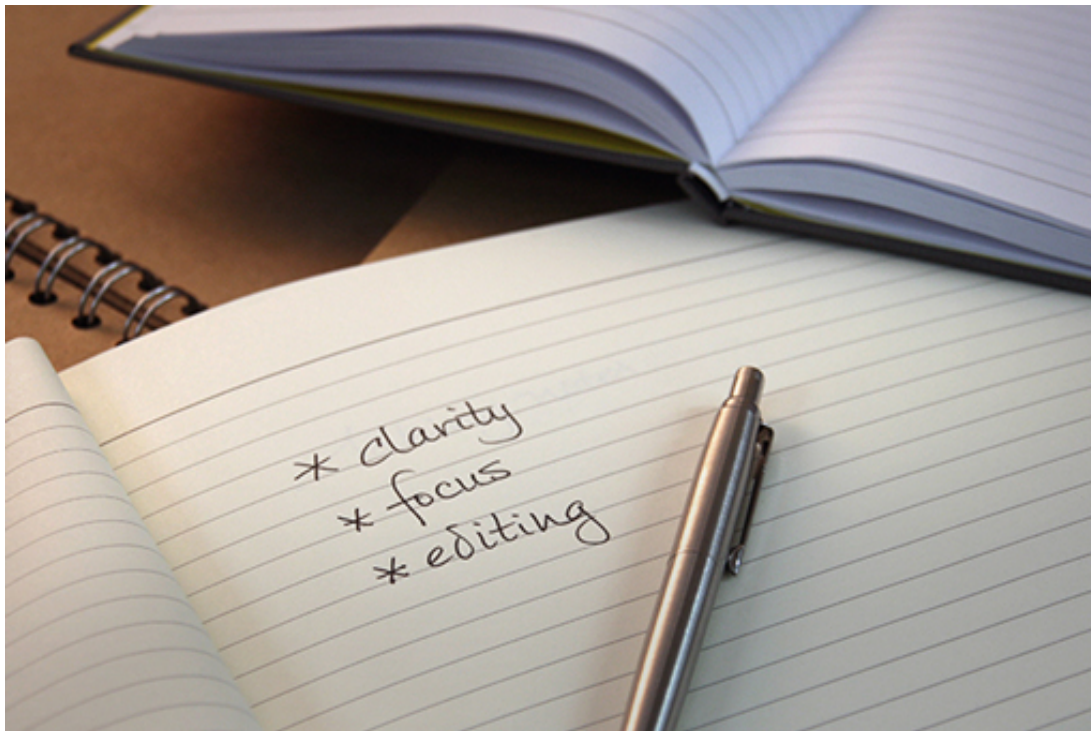


Figure 5

Editing is a practical activity and its benefits are only fully appreciated when you undertake it.

To demonstrate the importance of clarity, focus and the role of editing as part of writing, try the next activity.

Activity 3.1 Have a go at editing

Edit the following passage down to no more than two lines:

The heavy black and blue winter sky groaned awfully with rain clouds that at any moment were really about to fall crashing heavily down upon the street where, because it was rush hour, so many people, wearing all manner of different clothes, hats, shoes, boots, some of them carrying bags, suitcases, briefcases, scampered and strolled about the place as though oblivious to what was just about to happen over their very heads. One of these people was called Hilary and concealed inside her voluminous coat she carried the loaded, snub-nosed gun, and she also seemed to be the only one looking upwards into the tempestuous thundery heavens.

Remember to ask:

- What really matters about this scene?
- What 'adds' something to the scene?
- What merely adds confusion, detracting from the main point?

Discussion

Considering what other writers might cut or keep can help you to understand the core meaning in the passage and the editing process. This is one suggested edited version. It gives you an idea of what might be considered the core content of the passage:

The winter sky was heavy with rain. It was rush hour. Hilary concealed the loaded gun inside her coat.

Your version may not be quite the same. Ours is very short. Compare it with yours to see whether you decided to retain anything that we have cut, and think about the effect of either leaving that element in or taking it out. Think about why we might have cut out some of the elements, and consider how much stronger the short version is.

Remember that editing often occurs at the level of the sentence and is concerned with word order and punctuation, but also at the level of the whole scene, and even chapter. It is important to cut any overuse of words such as 'quite' and 'really', to be aware of any passages that are overwritten, and to ensure clarity of meaning. And then there are such aesthetic considerations as style, voice and rhythm. This brief illustration is focused more on the issues of overwriting, redundant words, and clarity of meaning.

There are two different but equally important skills that a writer needs to develop, skills that sometimes seem contrary: the skill to observe details that can bring a story to life and the skill to cut out extraneous details, elements that don't add to or improve the story.

3.2.3 Editing – big decisions

Editing is a process of decision making. Every writer will make different choices and have different reasons for their choices.

This is the process we followed to cut down the passage.

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The heavy ~~black and blue~~ winter sky ~~groaned awfully~~ with rain clouds that at any moment were really about to fall crashing heavily down upon the street where, because it was rush hour, so many people, wearing all manner of different clothes, hats, shoes, boots, some of them carrying bags, suitcases, breifcases, scampered and strolled about the place as though oblivious to what was just about to happen over their very heads. One of these people was called Hilary and concealed inside her voluminous coat she carried the loaded, snub-nosed gun, and she also seemed to be the only one looking upwards into the tempestuous thundery heavens.

3.2.4 Editing summary



Figure 6

Ernest Hemingway said he could tell he'd had a really great day's writing when even the work he threw away was good. The South African writer Nadine Gordimer describes how she 'used to write three times as much as the work one finally reads.'

Have the courage to edit your own work, even when you might have spent time and energy in producing it. It's better to have written ten drafts of a story and end up with

something you are proud of, than to have had a great idea for a story, but let it go to waste by being nervous about setting it down in case it wasn't perfect first time, or by thinking you need certain skills before you attempt it, or by 'talking it away'.

Remember you don't need to wait to be inspired. You can find all sorts of ways to begin writing, and you can then reflect on what you have written later and start to do the work of selecting what to keep and what to edit out.

After you have written a first draft, interrogate your writing using this editing checklist. Remember that the aim in editing is in many ways the aim in writing: clarity of expression.

Editing checklist

- Is it what you meant to say, really?
- Have you found the best way to convey it?
- Would a particular event really have happened that way?
- Would a particular character definitely use that expression or turn of phrase?
- Does an idea or scene really belong where you've put it, or would the piece be better if that element was cut? Could it be used elsewhere, or on another occasion?
- What's missing from your story? Details or background information?
- Is there enough to engage your reader?
- Do events occur in the best order and are significant events given enough weight, or are they lost beneath less important things? If so, is that what you intended?
- Does it read too slow, or too fast?
- Overall, does the writing convey the right tone – does it create the mood you hoped for?

3.3 Learn through writing



Figure 7

If you don't start to write, you won't write. It sounds like advice which is too obvious to repeat but many people talk a good story or book. Comparatively few begin.

It's important to be bold, to start. Sometimes stories 'keep' – only you know when something is ready to be written. But often stories can be lost by waiting for the ideal moment to write them down.

Remember, unlike many other kinds of work, writing is your training. A doctor trains for years before qualifying; a writer's training is the writing itself. Without writing, a person can't 'become' a writer. To say that a person has 'a great book inside them' might be true, but it isn't saying anything more than that there are great stories everywhere, in everything, wherever you look, just waiting to be told. The trick is to tell them. Only that way do they ever become 'stories'.

Become your own best judge: the aim is to discover your kind of writing.

3.3.1 Generate and share something new

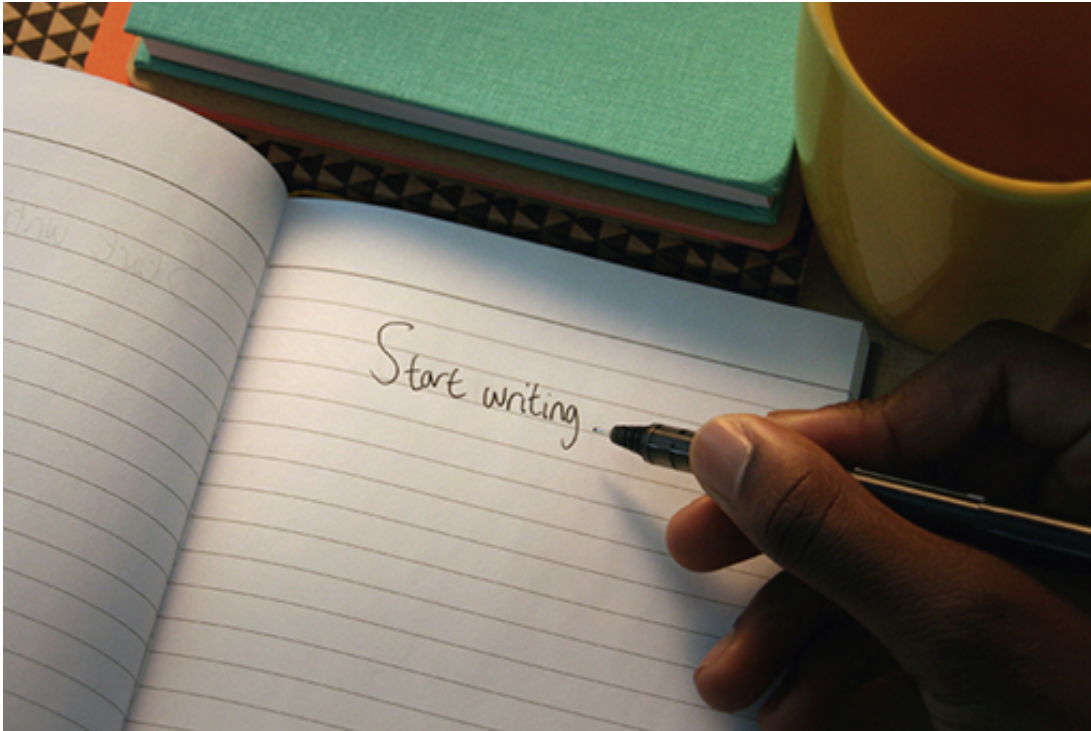


Figure 8

Beginning a new project should be made easier if you have been using your writer's notebook frequently and wisely.

In this section you will generate a new story and share it with others.

Activity 3.2: Generating a new story

Part 1

Look through your notebook to see whether there are any ideas there you might be ready to use for a story. If there are, remind yourself of the things we have already said about getting started. Try to start something new – different from the character sketch and the story prompted by the radio.

If you don't have an idea in your journal you want to develop, try looking at newspaper headlines to see if something sparks off an idea. If you still don't have something that grabs you, try the [Prompt Cloud PDF](#).

Remember that stories are about characters, so once you have an idea for a story make sure you have a strong impression of the characters that will be at the centre of the story.

There is no specific target to meet here. Just start writing and see where it takes you. It might become a story that you want to develop further, and you might carry on working on it. It might be something where you write the first paragraph or two and then decide you don't want to proceed further, and you'd rather try another idea. That's up to you.

Try to write at least 200 words, up to a maximum of 350 words.

Something you work on now could become the basis for a longer story later in the course.

Part 2

Share the start of the story that you wrote in Part 1 with others. It may not be as polished as you would like but getting feedback on your work helps you to improve your writing. Other people will read your work and offer helpful comments.

Remember: if your writing contains graphic material, you should warn people about this.

Guidelines for your posting

You should consider the following aspects when writing, and ask reviewers to read with these points in mind too:

- How was the central character portrayed and was this portrayal clear and interesting?
- What made you think this piece was a story and did you want to read on?
- What were the most, and least, successful aspects of the writing?

In the next section, you will be invited to exchange feedback with other writers.

3.3.2 Commenting on work

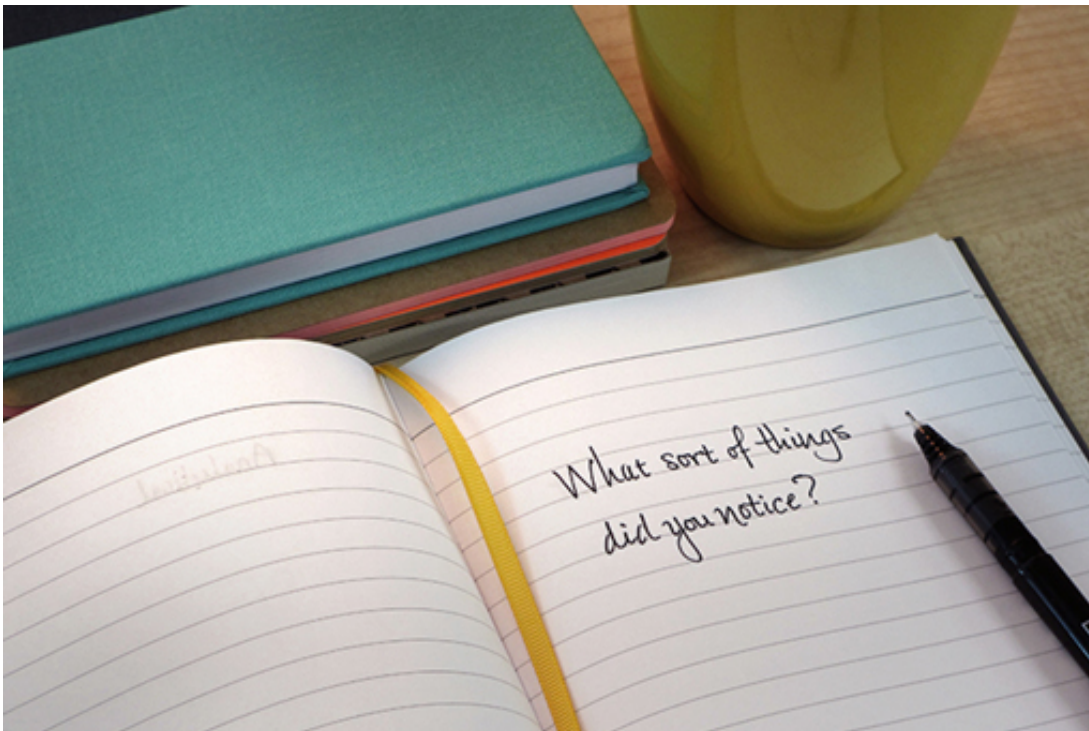


Figure 9

Reading the work of other writers who are trying the same tasks as you can be invaluable. It will speed up the development of your editorial skills.

Activity 3.3: Reading fellow writers' work

Now, if you exchanged your writing, read work by your fellow writers and give some feedback.

- Use the writing guidelines from the previous activity as headings for your comments. These are:
 - How was the central character portrayed and was this portrayal clear and interesting?
 - What made you think this piece was a story and did you want to read on?
 - What were the most, and least, successful aspects of the writing?
- Ensure that you make at least one positive comment and at least one critical comment about each piece.
- Give reasons for your comments, don't just say 'I liked this' or 'I didn't like that'.
- Check the guidance in the [Feedback guidance PDF](#) on giving and receiving review comments.

Exchanging work not only accelerates your writing and editing development but puts you in the privileged position of having a reader pay attention to your work. They will have a reciprocal interest in the work and they will be well-placed to offer objective feedback.

Reading reviews on your own writing

In feedback on your own writing, you will probably have received comments about:

- sentence-level editing, changing word order and using different words
- the portrayal of character, and whether the reader has been able to see the character
- structure and whether the passage works as a story with a beginning, a middle and an end.

Remember the guidance in the Feedback guidance PDF – always pause on any feedback that you receive. Don't plunge straight into editing and rewriting.

If there are several comments about the same element then it usually means there is an issue there. If you want to resist some suggestions and observations, you may well be right – but make sure your reasoning is sound.

3.4 Summary of Week 3

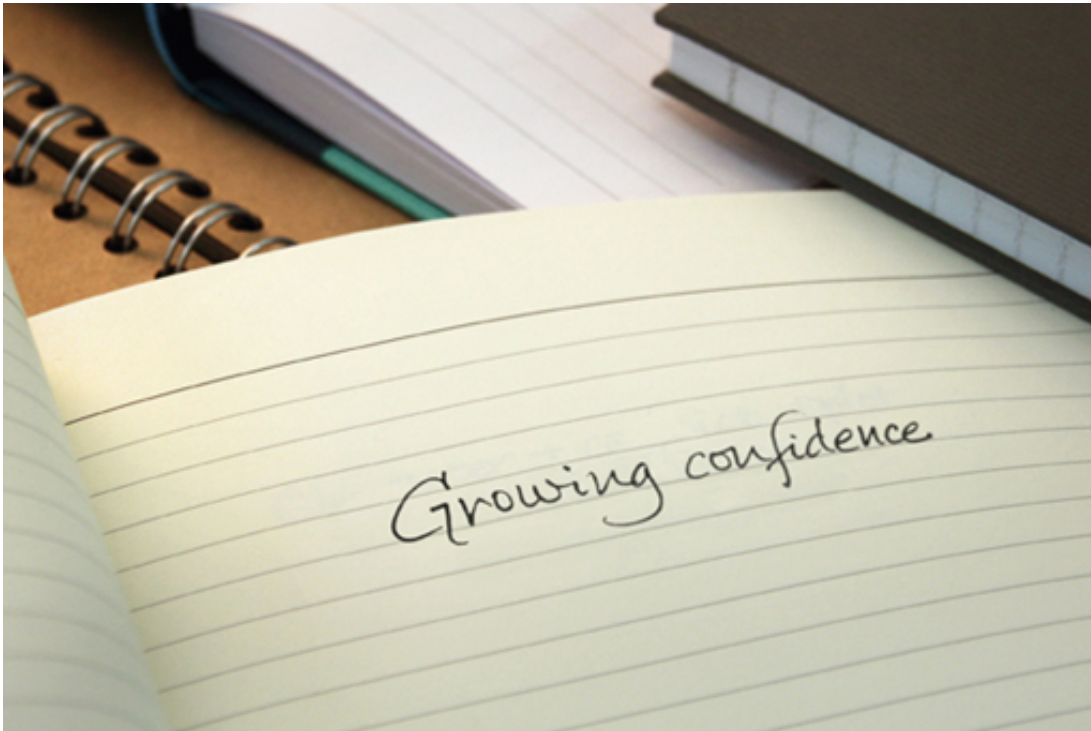


Figure 10

This week you have submitted a story for review and hopefully received feedback on that story. You may also have given feedback to others. Are there any common aspects that you noted in others' work and which reviewers noted in your writing?

The process may have felt quite daunting at first but hopefully it will have encouraged you in your own writing and given you confidence in giving feedback. There'll be another opportunity to take part in this peer review process in Week 5.

Next week, you'll think more about character and developing your plot line. You'll also explore where to find ideas for stories. You can move on to Week 4 now.

If studying this week of *Start writing fiction* has inspired you, take a look at the area specifically created for you to explore more about writing fiction on [OpenLearn](#).

Week 4: Building your story

Introduction

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What have you written in your writer's notebook so far? Find out how other writers use theirs and how you can develop a 'notebook habit'.

Your writer's notebook is a secret space where you can try out your ideas – map them, interrogate them, collect them. A journal can also form a kind of personal 'running commentary' to yourself, on your thoughts about your own work.

In the stories you've written so far, you'll have seen how ideas can come from anywhere. We will now look further at where ideas for stories may come from, and how to make them matter personally to you.

4.1 Why take notes and what to note



Figure 1

By now you should have quite a few things in your writer's notebook, besides the set writing tasks you have undertaken. Your notebook should be a repository for what you collect.

Alongside some of the activities included in this course, your journal might include:

- general notes and sensory observations of the world around you
- things you have seen or heard, felt or read – perhaps passages of other people's writing, or turns of phrase that you admire
- words and word-derivations that are new or interesting to you
- facts that you want to remember
- lines or phrases that you might use in your work
- images: postcards, pictures, photographs that are in some way significant to you, perhaps because they conjure up a scene or story that you might write about
- descriptions or sketches of characters and places you might wish to write about
- notes about periods in recent or distant history that you are interested in
- ideas and plot lines that might be useful in future, or that you are gathering for particular pieces of work.

A single line noted down can prove to be the basis for an entire story or even a novel. Describing her writer's journal, the American writer Joyce Carol Oates says:

It resembles a sort of ongoing letter to myself, mainly about literary matters.
What interests me in the process of my own experience is the wide range of my

feeling. ... after I finish a novel I tend to think of the experience of having written it as being largely pleasant and challenging. But ... the experience is various: I do suffer temporary bouts of frustration and inertia and depression. There are pages in recent novels that I've rewritten as many as seventeen times.

(Plimpton, 1989, p. 367)

Over time, a writer's notebook can act as an anchor to remind you how certain ideas originated, and where you initially meant to take them. It will also form a rich source book for you to draw on, to help to guide you through your work.

Also, for 'writer's block' and the nerves of facing a blank page or screen, a journal can be a great comfort – full of notes, reminders, jokes, special words or word-derivations, leads and prompts to get you started again.

Think of your notebook as being rather like an ongoing map of your writing's progress. You add to it every day, so each day your map improves and becomes more useful to you. Remember, whatever works for you, works.

4.1.1 Research



Figure 2

Writing fiction often involves finding out about things you don't yet know enough about, or checking things you are not sure of. Sometimes you will use your notebook to detail your research. But what research do other writers undertake?

Here novelists Tim Pears, Patricia Duncker and Alex Garland talk about their approaches to research. Do their approaches have anything in common?

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4.1.2 Different approaches to research



Figure 3

As you can see, different writers have differing approaches to research – and you may find a similar variety among any fellow writers. But are there things you have to do?

Consider what the novelists that you've just heard – Tim Pears, Patricia Duncker and Alex Garland – say about research, and note down your thoughts. The relevant questions might start with:

- What are the key areas of research for writing a novel?
- Does life experience have anything to do with research?
- Do you have to undertake research for a novel or story that is set in the present day?
- Are there any dangers in researching for a story? If so, how do you counter these dangers?
- Can you rely on memory if writing about an era within your lifetime?
- What was the difference in attitudes towards research between the three writers?

4.1.3 The notebook habit

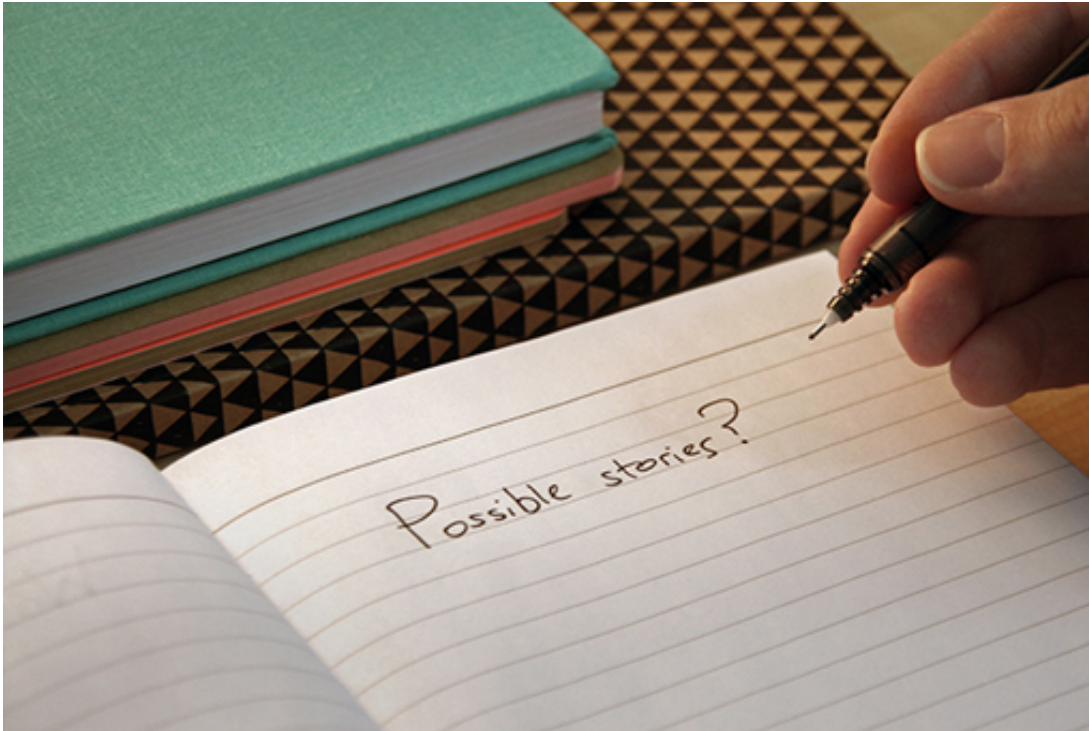


Figure 4

Research might well be one of the uses you have for your notebook. Whether it's research, observations, ideas, your reading or something else, get into the habit of writing something, however short, in your notebook every day.

Activity 4.1 Researching ideas for stories

Looking back over your notes, **either**:

- Find three possible stories that you might be able to draw out of your notes (the ideas can be as sketchy as you like at this point) and research at least one element for each idea. Then develop your journal notes on these ideas, including this research and any relevant sensory details.

or:

- Find one possible story that you might be able to draw out of your notes (similarly, the idea can be as sketchy as you like at this point) and research at least three elements for this idea. Then develop your journal notes on this idea, including this research and any relevant sensory details.

If you don't want to go with any of the ideas in your notebook, you can try using the [Prompt Cloud PDF](#).

These ideas may be developed into stories, or they may not. You may not wish to follow them up now, but might suddenly be inspired by them in years to come, and use them as

the basis for a story then. It doesn't matter whether you ever use them. Keeping ideas 'floating' is what's important.

4.2 What is plot?



Figure 5

How do you get from making notes for a story in your journal to thinking up a suitable plot line? The novelist E.M. Forster (1927) explains this very clearly.

He describes a story as 'a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence' and a plot as 'also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality' (Forster, 1927, p. 87).

For example, 'The king died, and then the queen died' is a story. 'The king died and then the queen died of grief' is a plot.

This is because there is a reason given for the queen dying. In a story, someone dying is not in itself interesting. It is the reason for the death that fascinates the reader, especially if the reason is connected with something that has happened to, or been done by, another character.

Readers are well tuned to guessing and imagining causes just from the details they perceive in the story. With this in mind, even the smallest recorded observations can be relevant.

For example: 'A woman on a bus today carried her Pekinese dog inside her handbag. It had a red bow on its head that matched her sweater.'

This short description of a real person could be the starting point for a fictional character. Imagine:

- Who might she have been?
- Where was she going?
- What did her appearance suggest about her mood or state of mind?
- How old was she?
- How did she live?

In answering these questions you are starting to build a concrete sense of character. You are starting to get a story.

4.2.1 Developing your plot line

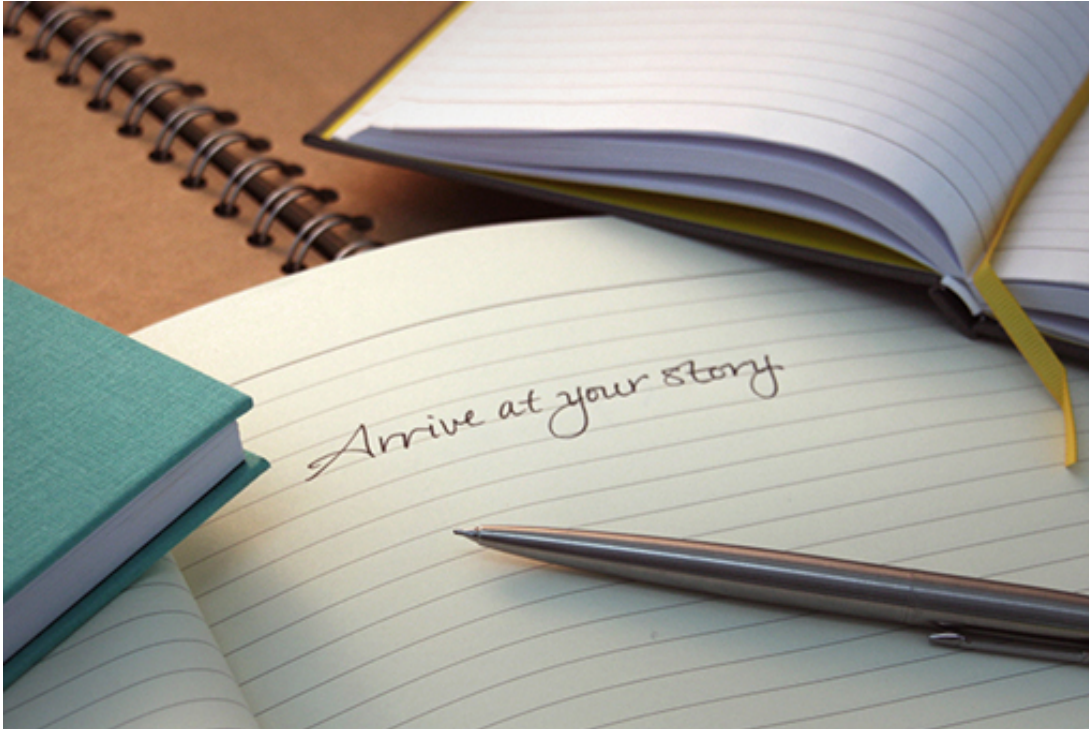


Figure 6

Developing the detail of your character will help you arrive at your story. And discovering causality – what causes your character to do things or to be the way they are – will give you plot. But how do you develop that plot?

Returning to the example:

‘A woman on the bus today carried her Pekinese dog inside her handbag. It had a red bow on its head that matched her sweater.’

Now consider:

- Why was she on the bus?
- Why did she have the dog and where was she taking it?
- Why did she look the way she did?
- Why did the dog have a red bow?

These are not scientific questions: if you wanted to know the correct answer to them, you would have asked her. They are matters for your imagination. Answering them will give you a *plot*.

For example:

- Perhaps she is taking the dog to be put down at the vet's, and is so upset about having to do so that she decides not to drive, and is taking the bus for the first time in ten years.

- Perhaps she's travelling through a dangerous neighbourhood and is now afraid to get off, so stays on the bus until it takes her back to where she lives, which also means that her beloved dog has a reprieve, and when she gets it home she feeds it the prime cut of rib-eye steak she'd intended for herself ... and so on.

4.2.2 What if?



Figure 7

In the example possibilities of how and why the woman happened to be on the bus with her dog, we are asking a question which is essential for writing fiction. This question is – ‘What if?’

Asking ‘What if?’ can help you to get from having an idea about a character you want to write about to developing a plot. For example, you might ask:

- What if at one time the straight-laced schoolteacher worked in the circus?
- What if that charming woman in the sweetshop poisoned her neighbour's cat?
- What if tomorrow I inherited a million pounds, and then what if the next day I lost it?
- What if the characters are not as they first seem?

This ability to ask ‘What if?’ is a habit that can easily be learned. It adds causality and richness to your characters as well as helping you to form a plot.

4.2.3 Writing character

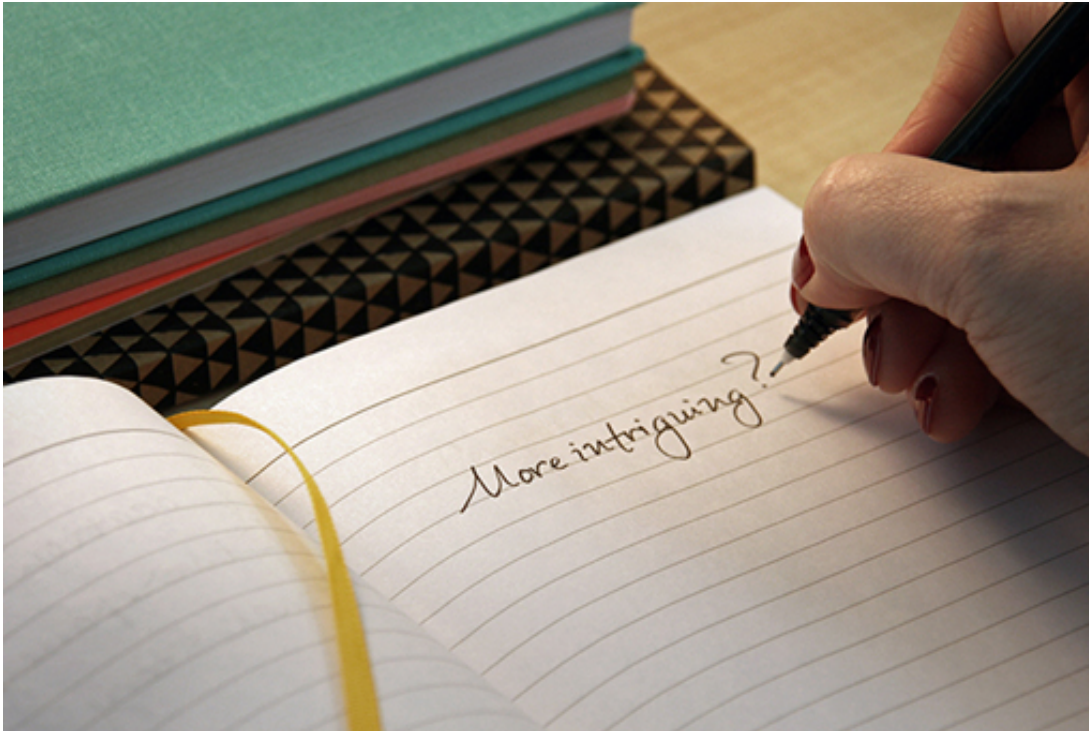


Figure 8

Regularly reviewing past work and any ideas or observations listed in your notebook can help you generate new ideas.

Activity 4.2 Reviewing character ideas

Look back at the possible story idea or ideas that you arrived at in The notebook habit, and review all other story and character ideas you have noted or started so far.

You may or may not have got very far with these but consider whether asking the 'What if?' question might help you to further develop any of them.

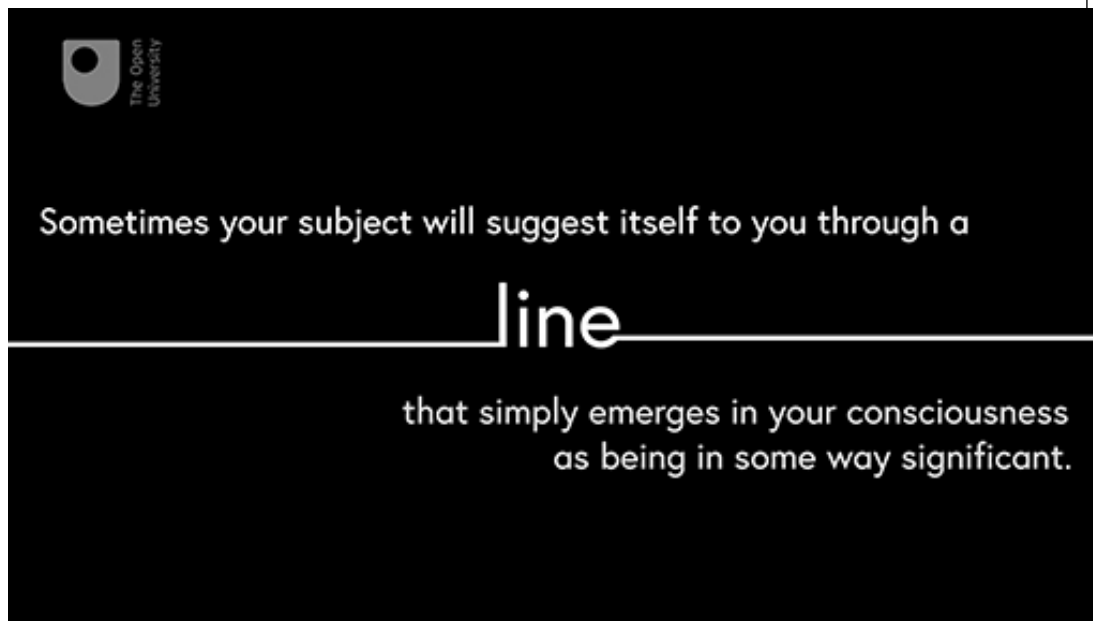
Choose one character and develop it by:

- imagining more detail
- making sure you've done any necessary research
- asking some 'What if?' questions
- imagining some of the reasons surrounding the character's dress, behaviour, speech or actions.

Write a paragraph or two about this character.

4.3 Hooked by lines and images

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'One sentence inspires great novel': it could be a headline. Often the motivating force behind the writing of a story can be an odd line or image that somehow sticks with the writer.

Have you ever found inspiration to write from a single sentence?

What about images? It could be an awe-inspiring sunset, a work of art or simply an imagined scene that just won't leave you.

4.3.1 Hunches that matter



Figure 9

The starting points for stories can come from many different directions. As an ongoing exercise in your journal, keep a note of any lines or images that present themselves to you in this way.

Also, note down a 'menu' of what you consider to be your overall 'concerns'. This exercise aims to help you build up a self-portrait of who you are as a writer, and to help you to become clearer about the kinds of things that matter to you, that are likely to be your overall subject matter or material when you write. Remember, your list will (and should) be highly personal.

For example, it might include:

- my children's safety
- passion for travel
- hatred of liars
- fascination for the movies
- fear of ageing
- interest in local politics
- love of animals.

Over time, your list should extend to include much more detailed descriptions of your concerns.

4.3.2 Writing about personal concerns



Figure 10

Now read the extract from a novel by Fred D'Aguiar, considering what you learn about the characters, the story and what you speculate to be Fred D'Aguiar's concerns. This extract is also available as a [PDF](#) for your convenience.

Fred D'Aguiar – *The Longest Memory*

... Again I stood riveted to the spot as the crowd around my son drifted to the center of the yard where punishments meant to dissuade onlookers from similar activities were staged. My son called his mother. I heard this above the clatter of 250 plantation slaves.

I grabbed the arm of the strongest kin to me, a man close to my son's age, third grandchild of the tenth of my twelve daughters. I told him to run the five miles to the deputy's house since only he could save my son from this public display of savagery. He looked alarmed. I'd forgotten. A slave discovered off the plantation at night was liable to be killed. I told him I would go myself to save my son. He touched my arm, nodded at me and darted into the shadows of the dusk skulking beneath the trees. I watched his back blend with the shadows then melt into them. My son shouted again for his mother. I parted the crowd to get to him.

'She can't come to you my son. I am here for you.'

He saw me and fell silent and dejected. I put myself before Mr Sanders who frowned. 'My son is all I have, sir. Spare him. Let me take his place.'

Mr Sanders laughed aloud, brushed the air in front of his face as if to rid it of a pest and ordered that I be restrained for as long as it took to administer 200 lashes to my son.

When he said the number of lashes an astonished cry rose from the crowd and filled the early evening air. I began to struggle against the grip of two men who simply tightened their hold on me and forced me to my knees. Fires were lit. Each flame conspired with the remaining scraps of light to drive away the ensuing darkness but to no avail. The first lash ripped a hole in my head and I screamed for my son, who fell as silent as the grass and trees. My two remaining daughters cried with their children and grandchildren and begged Mr Sanders for leniency. They begged and cried. The night was torn to ribbons by their grief.

(D'Aguiar, 1995, pp. 24, 26).

4.3.3 Week 4 quiz

The following quiz will encourage you to think further about dramatising concerns.

Complete the [Week 4](#) quiz now.

Open the quiz in a new window or tab then come back here when you've finished.

4.3.4 Reflecting on concerns and ideas



Figure 11

Reflecting on who you are and what sort of material you want to write about is an important and ongoing part of the writing process, not least because you will be more motivated by characters and storylines which embody topics that are important to you.

Activity 4.3 Reviewing your menu of concerns

Review some of the ideas in your notebook and your menu of concerns. Are there any characters or story ideas that match up with any of the concerns listed on your menu? Discuss any of these ideas with your fellow writers.

Don't worry if there seems to be an incongruity between your menu of concerns and the type of characters and story ideas that you are coming up with. In many ways, this can be very interesting.

In some cases, you may be the last to recognise that a story and characters you have created relates to a key personal concern.

4.3.5 Extraordinary versus ordinary



Figure 12

Fiction does not have to be about extraordinary circumstances. In fact, the best fiction is often the fiction that presents familiar concerns in a new and surprising way. Fiction will always be new and surprising if it is truthfully observed.

Raymond Carver writes:

It's possible, in a poem or short story, to write about common-place things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things – a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring – with immense, even startling power. It is possible to write a line of seemingly innocuous dialogue and have it send a chill along the reader's spine – the source of artistic delight, as Nabokov would have it.

(Carver, 1981)

Sometimes stories are about extraordinary situations, of course. When tackling an extraordinary or huge theme, don't try to say everything about everything. Sometimes a single focus on one or a few characters placed in extraordinary circumstances, will give a much larger sense of the whole. No matter how extraordinary the scenario, the reader's primary interest will always be the characters. If you, the writer, don't develop the characters well enough then the reader will lose interest.

4.4 Summary of Week 4



Figure 13

Have you developed a 'notebook habit' yet? What notes have you made that could become a story? A notebook is an important tool for a writer and should be a place you can record interesting uses of language or new ideas.

This week you've thought about where to find stories, and how you might consider using personal topics and thoughts in writing.

Next week you'll discover how to make characters rounded and more interesting. You'll also get the opportunity to test out these character skills by writing a character sketch. You can move on to Week 5 now.

If studying this week of *Start writing fiction* has inspired you, take a look at the area specifically created for you to explore more about writing fiction on [OpenLearn](#).

Week 5: Creating convincing characters

Introduction

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You've already done some work on character and story, and we're now going to develop that work with the help of a writer – Josip Novakovich. Like many novelists nowadays he teaches creative writing and he's also written books on how to write fiction.

Novakovich says this of himself when he started writing: 'I avoided letting anybody cramp my style. However, I think that I avoided advice and workshops a little too long: some lessons that I learned on my own, I could have learned faster from some good advice.'

This sums up what you stand to gain from studying creative writing.

With the help of Novakovich we will be looking at further ways to find and create characters, and at the importance of conflict in your writing.

5.1 Reading Novakovich

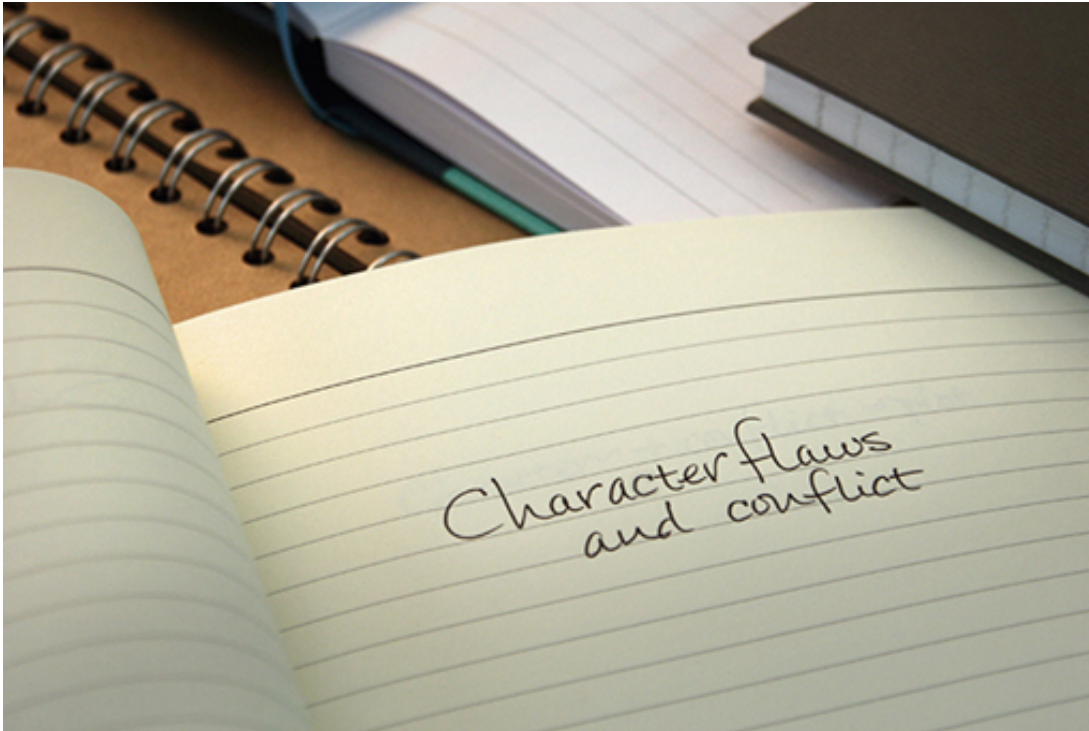


Figure 1

Considering exactly what is meant by character in the context of novels and stories can help you to identify methods for portraying them.

Read the section on character by Josip Novakovich below (the extract is also available as a [PDF](#) for your convenience).

As you read, consider these questions:

- What does Novakovich say about character flaws?
- How important is change to characterisation?
- Do all characters need to change in stories?

Take note of the stories and novels that Novakovich mentions. If you get the chance, take a look at some of these for your future research into the ways that writers use and depict character flaws and conflict.

Josip Novakovich – *Fiction Writer's Workshop*

Character

Most people read fiction not so much for plot as for company. In a good piece of fiction you can meet someone and get to know her in depth, or you can meet yourself, in disguise, and imaginatively live out and understand your passions. The writer William Sloan thinks it boils down to this: 'Tell me about me. I want to be more alive. Give me me.'

If character matters so much to the reader, it matters even more to the writer. Once you create convincing characters, everything else should easily follow. F. Scott Fitzgerald said, 'Character is plot, plot is character.' But, as fiction writer and teacher Peter LaSalle has noted, out of character, plot easily grows, but out of plot, a character does not necessarily follow. To show what makes a character, you must come to a crucial choice that almost breaks and then makes the character. The make-or-break decision gives you plot. Think of Saul on the way to Damascus: While persecuting Christians, he is blinded by a vision; after that, he changes, becomes St. Paul, the greatest proselyte. Something stays the same, however; he is equally zealous, before and after. No matter what you think of the story of Paul's conversion, keep it in mind as a paradigm for making a character.

Of course, not all characters undergo a crucial change. With some characters, their unchangeability and constancy makes a story. In 'Rust', my story about the sculptor-turned-tombstone-maker, everything (the country, family, town) changes, except the character. Even his body collapses, but his spirit stays bellicose and steadfast. Here he is, at work:

He refused to answer any more of my questions. His hands – with thick cracked skin and purple nails from hammer misses – picked up a hammer. Veins twisted around his stringy tendons so that his tendons looked like the emblem for medicine. He hit the broadened head of the chisel, bluish steel cutting into gray stone, dust flying up in a sneezing cloud. With his gray hair and blue stubbly cheeks he blended into the grain of the stone – a stone with a pair of horned eyebrows. Chiseling into the stone, he wrestled with time, to mark and catch it.

But time evaded him like a canny boxer. Letting him cut into rocks, the bones of the earth, Time would let him exhaust himself.

Seven years later I saw him. His face sunken. His body had grown weaker. Time had chiseled into his face so steadily that you could tell how many years had passed just by looking at the grooves cutting across his forehead. But the stubbornness in his eyes had grown stronger. They were larger, and although ringed with milky-gray cataracts, glaringly fierce.

Whether or not there's a change in you, character is not the part of you that conforms, but rather, that sticks out. So a caricaturist seeks out oddities in a face; big jaws, slanted foreheads, strong creases. The part of the character that does not conform builds a conflict, and the conflict makes the story. Find something conflicting in a character, some trait sticking out of the plane, creating dimension and complexity. Make the conflict all-consuming, so that your character fights for life. Stanley Elkin, author of *The Dick Gibson Show*, emphasized the need for struggle this way: 'I would never write about someone who is not at the end of his rope.'

Think of the basic character conflicts in successful stories. 'The Necklace' by Guy de Maupassant: Mme. Loisel, unreconciled to her lower-class standing, strives to appear upper class, at all costs. Out of that internal conflict ensues the tragedy of her working most of her adult life to pay for a fake necklace.

‘The Girls in Their Summer Dresses’ by Irwin Shaw: Though married and in love with his wife, a young man is still attracted to other women.

In Henry James’ ‘The Beast in the Jungle’: John Marcher waits for some extraordinary passion to take hold of him; he dreams of it so much that he does not notice he is in love with May Bertram, who is at his side all along. Only when she dies, of neglect, does he realize it.

In ‘The Blue Hotel’ by Stephen Crane: The Swede, visiting a small town in rural Nebraska, imagines that he is in the wild west and consequently sets himself against a bar of ordinary people whom he imagines as gamblers and murderers.

In all these stories, characters suffer from a conflicting flaw. Aristotle called these character flaws *hamartia* – usually interpreted as ‘tragic flaw’ (most often *hubris* or arrogance) when we talk about tragedies. Sometimes, however, a flaw may not lead to disaster, but to a struggle with a subsequent enlightenment. (St. Paul’s zeal, for example, leads him to an epiphany.)

A flaw could result also from an excessive virtue. Look at the opening of Michael Kohlhaas by the early nineteenth-century German writer Heinrich von Kleist:

Michael Kohlhaas ... owned a farm on which he quietly earned a living by his trade; his children were brought up in the fear of God to be industrious and honest; there was not one of his neighbors who had not benefited from his goodness and fair-mindedness – the world would have had every reason to bless his memory, if he had not carried one virtue to excess. But his sense of justice turned him into a robber and a murderer.

Since his horses were abused at a border crossing between two principalities, and he could not get a just compensation in courts, Kohlhaas takes justice into his hands and burns down the castle where the horses suffered. In addition, he burns the city of Dresden, which protected the offenders. His sense of justice provokes a war. His uncompromising virtue may amount to vice – certainly it’s a flaw, the plot-generating flaw.

(Novakovich, 1995, pp. 48–50)

5.1.1 Character and plot



Figure 2

The dictum that ‘character is plot, plot is character’, attributed, by Novakovich, to F. Scott Fitzgerald in the extract that you read in the previous section, is a familiar one, similar to Shakespeare’s ‘Character is destiny’ (from *King Lear*).

We have already begun to think about how to turn ideas about character into ideas for a plot. Novakovich further develops these thoughts.

This is not to say that what happens to characters is inevitable or predetermined. It’s simply that particular characters seek or attract certain events or encounters.

If you start by building a strong sense of your main character or characters, then add a dilemma, challenge or conflict, you will automatically be generating your plot. Starting the other way around, with a chain of events into which you then fit characters, can often be more difficult and less convincing.

Character + conflict = plot

Apply this formula when building stories. See if it works for you.

5.1.2 Revisit your journal



Figure 3

Look back through characters you have developed in your journal. You may have already thought of flaws and conflicts for your characters.

Find one or more characters now and give these characters a dilemma or a conflict. Does this give more of a story centred on these characters?

Remember that conflicts in this context don't have to be monumental – they don't have to be wars, murders, deaths and betrayals (though they might be). They can be relatively domestic matters, but in the context of a particular character's life they can take on monumental proportions.

5.2 Round and flat characters



Figure 4

Stereotypes can be helpful when we start thinking about creating characters. But developing characters, giving them unexpected contradictions and conflicts, helps to create characters that are living people, not just types or caricatures.

But what about minor characters? How deeply do peripheral characters have to be imagined? Do all characters have to be rounded?

Read Novakovich's section on 'Round and flat characters' below (also available as a [PDF](#) for your convenience). The 'above examples' in the opening sentence refer to the characters discussed in the previous section on characters that you looked at in Reading Novakovich.

- What does Novakovich say that most round characters possess?
- What are typical features of flat characters?
- Are flat characters okay in some circumstances?
- Are all stereotypes necessarily bad?

Round and flat characters

Most of the characters in the above examples could be called round characters because they have three dimensions, like a ball. These characters are complex, possessing conflicting traits. Mme. Loisel is both frivolous and responsible. The Swede is paranoid yet insightful. John Marcher is sensitive yet callous. In writing, you must not oversimplify –that is, create flat characters. (It's all right to have flat characters as part of a setting but not as part of an interactive community, the cast of your story.)

Flat characters have few traits, all of them predictable, none creating genuine conflicts. Flat characters often boil down to stereotypes: fat, doughnut-eating cop; forgetful professor; lecherous truck driver; ... shifty-eyed thief; anorexic model.

Using these prefab characters can give your prose a semblance of humor and quickness, but your story featuring them will have about as much chance of winning a contest as a prefab apartment in a competition of architects. Even more damaging, you will sound like a bigot. As a writer you ought to aspire toward understanding the varieties of human experiences, and bigotry simply means shutting out and insulting a segment of population (and their experiences) by reducing them to flat types.

But can you have a character without types? What would literature be without gamblers or misers? The answer, I believe, is simple: Draw portraits of misers, but not as misers – as people who happen to be miserly. And if while you draw misers as people you feel that you fail to make characters but do make people, all the better. Ernest Hemingway said, 'When writing a novel a writer should create living people; people, not characters. A character is a caricature.' So, give us people ('Give me me.'). Let the miser in me come to life – and blush – reading your story.

(Novakovich, 1995, p. 51)

5.2.1 Enriching stereotypes



Figure 5

Recalling the real life characters in our video Keeping track of useful details, do any of these suggest a stereotype to you?

If so, can you think of a way in which you might develop such characters beyond stereotype?

Novakovich suggests that showing the contradictions in characters is one way of making them 'round'. Taking a stereotype and portraying it in a way that goes against the usual expectations is an effective way of making them more complex.

For example:

- the bullying headmaster with a tender sentimental side
- the meticulous manager who lives in a messy house
- the shy librarian who goes bungee-jumping
- the habitual flirt who avoids relationships.

5.2.2 Talking more than types



Figure 6

Discussing how stereotypes or flat characters might be made more round can be interesting, not least because it can open your eyes to how stereotypes are commonly perceived and how perceptions can be subtly altered.

Think up some examples of stereotypes that might be made less stereotypical – less flat and more round – by adding an aspect which is contradictory.

5.2.3 Challenging expectations



Figure 7

The challenge now is to write your stereotype in a more complicated fashion. Gauging your characters in terms of stereotypes and considering ways to make them more complex, and offering more nuanced detail about them, will help make your characters more life-like.

Activity 5.1 Creating a complex character

Part 1

Write a brief scene, around 300–500 words, in your notebook, in which you portray a character in a complex way, going against the usual expectations for such a character.

You could:

- take one of the stereotypes mentioned by Novakovich (shifty-eyed thief, forgetful professor, etc.)
- or use one of your own
- or use one of the examples listed in Enriching stereotypes (headmaster, manager, librarian or flirt).

Part 2

Consider the character scene you have just written, and share your thoughts with other writers if you can.

Here are some questions to consider and/or discuss:

- What sorts of stereotypes did you use?
- What sorts of methods did you and other writers use to make the character go against expectations?
- Do you, and other writers, think all of these methods were successful or did some characters remain typical?
- What were the most and least successful methods?
- Which stereotypes were used most commonly as starting points?

5.3 Using yourself



Figure 8

Explore various sources for new fictional characters – where do they come from and how are they developed?

You've already done some work on how and where to find and research your characters. Here novelists talk about how they have used themselves in their fiction, often as a starting point for the creation of someone very different.

Audio content is not available in this format.

As you're listening to Abdulrazak Gurnah, Michèle Roberts, Monique Roffey and Alex Garland, make a note of any approaches to finding characters that:

- are similar to your own
- seem quite different but which you might like to try.

5.3.1 Finding and developing fictional characters

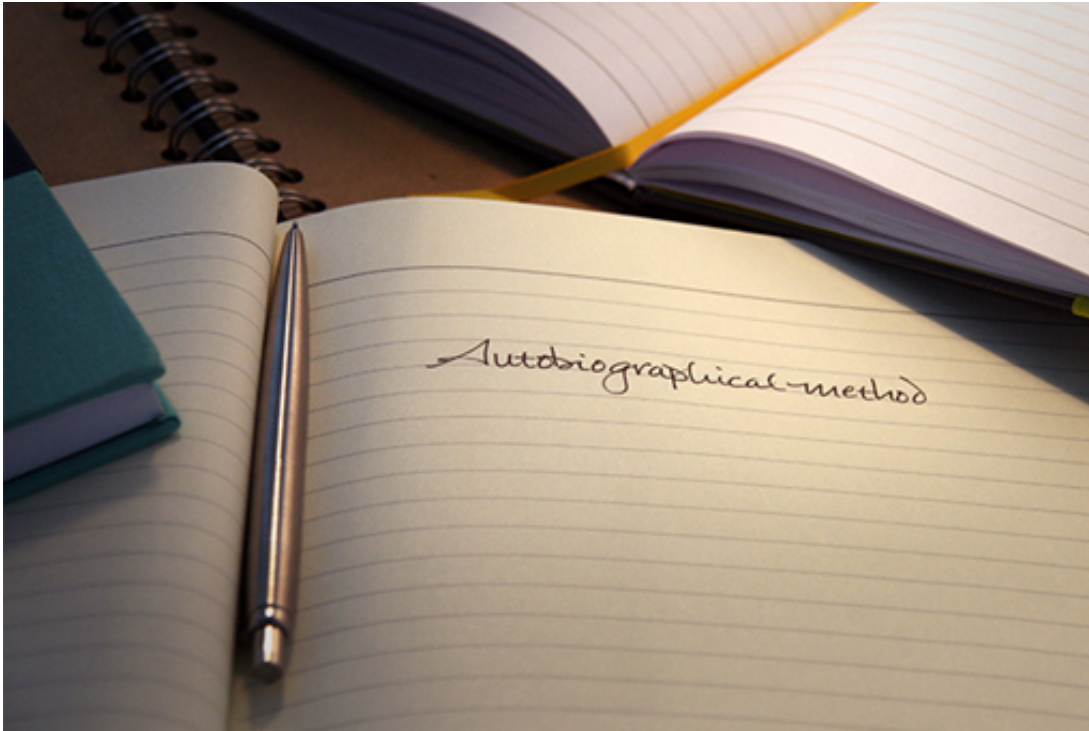


Figure 9

The methods of creating characters suggested by Gurnah, Roberts and Roffey may be familiar to you. Novakovich calls this method the 'autobiographical method'. But, according to him, it isn't the only method of finding characters.

Read Novakovich's section 'Sources of characters' below. The extract is also available as a [PDF](#) for your convenience. Here he outlines methods of finding and developing fictional characters.

- Compare his approaches to the approaches you've adopted so far.
- What are his four main methods?

Sources of characters

Where do you find fictional people?

You can completely make them up, using psychology textbooks, astrology charts, mythology, the Bible or, simply, your imagination. This is the *ideal method* – ideal in a sense that you work from a purely intellectual creation, an idea about a character whom you have not observed and who is not you. Although by using this method you don't draw from people you know to make your characters, you must speak of real passions, and each character must appear like a real person. *Real person* is a bit of a contradiction in terms because *persona*, the Latin root for *person*, means 'mask'. We usually take a mask to be the 'unreal', phony part of a person. But wearing a mask at a carnival can help you live out your true passions that otherwise, due to social

pressures, you keep in check. Fiction is a carnival. So give us real passions with good masks, and everybody will be fair game! Make up character masks, release dramatic conflicts beneath them, and you will create startling people, such as you would like, or fear, to meet.

The mother of all methods – though not necessarily the one you should use most – is the *autobiographical method*, for it is through your own experience that you grasp what it is to be a person. Because of this, you are bound, at least to some extent, to project yourself into the fictional characters you render by any other method. Many writers project themselves into all the characters they portray. This is, metaphorically speaking, the fission approach: an atom may be split into several, during which an enormous amount of energy is released. Fyodor Dostoyevski split his personality into many fictional ones, all of them as temperamental as he. Mel Brooks, the comedy writer and movie director, thinks this is the primary way to write: 'Every human being has hundreds of separate people living under his skin. The talent of a writer is his ability to give them their separate names, identities, personalities, and have them relate to other characters living with him.'

In the *biographical method*, you use people you have observed (or researched) as the starting points for your fictional character. This seems to be the most popular

method. Despite legal limitations on the biographical method, don't shut down this basic source of fictional characters. Hemingway said that if he explained the process of turning a real-life character into a fictional one, it would be a handbook for libel lawyers. The notion that writers work this way will keep some people quiet around you lest you broadcast their secrets. For a long while it irritated me that my older brother would not believe that I was becoming a writer; and now that he does, it irritates me even more because he does not tell me anything about himself. To find out about him, I talk to our middle brother, and as soon as my older brother finds out that that's how it works, he probably won't talk to him either.

Most fictional characters are directly or at least indirectly drawn from life. E.M. Forster, author of *A Passage to India*, said: 'We all like to pretend we don't use real people, but one does actually. I used some of my family ... This puts me among the large body of authors who are not really novelists, and who have to get on as best they can.' (By the way, most novelists are not really novelists, and they must get on as best they can. Nobody is born with this stuff, and hardly anybody becomes quite secure in the craft. I think that's comforting: Novelists are regular people, like you and me.)

Using the biographical method, writers often compose their characters from the traits of several people. To express it with another term from nuclear physics, this is the fusion approach: You fuse character traits the way you fuse atoms. Lillian Hellman, author of *Pentimento*, supports this view of making fictional characters: 'I don't think you start with a person. I think you start with parts of many people. Drama has to do with conflict in people, with denials.' She looks for conflicts in real people and gives these conflicts to her fictional characters, whose traits she gets from other people.

The fourth way to create fictional characters is the *mixed method*. Writers frequently combine the biographical and the ideal methods since there's a limit to relying on direct knowledge of characters. In part, this stems from our

inability to know people in depth. Somerset Maugham, author of *Of Human Bondage*, said: 'People are hard to know. It is a slow business to induce them to tell you the particular thing about themselves that can be of use to you.' Unless you are a psychiatrist or a priest, you probably will not find out the deep problems of the people around you. That does not mean you can't use some aspects of the people you know. But soon you must fill in the gaps, and let's hope that then you will create a character independent from the real-life model. You may use ideas and imagination, or it may happen spontaneously, as it apparently did to Graham Greene, author of *The Human Factor*, who said: 'One gets started and then, suddenly, one cannot remember what toothpaste they use ... The moment comes when a character does or says something you hadn't thought about. At that moment he's alive and you leave it to him.' If your character begins to do something different from what the real-life precedent would do, encourage this change, and forget about the real-life model.

Soon you should have someone answering to the necessities of your plot and conflicts, not to the memory of the person you started with.

The ideal to strive for is a character who will come to life seemingly on his own. It will no longer be the person from life outside the novel that served as a starting point, but a fictional one, who not only is there to be written about, but who, in an optimal case, writes for you. Erskine Caldwell expressed this blessed autonomy of fictional characters: 'I have no influence over them. I'm only an observer, recording. The story is always being told by the characters themselves.'

Not all writers give their characters autonomy and allow them to dictate what to write down. John Cheever said: 'The legend that characters run away from their authors – taking up drugs, having sex operations, and becoming president – implies that the writer is a fool with no knowledge or mastery of his craft. This is absurd.' Of course, Cheever believed in his method and distrusted the methods of other authors. I think it's silly when a writer assumes that his method is the method for all writers. However, it is good to learn what approaches exist, to try them all, and to see which works best for you.

But one principle about constructing characters can be stated unequivocally. Whether your characters attain autonomy or not, whether they come from you or from Greek myths, the more you get to know them, the better you will work with them.

(Novakovich, 1995, pp. 51–4)

5.3.2 Week 5 quiz

The following quiz will encourage you to think about four ways create to characters.

Complete the [Week 5](#) quiz now.

Open the quiz in a new window or tab then come back here when you've finished.

5.3.3 Generating and sharing a character sketch

‘Write what you know’ is a familiar piece of advice often given to writers. But ‘what you know’ can expand through imagination and sympathetic identification with others who are not like you at all.

This is similar to what actors do – they are not confined to ‘playing themselves’ – and neither are writers. But, as Novakovich says, there are other methods for creating your characters besides the autobiographical approach.

Activity 5.2: Trying a new approach to the character sketch

Part 1

Choose one of the methods below, one which is least familiar to you, one you have never tried before:

- Imagine a character very like you but give them a dramatic external alteration. You might make the character the opposite sex, for example, or make them significantly older or younger. You choose.
- Imagine a character very like someone you have observed – but give them a dramatic external alteration. You might make the character the opposite sex, for example, or make them significantly older or younger. You choose.
- Create a character purely on the basis of your imagination or intellectual conception (as described by Novakovich as the ‘ideal method’). Remember, don’t be misled by the term ‘ideal’ – this character won’t necessarily be morally good or well behaved.
- Create a character using any of the above methods in combination, as in what Novakovich calls the ‘mixed method’.

Now write a brief character sketch, around 300–500 words, in which you reveal certain aspects of the character. Use a third-person narrator (‘he’ or ‘she’). Here are some things you might like to include in your sketch but this is not an exclusive list – you may not include all of these aspects; you may include other aspects:

- appearance
- occupation
- voice
- feelings
- current circumstances
- attitudes
- hopes and fears.

Part 2

Share your sketch with some other writers or readers, and ask for their review and feedback.

Remember: if your writing contains graphic material, you should warn your readers.

Part 3

A reader has an intimate relationship with the characters in a story or novel. The reader's reaction to your character matters.

Read and think about the comments you receive about your character sketch, and ask these questions:

- Has more than one person made the same point about an aspect of the writing?
- Is there anything that people think worked better than you did?
- Is there something you thought worked well that someone else has found less successful?
- Has anyone said something about it that has surprised you?

Reflect on these comments and decide what you agree with and what you are not sure about. Do any of the comments help you to think about how you could change the writing for the better?

Remember: the point of obtaining feedback on your work, and discussing work with fellow writers, is to help you to think about how to improve your writing.

5.4 Summary of Week 5

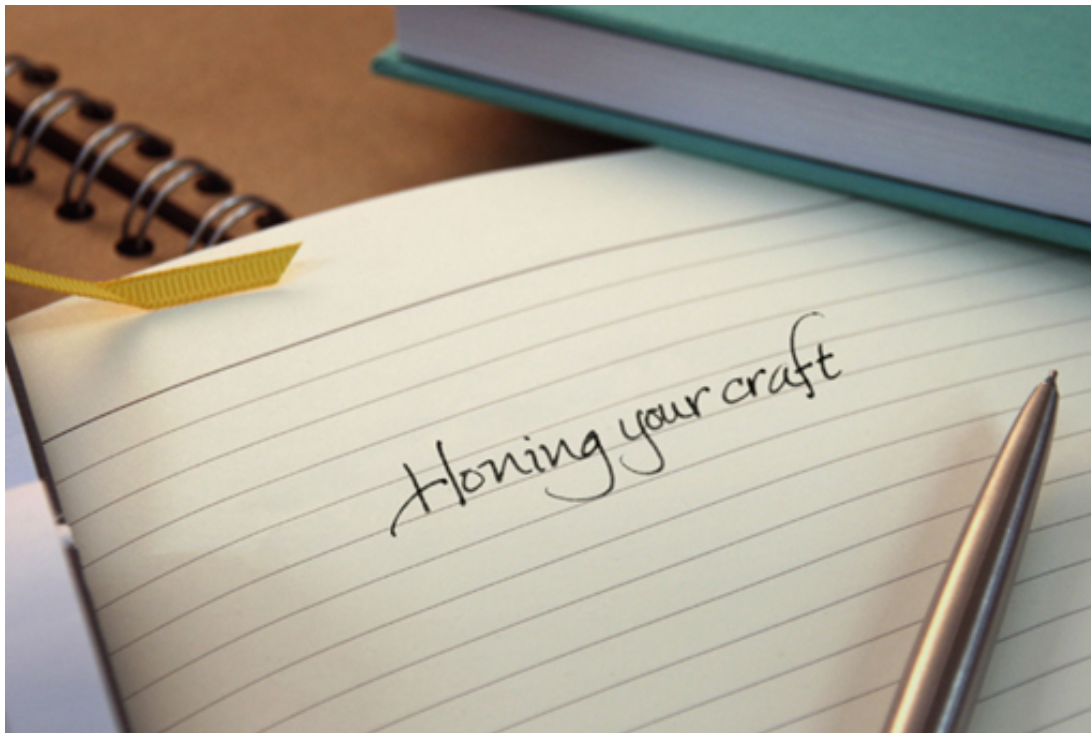


Figure 10

Character plus conflict equals plot. Novakovich suggests that character must come first and that it is a character's contradictions and flaws that naturally bring out plot.

This week you will have written a character sketch and may have already received feedback on it from your fellow writers. This process will help you to hone convincing characters who will matter to the reader.

In Week 6, you'll discover how to develop your characters, look at great examples from other writers and you'll write the first draft of your final story. You can move on to Week 6 now.

If studying this week of *Start writing fiction* has inspired you, take a look at the area specifically created for you to explore more about writing fiction on [OpenLearn](#).

Week 6: Developing and portraying characters

Introduction

Video content is not available in this format.



You have now gathered a raft of methods for finding and creating characters, and seen how conflict can help these characters become great story material. And, just as there are different ways of finding and creating characters, you're now going to look at ways of developing those characters.

How do you get to know them better – and then reveal the subtle nuances of that knowledge to your reader?

This week you'll be reading more from Novakovich on character development, and how to portray characters and reveal their secrets to your reader.

6.1 Ways of developing characters



Figure 1

Audio content is not available in this format.

You've already discovered that learning about the approaches other writers take can be helpful.

Here novelists discuss how they develop their fictional characters using a mixture of methodical research, accident and empathy.

As you're listening to Tim Pears, Monique Roffey, Alex Garland and Louis de Bernières, make a note how you might develop main characters and how much work goes into differentiating between relatively minor characters.

6.1.1 Talking about characters



Figure 2

Note down some of the salient points made by Pears, Roffey, Garland and de Bernières:

- Which ways of working on characters seem most familiar to you?
- Which seem very different or most difficult?
- Is there a type of character who would present difficulties for you to work on?
- Try this different or difficult method with a character in your notebook.

6.1.2 Building a new character



Figure 3

Learning as much as you can about your characters is important, even if all that you learn doesn't make it into the eventual story.

Monique Roffey is not alone in collecting information for character outlines. This is what Novakovich says about writers working with a character (this extract is also available as a [PDF](#) for your convenience)

Working with character

To work with a character, you might need to sketch it in several ways. You could start with this questionnaire (or make one up for yourself): Name? Age? Place of birth? Residence? Occupation? Appearance? Dress? Strengths? Weakness? Obsessions? Ambition? Work habits? Hobbies? Illness? Family? Parents? Kids? Siblings? Friends? Pets? Politics? Tics? Diet? Drugs? Favorite kinds of coffee, cigarettes, alcohol? Erotic history? Favorite books, movies, music? Desires? Fears? Most traumatic event? Most wonderful experience? The major struggle, past and present?

If you give quick, spontaneous answers, you might surprise yourself with the character that emerges. Don't worry if this works like a Rorschach blot, if it reveals something about you. You might do it in a silly way, have fun, and still get an idea for a character. And you might do it quite thoughtfully, in relation to your plot, if you've chosen one. (Let's say, your plot involves a son who gambles away his patrimony, until he becomes a father, and then works so hard to leave his son with a patrimony that he doesn't spend any time with him, and his son disowns him. You must devise character traits that would make him

plausible.) If you don't have a plot yet, some of the answers to these questions, particularly the last one – the character's major struggle – might give you ideas.

Once you know almost enough – you hardly ever know enough – about the character, test her out. Portray her.

(Novakovich, 1995, pp. 54–5)

In your notebook, try Roffey's and Novakovich's methods of building character outlines to flesh out your character. See how much you can discover about them.

Use headings such as these, or Novakovich's, for your character outline – or, as he suggests, make up your own:

- **Physical/biological:** age, height, size, state of health, assets, flaws, sexuality, gait, voice.
- **Psychological:** intelligence, temperament, happiness/unhappiness, attitudes, self-knowledge, unconscious aspects.
- **Interpersonal/cultural:** family, friends, colleagues, birthplace, education, hobbies, beliefs, values, lifestyle.
- **Personal history:** major events in their life, including the best and the most traumatic times.

Don't write any more than outline notes for the moment. You will use this character profile later so make sure you know where to find it.

You can use this as an ongoing method – creating a profile with headings such as these – and it will help you to research and build your characters.

6.1.3 Revealing characters



Figure 4

Finding sources for your characters, methods of developing them and getting to know them better, is all very well. But you then have to find ways of portraying your characters for your reader.

Read what Novakovich (Novakovich, 1995, pp. 65–66) has to say about portraying a character in the next section ‘Portraying a character’. This extract is also available as a [PDF](#) for your convenience. This outlines some prominent approaches.

As you read the extract, note down:

- the main methods of portraying character
- any methods that you haven’t tried.

Try out some of those methods in your notebook.

Extract: Portraying a character

The way you present a character is at least as important as where you get the character. Fleshing out your characters in various ways may take up most of the story. So if you learn how to make your characters act on a stage, in your setting, you’ll certainly be able to write stories. In this section you’ll find a variety of ways to portray a character.

Summary

You can tell us outright what your fictional characters are like and what they do. If you answered the questionnaire at the end of the previous section, you have a rough character summary. Link the character traits that strike you as the most

important ones, and you'll have a complete character summary. Here's a classic summary from *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes:

This gentleman, in the times when he had nothing to do – as was the case for most of the year – gave himself up to the reading of books of knight errantry; which he loved and enjoyed so much that he almost entirely forgot his hunting, and even the care of his estate.

He so buried himself in his books that he spent the nights reading from twilight till daybreak and the days from dawn till dark; and so from little sleep and much reading, his brain dried up and he lost his wits.

Cervantes goes on with the summary for several pages, but I think this excerpt gives you an idea of how summary works. We find out Don Quixote's work and leisure habits, hobbies and passions, and the consequences of pursuing these – his obsession with books results in his illness, madness.

The advantage of this method is its simplicity and readability: The writer quickly focuses on the main character's conflict and supplies the background we need to know. You clearly set up expectations for what follows if you use this method in or near the beginning of your story. Unless you botch the summary, your reader will easily understand what the main character traits and conflicts are about.

The disadvantage to this method is that you are bound to tell rather than show what your character is like – this method makes it hard to see and hear the character. While the summary goes on, no dramatic action, no dialogue, takes place. We are waiting. Still, the character summary is often worth risking; after you orient the reader clearly and quickly, you will not need to stall the dramatic action (in order to supply the background) once it begins to take place.

Here's another example of how summary works, from *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway. See how quickly we learn the character's main concerns:

Robert Cohn was once middleweight boxing champion of Princeton. Do not think that I am very much impressed by that as a boxing title, but it meant a lot to Cohn. He cared nothing for boxing, in fact he disliked it, but he learned it painfully and thoroughly to counteract the feeling of inferiority and shyness he had felt on being treated as a Jew at Princeton. There was a certain inner comfort in knowing he could knock down anybody who was snooty to him, although, being very shy and a thoroughly nice boy, he never fought except in the gym.

This is the opening of the novel. There's no scene for us to visualize, but we receive the basic outline of the character's psychology and motivation. Later, we'll hear the character speak, see him act, but for now, we have some guiding ideas about him (and the novel), which will help us understand what follows.

If this approach strikes you as too much 'telling,' try to show all the information in a dramatic scene, and you'll realize that you'll need at least several pages to do it. Since the action Hemingway is concerned with is not in the past but in the dramatic present (which will follow), to go back into the past dramatically would dissipate the novel's focus. The summary gives us the relevant aspects of the

past, so we can stick with the dramatic present. While it's not the most graceful method, it's certainly useful.

Repeated action or habit

This is the most common notion of character – the expectation of how a person will behave in a given situation, based on the observation that she has behaved like that many times, that she has the habit. This may be an effective way of describing a person when you don't have the time to go into the scenes to show us how she behaves. Here's an example from 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?' by Joyce Carol Oates:

She was fifteen and she had a quick, nervous giggling habit of craning her neck to glance into mirrors or checking other people's faces to make sure her own was all right.

Now we know that in many situations the girl behaves this way. It would take an awful lot of time to show this habit dramatically. If the sole point of the scenes were to show her habit, the scenes would be a strain on the reader. Describing it in a summary will save you time. That's the advantage. The disadvantage is that doing this will delay your entry into your main dramatic scenes, where the story takes place.

Self-portrait

The writer may let the character introduce himself to us. Again, this usually will be a summary of the basic concerns, at least in the beginning. Notice that a self-portrait can be achieved indirectly, as Hemingway's narrator does in the example of character summary from *The Sun Also Rises*. The narrator says, 'Do not think that I am very much impressed by that as a boxing title, but it meant a lot to Cohn.' In this sentence we notice a certain sense of superiority, perhaps arrogance, on the part of the narrator. When he characterizes Robert Cohn as 'very shy and a thoroughly nice boy,' we hear the narrator's voice. Who would speak of a twenty-year old as a 'thoroughly nice boy'? We begin to surmise inferences about the narrator. The narrator's summary gives us an explicit portrait of Robert Cohn and an implied and indirect self-portrait. Good economy.

Here's a direct self-portrait by the narrator of *Notes From Underground* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky:

I am a sick man ... I am a spiteful man. I am an ugly man. I believe my liver is diseased. However, I know nothing at all about my disease, and do not know for certain what ails me. I don't consult a doctor for it, and never have, though I have a respect for medicine and doctors. Besides, I am extremely superstitious, sufficiently so to respect medicine, anyway (I am well-educated enough not to be superstitious, but I am superstitious). No, I refuse to consult a doctor from spite ... My liver is bad, well – let it get worse!

Here, the advantage over the third-person summary is that the way sentences are put together, the way of thought, is our picture of the character just as much as the content of the thoughts. The Underground Man thinks in paradoxes, spitefully, in intentional self-contradictions. He certainly prepares us for the humorous and self-destructive acts to follow, so the disadvantages of this method, that it is not dramatic and that it does not create pictures, are not significant.

Appearance

Image is not everything, but it does account for a lot. Through how a person looks, you may try to infer what the person is like – but appearances may be deceptive. Still, to suggest the person's character, you may select and interpret details, to guide the reader's expectations.

George Eliot uses this approach in the following paragraph from *Middlemarch*:

Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress. Her hand and wrist were so finely formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters; and her profile as well as her stature and bearing seemed to gain the more dignity from her plain garments, which by the side of provincial fashion gave her the impressiveness of a fine quotation from the Bible – or from one of our elder poets – in a paragraph of today's newspaper.

Eliot draws a portrait of a Victorian lady who drives the modesty of her dress to such an extreme that we are alerted by it. Immediately after this, Eliot gives us an inkling of how to interpret the appearance. 'She was usually spoken of as being remarkably clever, but with the addition that her sister Celia had more common sense.' Miss Brooke is so ascetic that she creates problems for herself; she imprisons herself in a sterile marriage to a priestly scholar. Her appearance points in the direction of the key conflict of the novel.

Eliot's description works like a painting, in which the surface details suggest character and mood. Sometimes the appearance of a character can indeed attain the quality of a good drawing, a cameo, as in the following example from 'Patriotism,' by the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima:

For the beauty of the bride in her white over-robe no comparisons were adequate. In the eyes, round beneath soft brows, the slender, finely shaped nose, and in the full lips, there was both sensuousness and refinement. One hand, emerging shyly from a sleeve of the over-robe, held a fan, and the tips of the fingers, clustering delicately, were like the bud of a moonflower.

Notice how, in the two above examples, the authors draw the hands more successfully than the faces. While hands are often more difficult than faces to render in paintings, in writing it's the reverse, because writing can capture motion and activity better than painting can. Hands can do more than faces can – unless we are mimes, and even with mimes, hands are at least as active as faces. In describing faces, it's easy to resort to smiles and frowns, and difficult

to strike a fresh image. With hands, you can play with a large array of possibilities.

You can characterize someone even by his feet or his walk, as does Thomas Hardy in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*:

His measured, springless walk was the walk of the skilled country-man as distinct from the desultory shambling of the general labourer; while in the turn and plant of each foot there was, further, a dogged and cynical indifference personal to himself.

No matter how you describe a character's appearance, your reader must be able to see it. If you rely on an adjective and give us little besides, you will probably fail to make us visualize anything. In his novel *The Citadel*, British author A.J. Cronin makes this mistake and gives us an example of what not to do:

Late one October afternoon in the year 1921, a shabby young man gazed with fixed intensity through the window of a third-class compartment in the almost empty train labouring up the Penowell valley from Swansea.

This is the opening line from the novel. It accomplishes a lot in terms of setting, but the adjective *shabby* adds nothing. Judging from our being in a third-class compartment, we would get the notion of shabbiness anyhow, and *shabby* does not in any way give us the look of the man. *The Citadel* is an excellent novel, and it's good to see that not everything needs to be perfect for a novel to succeed. If you don't want to describe appearance, perhaps you can get away with it — but then don't pretend that you are depicting. Scratch out the *shabby*.

Scene

In a scene you set your character in motion. Especially if she's speaking, you can show us the character in action, without needing to summarize and generalize, although you may supplement the scene with a summary.

Christopher Isherwood in 'Sally Bowles' draws a character portrait in a scene with dialogue:

'Am I terribly late, Fritz darling?'

'Only half or an hour, I suppose,' Fritz drawled beaming with proprietary pleasure. 'May I introduce Mr. Isherwood – Miss Bowles? Mr. Isherwood is commonly known as Chris.'

'I'm not,' I said. 'Fritz is about the only person who's ever called me Chris in my life.'

Sally laughed. She was dressed in black silk, with a small cape over her shoulders and a little cap like a page-boy's stuck jauntily on one side of her head:

'Do you mind if I use your telephone, sweet?'

'Sure. Go right ahead.' Fritz caught my eye. 'Come into the other room, Chris.'

‘For heaven’s sake, don’t leave me alone with this man!’ she exclaimed. ‘Or he’ll seduce me down the telephone. He’s most terribly passionate.’

As she dialed the number, I noticed that her fingernails were painted emerald green, a colour unfortunately chosen, for it called attention to her hands, which were much stained by cigarette-smoking and as dirty as a little girl’s.

Here we meet the character through her voice, appearance, action, as though in a theater, and certainly, she is theatrical. She says, ‘He’s most terribly passionate.’

This string of three adjectives is a kind of sophisticated excess that achieves a theatrical sound, as though we were listening to an ironic actor. Isherwood guides us to interpret the details, to see the little girl behind the sophisticated guise. The hands are as dirty as a little girl’s. Emerald green for fingernail paint seems gaudy and excessive; in her attempt to appear sophisticated, she fails, but achieves a charm, especially through her flirtatious talk: ‘He’ll seduce me down the telephone.’ The advantage of introducing a character in a scene is that we hear the character’s voice and diction, and we see the person. So when the narrator analyzes this character, he does not do it abstractly, but in conjunction with what we have seen and experienced. The scene combines appearance, action and dialogue; it’s a highly versatile approach. The drawback is that you can’t supply the background easily without stalling a scene. Sometimes you can introduce a character through action, so we begin to see her without needing much dialogue, as does Bobbie Ann Mason in ‘Shiloh’:

Leroy Moffitt’s wife, Norma Jean, is working on her pectorals. She lifts three-pound dumbbells to warm up, then progresses to a twenty-pound barbell. Standing with her legs apart, she reminds Leroy of Wonder Woman. ‘I’d give anything if I could just get these muscles to where they’re real hard,’ says Norma Jean. ‘Feel this arm. It’s not as hard as the other one.’

The advantage of this method is that the reader is immediately with you, visualizing, experiencing a scene. You can show and suggest what you could have told us about – such as that Norma Jean is a fitness nut, a bodybuilder, a self-obsessed person. The scene implies all this information without completely committing such a blatant interpretation, so it’s less judgmental than a summary to this effect would be. (This is most lifelike. We watch how people behave, we never see abstract qualities such as self-obsession – we merely see the signs, symptoms, which we interpret.) The author leaves the opportunity of judgment to the reader. Whenever you can, show character traits acted out in scenes. If you are interested in directly judging your characters, of course, rely on summaries and interpretations. (Judgment does have its virtues – it’s abstract, possibly philosophical.) The disadvantage to the scenic characterization method is that it’s awkward to construct scenes that are outside of the main time frame of the story, unless you do flashbacks and memories. There’s a limit to how many flashbacks you can handle without destroying the flow of the story. And there’s a limit to how many things you can *show*, anyhow. Thus, although scenes are probably the most attractive method

of characterization, you probably need to resort to summaries of relevant character deeds and inclinations outside of the story's time frame.

Combining techniques

Most developed character descriptions combine two or more approaches. During the course of a novel, we see a character in the ways the author chooses for us. That, too is lifelike – you hardly ever experience all the aspects of a friend right away. It takes time – different situations, communications, perceptions, and thoughts.

In Flannery O'Connor's [story], we see three approaches: habit, summary and appearance.

The alarm on the clock did not work but he was not dependent on any mechanical means to awaken him. Sixty years had not dulled his responses; his physical reactions, like his moral ones, were guided by his will and strong character, and these could be seen plainly in his features. He had a long tube-like face with a long rounded open jaw and a long depressed nose. His eyes were alert but quiet, and in the miraculous moonlight they had a look of composure and of ancient wisdom as if they belonged to one of the great guides of men.

'Strong character' is an abstract summary. 'A long tube-like face' is a caricature, appearance. 'He was not dependent on any mechanical means to awaken him' is a habit summary. These traits give us a quick synopsis of this man, which lead us into a scene, where we observe him in action.

Mr. Head went to the stove and brought the meat to the table in the skillet. 'It's no hurry,' he said. 'You'll get there soon enough and it's no guarantee you'll like it when you do neither.'

Now we hear him talk. Later we'll see him talk and act at greater length, each time getting to know him better. O'Connor's approach is incremental.

Here's a portrait of a paranoid schizophrenic, drawn by summary of habits, appearance and psychology. In 'Ward VI,' Anton Chekhov portrays the character so gently that he undermines our trust in the diagnosis of madness; later in the story we begin to perceive Russian psychiatry as mad, so that the character is quite justified in feeling persecuted.

Ivan Dmitrich Gromov ... is always in a state of agitation and excitement, always under the strain of some vague undefined expectation. The slightest rustle in the entry or shout in the yard is enough to make him raise his head and listen: are they coming for him? Is it him they are looking for?

I like his broad pale face with its high cheekbones ... His grimaces are queer and morbid, but the fine lines drawn on his face by deep and genuine suffering denote sensibility and culture, and there is a warm lucid gleam in his eyes. I like the man himself, always courteous, obliging, and extremely considerate in his treatment of

everyone except Nikita. When anyone drops a button or a spoon, he leaps from his bed and picks it up.

I think this is an excellent pattern not only combining summary and scene, but also sympathy. Chekhov treats a type, a paranoid schizophrenic, with enough sympathy that the type no longer threatens to reduce the human qualities and complexities of Ivan's character. Ivan has become a person for us.

Gustave Flaubert portrays Madame Bovary in a succession of different approaches. Each time we meet her, we see a different aspect of her, in a new light, and in a new approach:

[Brief Silent Scene] She made no comment. But as she sewed she pricked her fingers and then put them into her mouth to suck them ...

[Silent Scene, Habit, Appearance] As the room was chilly, she shivered a little while eating. This caused her full lips to part slightly. She had a habit of biting them when she wasn't talking ...

[Psychological Summary] Accustomed to the calm life, she turned away from it toward excitement. She loved the sea only for its storms, and greenery only when it was scattered among ruins. She needed to derive immediate gratification from things and rejected as useless everything that did not supply this satisfaction. Her temperament was more sentimental than artistic. She sought emotions and not landscapes.

And later, of course, Flaubert stages Madame Bovary, just as Isherwood does Sally Bowles. I recommend this pattern of multiple approaches particularly for your main characters in a novel. If your character is complex enough, you might try all the approaches you can think of to understand who you are creating. Your readers will probably get involved, too, trying to understand with you. The trick is to be genuinely curious about the people populating your fiction.

(Novakovich, 1995, pp. 54–5)

6.1.4 Getting to know your characters



Figure 5

In the following activity you will have the opportunity to discuss Novakovich's six methods with fellow learners – and writers!

Activity 6.1 Discussing Novakovich's six methods

Consider the six key methods identified by Novakovich – summary; repeated action or habit; self-portrait; appearance; scene; combination of techniques. Discuss the topic with any fellow writers.

Think about the following:

- Are there any methods that particularly appeal to you?
- Do you enjoy describing a character's appearance, for example?
- Do you find it particularly effective to use dialogue to reveal a character?
- Do you like the idea of defining your character through a particular habit of speech or gesture?
- Do you think it is helpful to use summary to tell your reader what your characters are like and what they do?
- Do you like the idea of using first-person narration, so that the character reveals themselves to the reader?

These are all methods that Novakovich refers to. Most writers, as he suggests, combine several methods, of course, so it is wise to bear this in mind, and to try various combinations in your own writing.

6.2 'Three Hours Between Planes'



Figure 6

Novakovich's suggested methods of portraying characters might be seen in the writing of established writers – or variations on those methods.

Read F. Scott Fitzgerald's short story 'Three Hours Between Planes' (2000 [1941]) below. This extract is also available as a [PDF](#) for your convenience.

Notice the ways in which he has approached building and presenting his characters.

- Does he use any of the methods described by Novakovich – in combination or on their own?
- Can you find examples of the characters' physical/biological aspects?
- Can you find examples of the characters' interpersonal/cultural aspects?
- Can you find examples of the characters' personal histories?
- Can you find examples of the characters' psychological aspects?

F. Scott Fitzgerald – 'Three hours between planes'

It was a wild chance but Donald was in the mood, healthy and bored, with a sense of tiresome duty done. He was now rewarding himself. Maybe.

When the plane landed he stepped out into a mid-western summer night and headed for the isolated pueblo airport, conventionalized as an old red 'railway depot'. He did not know whether she was alive, or living in this town, or what was her present name. With mounting excitement he looked through the phone book for her father who might be dead too, somewhere in these twenty years.

No. Judge Harmon Holmes – Hillside 3194.

A woman's amused voice answered his inquiry for Miss Nancy Holmes.

'Nancy is Mrs Walter Gifford now. Who is this?'

But Donald hung up without answering. He had found out what he wanted to know and had only three hours. He did not remember any Walter Gifford and there was another suspended moment while he scanned the phone book. She might have married out of town.

No. Walter Gifford – Hillside 1191. Blood flowed back into his fingertips.

'Hello?'

'Hello. Is Mrs Gifford there – this is an old friend of hers.'

'This is Mrs Gifford.'

He remembered, or thought he remembered, the funny magic in the voice.

'This is Donald Plant. I haven't seen you since I was twelve years old.'

'Oh-h-h!' The note was utterly surprised, very polite, but he could distinguish in it neither joy nor certain recognition.

'– Donald!' added the voice. This time there was something more in it than struggling memory.

'... when did you come back to town?' Then cordially, 'Where are you?'

'I'm out at the airport – for just a few hours.'

'Well, come up and see me.'

'Sure you're not just going to bed?'

'Heavens, no!' she exclaimed. 'I was sitting here – having a highball by myself. Just tell your taxi man ...'

On his way Donald analysed the conversation. His words 'at the airport' established that he had retained his position in the upper bourgeoisie. Nancy's aloneness might indicate that she had matured into an unattractive woman without friends. Her husband might be either away or in bed. And – because she was always ten years old in his dreams – the highball shocked him. But he adjusted himself with a smile – she was very close to thirty.

At the end of a curved drive he saw a dark-haired little beauty standing against the lighted door, a glass in her hand. Startled by her final materialization.

Donald got out of the cab, saying:

'Mrs Gifford?'

She turned on the porch light and stared at him, wide-eyed and tentative. A smile broke through the puzzled expression.

'Donald – it is you – we all change so. Oh, this is remarkable!'

As they walked inside, their voices jingled the words 'all these years', and Donald felt a sinking in his stomach. This derived in part from a vision of their last meeting – when she rode past him on a bicycle, cutting him dead – and in part from fear lest they have nothing to say. It was like a college reunion – but there the failure to find the past was disguised by the hurried boisterous occasion. Aghast, he realized that this might be a long and empty hour. He plunged in desperately.

'You always were a lovely person. But I'm a little shocked to find you as beautiful as you are.'

It worked. The immediate recognition of their changed state, the bold compliment, made them interesting strangers instead of fumbling childhood friends.

'Have a highball?' she asked. 'No? Please don't think I've become a secret drinker, but this was a blue night. I expected my husband but he wired he'd be two days longer. He's very nice, Donald, and very attractive. Rather your type and colouring.' She hesitated, '– and I think he's interested in someone in New York – and I don't know.'

'After seeing you it sounds impossible,' he assured her. 'I was married for six years, and there was a time I tortured myself that way. Then one day I just put jealousy out of my life forever. After my wife died I was very glad of that. It left a very rich memory – nothing marred or spoiled or hard to think over.'

She looked at him attentively, then sympathetically as he spoke.

'I'm very sorry,' she said. And after a proper moment, 'You've changed a lot. Turn your head. I remember father saying, "That boy has a brain."'

'You probably argued against it.'

'I was impressed. Up to then I thought everybody had a brain. That's why it sticks in my mind.'

'What else sticks in your mind?' he asked smiling.

Suddenly Nancy got up and walked quickly a little away.

'Ah, now,' she reproached him. 'That isn't fair! I suppose I was a naughty girl.'

'You were not,' he said stoutly. 'And I *will* have a drink now.'

As she poured it, her face still turned from him, he continued:

'Do you think you were the only little girl who was ever kissed?'

'Do you like the subject?' she demanded. Her momentary irritation melted and she said: 'What the hell! We *did* have fun. Like in the song.'

'On the sleigh ride.'

'Yes – and somebody's picnic – Trudy James's. And at Frontenac that – those summers.'

It was the sleigh ride he remembered most and kissing her cool cheeks in the straw in one corner while she laughed up at the cold white stars. The couple next to them had their backs turned and he kissed her little neck and her ears and never her lips.

'And the Macks' party where they played post office and I couldn't go because I had the mumps,' he said.

'I don't remember that.'

'Oh, you were there. And you were kissed and I was crazy with jealousy like I never have been since.'

'Funny I don't remember. Maybe I wanted to forget.'

'But why?' he asked in amusement. 'We were two perfectly innocent kids. Nancy, whenever I talked to my wife about the past, I told her you were the girl I loved almost as much as I loved her. But I think I really loved you just as much. When we moved out of town I carried you like a cannon ball in my insides.'

'Were you that much – stirred up?'

'My God, yes! I –' He suddenly realized that they were standing just two feet from each other, that he was talking as if he loved her in the present, that she was looking up at him with her lips half-parted and a clouded look in her eyes.

'Go on,' she said, 'I'm ashamed to say – I like it. I didn't know you were so upset then. I thought it was me who was upset.'

'You!' he exclaimed. 'Don't you remember throwing me over at the drugstore.' He laughed. 'You stuck out your tongue at me.'

'I don't remember at all. It seemed to me you did the throwing over.' Her hand fell lightly, almost consolingly on his arm. 'I've got a photograph book upstairs I haven't looked at for years. I'll dig it out.'

Donald sat for five minutes with two thoughts – first the hopeless impossibility of reconciling what different people remembered about the same event – and secondly that in a frightening way Nancy moved him as a woman as she had moved him as a child. Half an hour had developed an emotion that he had not known since the death of his wife – that he had never hoped to know again.

Side by side on a couch they opened the book between them. Nancy looked at him, smiling and very happy.

'Oh, this is *such* fun,' she said. 'Such fun that you're so nice, that you remember me so – beautifully. Let me tell you – I wish I'd known it then! After you'd gone I hated you.'

'What a pity,' he said gently.

'But not now,' she reassured him, and then impulsively, 'Kiss and make up –'

'... that isn't being a good wife,' she said after a minute. 'I really don't think I've kissed two men since I was married.'

He was excited – but most of all confused. Had he kissed Nancy? or a memory? or this lovely trembly stranger who looked away from him quickly and turned a page of the book?

'Wait!' he said. 'I don't think I could see a picture for a few seconds.'

'We won't do it again. I don't feel so very calm myself.'

Donald said one of those trivial things that cover so much ground.

'Wouldn't it be awful if we fell in love again!'

'Stop it!' She laughed, but very breathlessly. 'It's all over. It was a moment. A moment I'll have to forget.'

'Don't tell your husband.'

'Why not? Usually I tell him everything.'

'It'll hurt him. Don't ever tell a man such things.'

'All right I won't.'

'Kiss me once more,' he said inconsistently, but Nancy had turned a page and was pointing eagerly at a picture.

'Here's you,' she cried. 'Right away!'

He looked. It was a little boy in shorts standing on a pier with a sailboat in the background.

'I remember –' she laughed triumphantly, '– the very day it was taken. Kitty took it and I stole it from her.'

For a moment Donald failed to recognize himself in the photo – then, bending closer – he failed utterly to recognize himself.

'That's not me,' he said.

'Oh yes. It was at Frontenac – the summer we – we used to go to the cave.'

'What cave? I was only three days in Frontenac.' Again he strained his eyes at the slightly yellowed picture. 'And that isn't me. That's Donald Bowers. We did look rather alike.'

Now she was staring at him – leaning back, seeming to lift away from him.

'But you're Donald Bowers!' she exclaimed; her voice rose a little. 'No, you're not. You're Donald Plant.'

'I told you on the phone.'

She was on her feet – her face faintly horrified.

'Plant! Bowers! I must be crazy. Or it was that drink? I was mixed up a little when I first saw you. Look here! What have I told you?'

He tried for a monkish calm as he turned a page of the book.

'Nothing at all,' he said. Pictures that did not include him formed and re-formed before his eyes – Frontenac – a cave – Donald Bowers – 'You threw me over!'

Nancy spoke from the other side of the room.

'You'll never tell this story,' she said. 'Stories have a way of getting around.'

'There isn't any story,' he hesitated. But he thought: So she was a bad little girl.

And now suddenly he was filled with wild raging jealousy of little Donald Bowers – he who had banished jealousy from his life forever. In the five steps he took across the room he crushed out twenty years and the existence of Walter Gifford with his stride.

'Kiss me again, Nancy,' he said, sinking to one knee beside her chair, putting his hand upon her shoulder. But Nancy strained away.

'You said you had to catch a plane.'

'It's nothing. I can miss it. It's of no importance.'

'Please go,' she said in a cool voice. 'And please try to imagine how I feel.'

'But you act as if you don't remember me,' he cried, '– as if you don't remember Donald Plant!'

'I do. I remember you too ... But it was all so long ago.' Her voice grew hard again. 'The taxi number is Crestwood 8484.'

On his way to the airport Donald shook his head from side to side. He was completely himself now but he could not digest the experience. Only as the plane roared up into the dark sky and its passengers became a different entity from the corporate world below did he draw a parallel from the fact of its flight. For five blinding minutes he had lived like a madman in two worlds at once. He had been a boy of twelve and a man of thirty-two, indissolubly and helplessly commingled.

Donald had lost a good deal, too, in those hours between the planes – but since the second half of life is a long process of getting rid of things, that part of the experience probably didn't matter.

(Fitzgerald, 2000 [1941], pp. 573–78)

6.2.1 Can't stop talking about characters



Figure 7

Note down your ideas about the Fitzgerald story.

- You may have noted that Fitzgerald makes some use of summary; is this effective?
- There is little or no use of physical description – is this a deficit?
- There is a considerable use of dialogue, so we see the characters in action in a scene; is the dialogue effective in revealing what characters are like and the sorts of misunderstanding that arises between them?
- In many narratives there might be a preponderance of one particular method over another at any one time – is there a dominant method of portrayal in this story?

6.2.2 Returning to your character

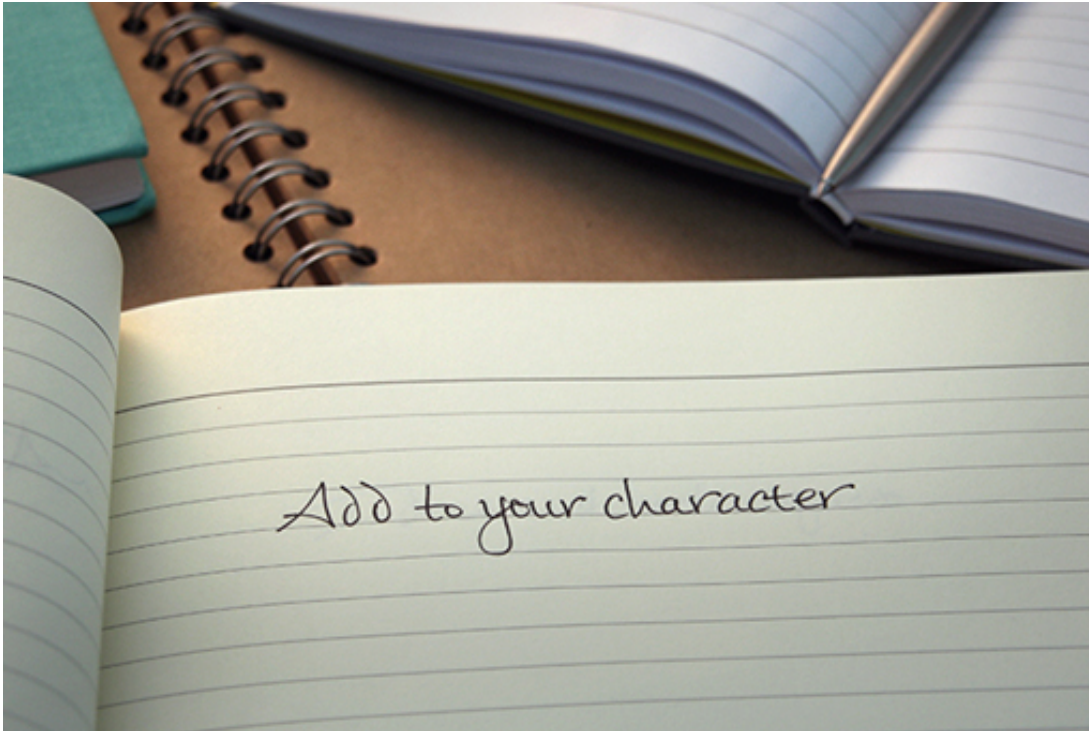


Figure 8

Reviewing stages of a character's development and coming back to it can enrich the character and eventually the story.

Return to the character that you researched in Building a new character. You'll recall that you developed research on this character by compiling information, possibly using the checklist shown previously.

Here it is again, to remind you:

- **Psychological** – intelligence, temperament, happiness/unhappiness, attitudes, self-knowledge, unconscious aspects.
- **Physical/biological** – age, height, size, state of health, assets, flaws, sexuality, gait, voice.
- **Interpersonal/cultural** – family, friends, colleagues, birthplace, education, hobbies, beliefs, values, lifestyle.
- **Personal history** – major events in the life, including the best and the most traumatic.

Review your outline of this character. Check to see if you want to add anything new. Sometimes leaving a character a little while, as you've done, can be productive and allows you to imagine and see the character more clearly.

Although you may have noted different aspects of your character, check there are no inconsistencies. For example, Flaubert's depictions of Madame Bovary all show her as sensual.

If there are contradictions in the information you have about your character, are these appropriately interesting and do they add intrigue rather than appear implausible or confusing?

As you've seen, contradictory aspects of a character can be very interesting – they can add conflict or make a character more rounded. But such contradictions have to be plausible in order for the reader to be able to accept them.

6.2.3 Portraying your character



Figure 9

Experiment with different ways of portraying your character, in line with the suggestions made by Novakovich.

Activity 6.2 Experimenting with character portrayals

Writing in the third person (using 'he' or 'she'), try each of the four different ways outlined below, either in one or two continuous pages, or in four separate paragraphs:

- Make a **summary** of what the character is like.
- Finally, show them through a **speech in a scene**.
- Show them through **appearance**.
- Show them through a **habitual or repeated action**.

Start writing this character, in your notebook or on your computer.

Even if you used the methods in separate paragraphs, reflect on what you have written to see if there is any combination of techniques at work in any of the paragraphs.

6.2.4 Self-portrait

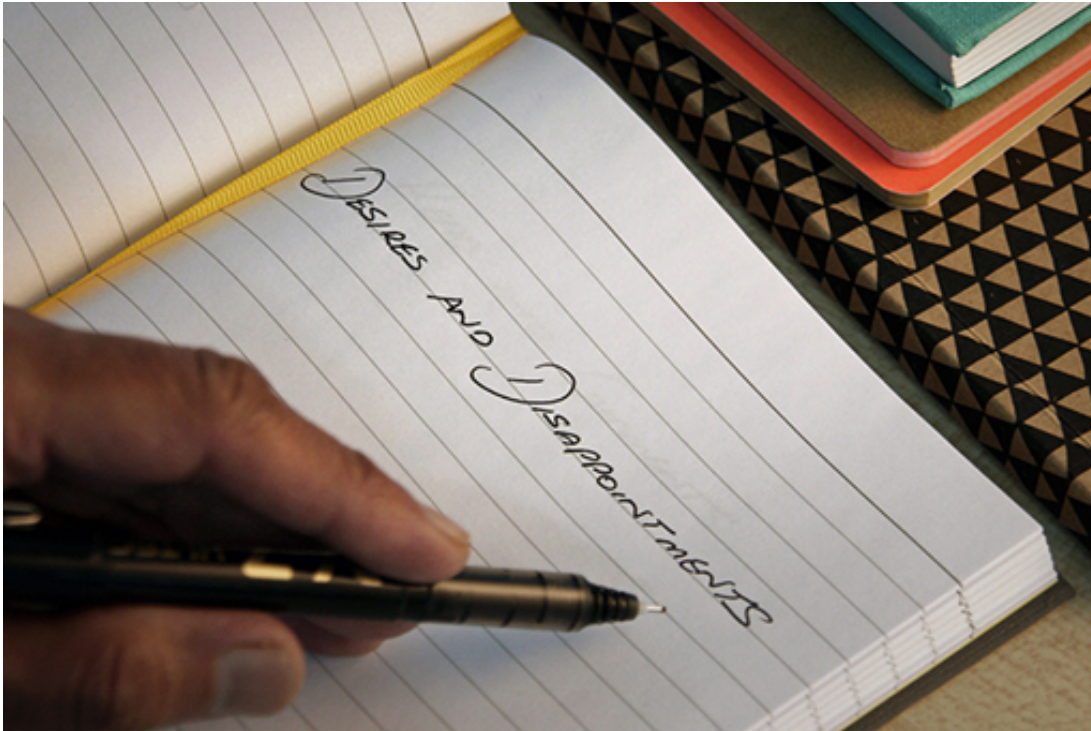


Figure 10

There are different kinds of self-portrait characterisations, as identified by Novakovich. You will recognise, in the first part of Novakovich's description of the self-portrait method and the example he gives of Hemingway's story, a mode very similar to the one you have already seen in Heller's *Notes on a Scandal*, which you looked at in Reading characters in Week 1. This involves a direct exposition of a 'seen' character accompanied by an indirect exposition of another character (the narrator).

Novakovich also details a more direct sort of self-portrait with the Dostoyevsky extract, which you read in Revealing characters. The PDF of this extract is also available as a [PDF](#) for your convenience.

Activity 6.3 Trying self-portrait characterisations

Now try either of these approaches with your 'new' character:

- have them either as an explicit first person ('I') character narrating themselves
- or have them as a narrator who talks about the other character and in doing so reveals something of themselves.

Write about 250 words or so in your notebook.

This time you should also make your character desire something, and make the desire their driving force. It will work best if you make whatever the character desires desirable in the reader's eyes too. Think about why they can never have what they want. 'Three Hours Between Planes' is a good example of this.

By giving your character desires and disappointments you will see how this quickly develops potential stories.

6.3 Planning your short story



Figure 11

You will now plan a story based on a central character and use techniques and methods learned so far. You will be able to put these into practice as you write.

Activity 6.4 Planning your short story assignment

Your final short story for this course should be between 750 and 1000 words in length, and based on a central character. You may want to introduce other characters, but as this is a very short story it will probably work best if you only have one or two other characters alongside the main one.

Whatever you choose, the reader should see the story from the main character's perspective. You can use first or third person.

Plan what your story will be about. You may already have a clear idea but if not, you can:

- look back through your notebook to see whether any of your ideas or observations could form the basis of this story
- look at the exercises you have written so far – even if you didn't get very far with them, they might still form a good basis for a story
- use one of the ideas we have discussed for characters or ideas for stories, for example, turn on the radio, or look at newspaper headlines
- use the [Prompt cloud PDF](#), if you need to (often the marriage of disparate ideas can be very profitable).

Make a note of your plan in your notebook.

6.3.1 Ideas and techniques for working on your story

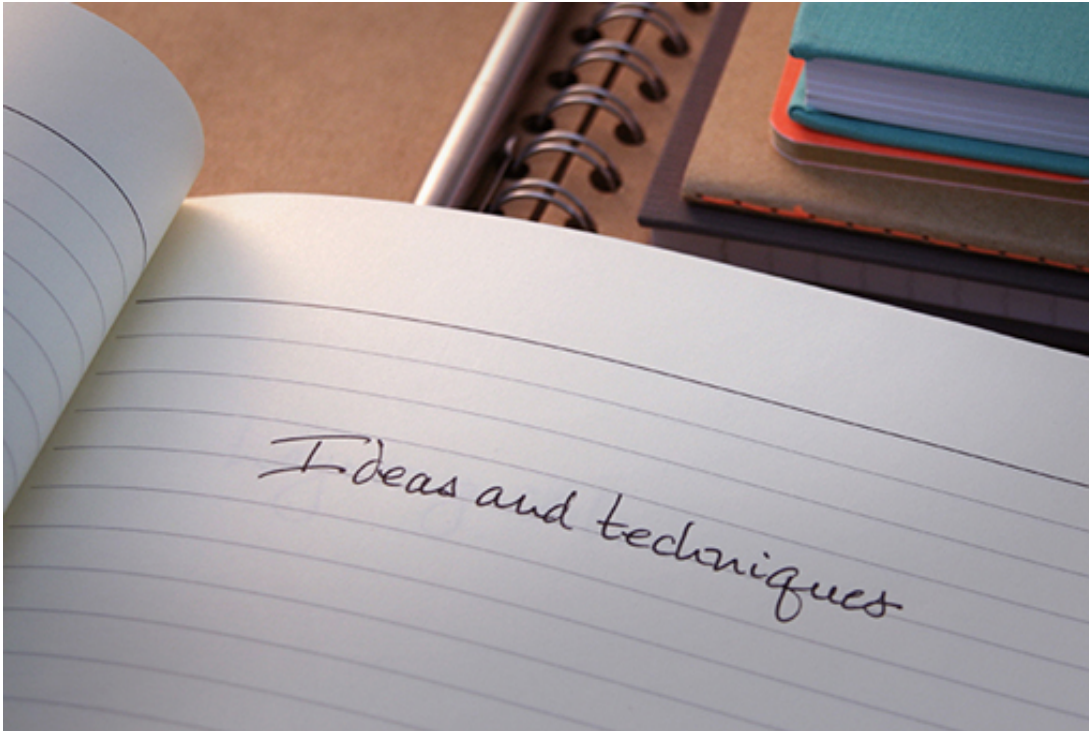


Figure 12

Once you've identified the idea you want to develop, you will find it helpful to make use of the ideas and techniques we have discussed so far:

- Use your notebook to build ideas for your character.
- Get to know about your character's inner life: what they want, think, remember, resent, fear, dream, deny.
- Get to know about your character's behaviour, what they wear, buy, eat, say, work at and play at.
- Get to know how your character speaks and how this changes according to context, mood and intention.
- Consider all the influences that go into the making of your character: age, gender, race, nationality, marital status, religion, profession.
- Build a profile or outline for your main character using some of the suggested headings.
- Focus on your character's contradictions and conflicts in order to create a complex person and also to generate plot.
- Remember the main methods of character presentation: summary, appearance, habit, scene, self-portrait and combinations of these methods.
- See and describe your character vividly, how they look, how they move, their possessions and surroundings.

6.3.2 Starting to write your story



Figure 13

Now's the time to begin writing your final story that you'll share in Week 8.

Activity 6.5 Start drafting your final story

Try to write a draft of 600–750 words of your final story. Remember you are not aiming to write the perfect version immediately – you will need to edit and augment, to cut back and make additions as you develop the piece. The upper word limit will be 1000 words and it is important to bear this in mind.

Everyone reads over what they've written as they go and makes necessary alterations and adjustments, but try to get to the end of the draft before you move on to do any serious editing. We will get to more detailed editing advice shortly.

6.3.3 Layout

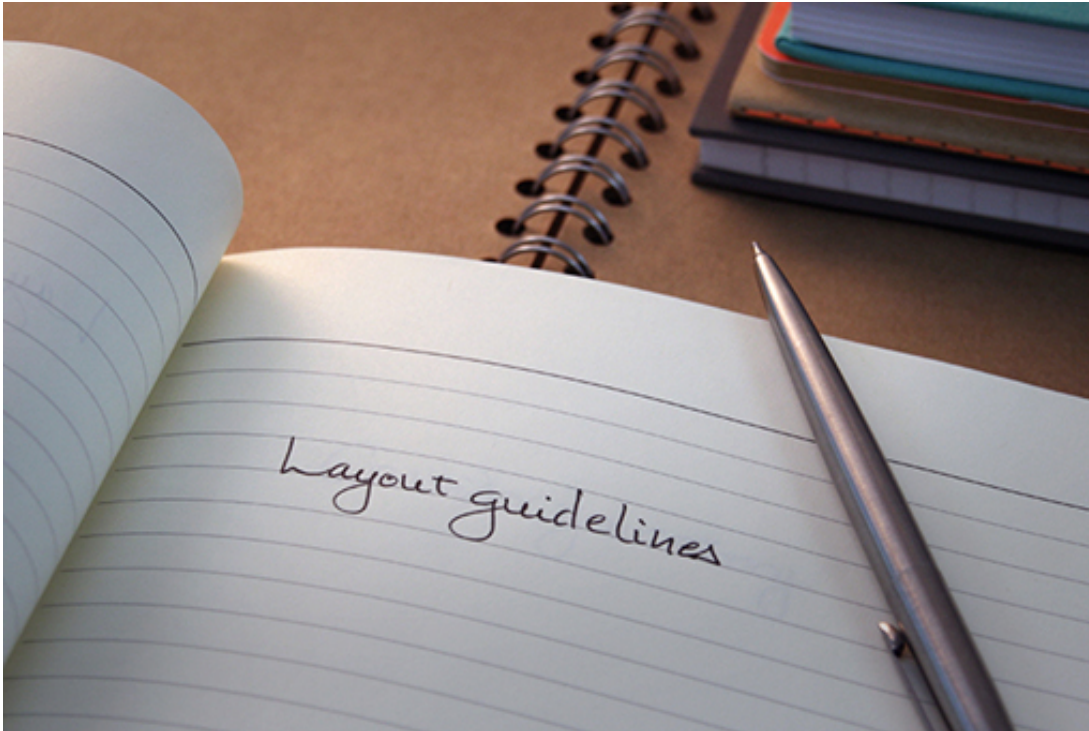


Figure 14

To see how fiction layout works, check out the books on your bookshelf. Notice how the paragraphing and dialogue are formatted. This will give you a general idea but it is worth remembering that the work you submit to publishers and agents should be formatted slightly differently.

Here are some general guidelines (some of them might be superseded by specific formatting requirements requested by particular editors, publications or competitions – and some may differ in different countries; these are guidelines for the UK).

Besides helping you to produce readable, uncluttered manuscripts, this will get you into the habit of presenting your work as required by publishers and any critical readers who may offer feedback:

- Number your pages. This is normal, professional practice and makes it easier for your reader to refer to particular points when giving feedback.
- Set margins at each side of at least 3 cm (in most cases, this is the default setting).
- Don't justify lines to the right-hand margin.
- Use double-line spacing.
- Give your story a title.
- Use a 12-point standard serif font (i.e. Times New Roman or similar), especially when submitting paper copy. Some online submissions now require sans serif font (i.e. Arial).
- Generally, there should be no line space between paragraphs, except when a line space between paragraphs is used to indicate a section break (i.e. a change of scene; a viewpoint switch; or some time has passed).

- The first line of the next paragraph following such a line space should not be indented.
- Asterisks can be used to draw attention to a significant section break but shouldn't be overused.
- The first line of every paragraph should be indented, with the exception of the first paragraph in each chapter or section.

Readers will have big problems and potentially get very confused if the layout isn't clear. Before you get to the editing stage with your story, check that the format and layout of your piece is readable and that you have followed all the guidelines on layout.

[View the layout PDF](#), for an example of how the paragraphing in your stories should look.

6.4 Summary of Week 6



Figure 15

This week you've learned how to develop characters using research, accident and empathy, and had the opportunity to test this out.

You have also considered different types of character, and may have discussed your thoughts with other writers. You will have now planned and started writing your short story, putting all you have learned about developing character into practice.

In Week 7, you'll explore the benefits of reading as a writer and learn how to give feedback, while you continue to write and edit your short story. You can move on to Week 7 now.

If studying this week of *Start writing fiction* has inspired you, take a look at the area specifically created for you to explore more about writing fiction on [OpenLearn](#).

Week 7: Reading as a writer

Introduction

Video content is not available in this format.



Throughout this course you have read stories and extracts from established writers. Reading is an important way to expand your own work.

A writer has permanent access to the best teaching: in novels and short stories. In terms of technique, nothing is or can be hidden: it's all there on the page. It's up to the person reading as a writer to 'unpack' how a novel has been made.

Starting out, and throughout a writer's career, seeing how other people do things is invaluable. Writing without reading is to write in the dark: it might work, but it's an unnecessary handicap.

7.1 Enrichment from reading



Figure 1

Here novelists talk about the importance of reading and how it enriches their work, but also about the influence of film.

As you're listening to Louis de Bernières, Patricia Duncker, Tim Pears and Alex Garland, make a note of:

- what reading – or viewing – appears to be important for them
- how you think reading influences their writing
- how cinematic storytelling influences the way a novelist tells and structures a story.

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7.1.1 Formulating and sharing technical opinion

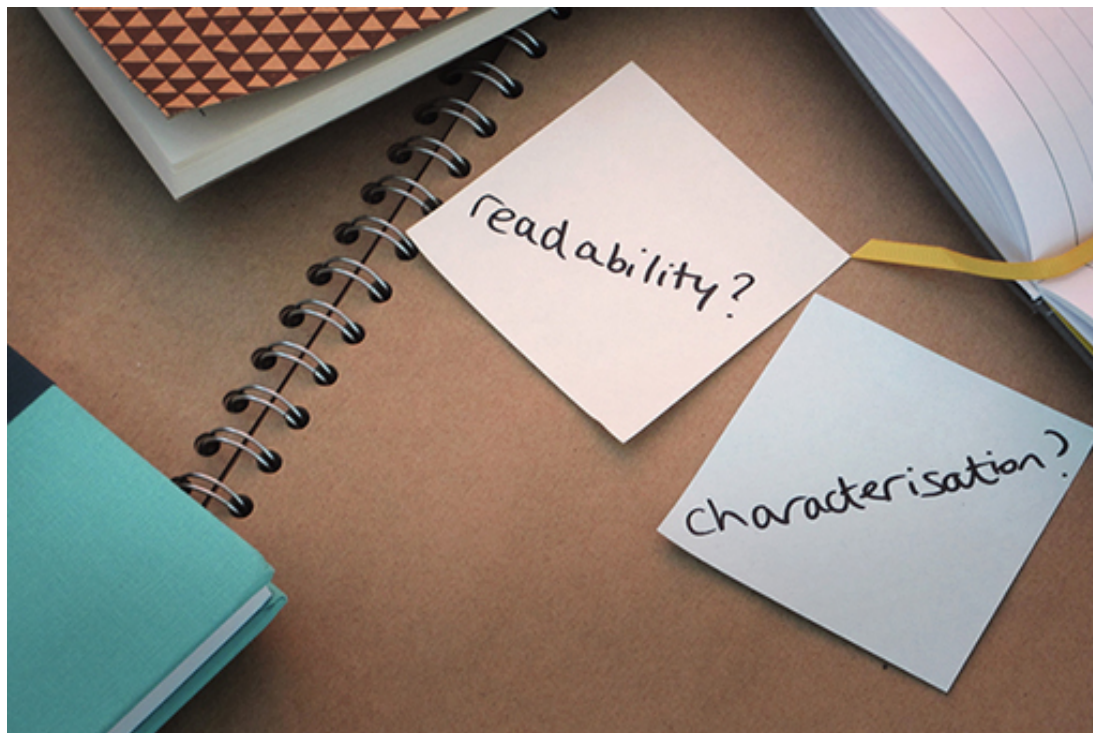


Figure 2

Your opinion about what you read is important and you now have the skills necessary to be more analytical in assessing why you prefer one story, or novel, over another.

Activity 7.1 Why does a book work?

Choose one book you have read and liked, and one you have read and disliked. In 100 words, say why you think a particular book you have read works; again, in 100 words, say why you think another book does not.

Note especially:

- how effective the characterisation is in these books
- whether these books make you want to read on – why or why not
- how and why you consider a book or passage in a book ‘works’ or doesn’t ‘work’.

Note: you might enjoy reading a book that in many ways you think does not work. Or you might dislike a book that you are conscious of ‘working’ or of being ‘good’. It is important to reflect and analyse why you form these opinions. Such reflections can be crucial to how you undertake your own writing.

Write your observations in your notebook – and see if you can exchange thoughts with somebody you know.

7.1.2 Reviewing your story

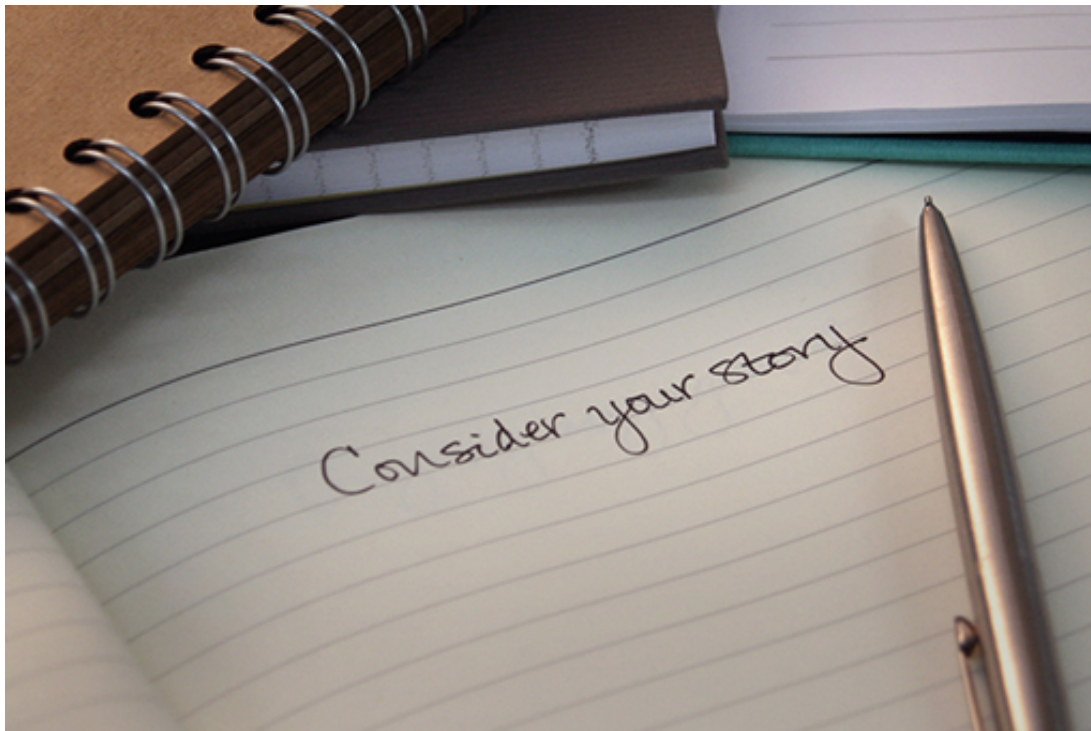


Figure 3

You will now have left the story you wrote in Starting to write your story for a short while – hopefully for at least a few days. Return to it and read it through.

Consider your story in light of discussions around published novels in Formulating and sharing technical opinion.

- Are there any aspects in your own work that tally with elements you enjoyed reading in the published novels?
- Are there any aspects that you noticed about published novels where the writing was seen to be 'working' that are relevant to your writing?

7.1.3 Editing your story

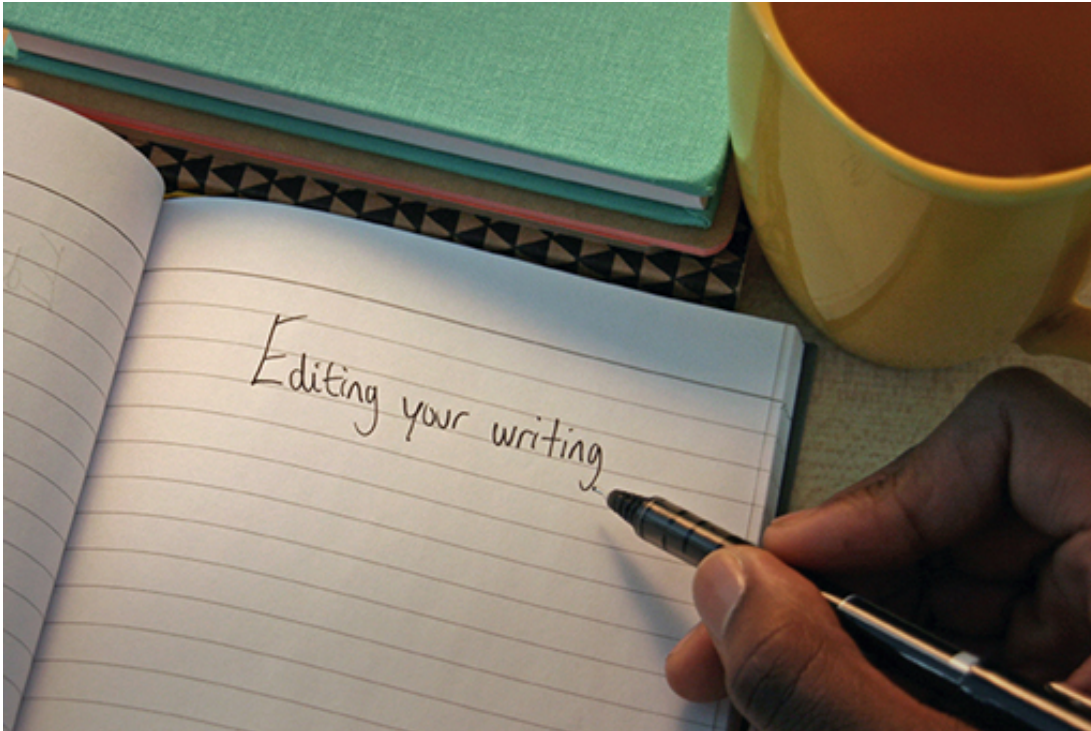


Figure 4

Remember that your short story has to be ready soon, so you should continue to review it, and start rewriting and editing it as necessary.

Editing your writing is very important – some would say the most important aspect of writing. It's often said that anyone can write but only writers can edit. Now that you have written your first draft and left it to settle for a while, you will need to go back and reflect on what you have written, and make changes accordingly.

- Don't be afraid to cut large parts of it if necessary.
- As we have already discussed, you might find that when you have got into the story you can go back and cut out the opening sentences. Remember the 'Emma said' exercises in Finding a voice. Some openings may well have been used as a way to get into writing the story, or a particular passage, but the story might be more vibrant and enticing without them.
- Remember that you are aiming to develop a character who is complex and not too predictable.
- Remember that you are aiming to make the story as interesting and intriguing for the reader as you can.
- Reflect on all your reading and any tricks or techniques that you see in the novels and stories that might help you.
- Also reflect on the reading you've done that displays techniques and approaches that don't seem, to you, to be working.

7.2 Ongoing book reviews



Figure 5

Noticing details about the construction of language, plot and story in what you read will help form your own writing taste and style.

As you've done in Formulating and sharing technical opinion, note in your journal the books you read, and what you think of them. Note why you like or dislike them; what you think works or doesn't work. This ongoing engagement with your reading will feed into your writing practice.

At the time, these notes might seem very slight – perhaps just a jotting down of the impression a novel left you with. But with hindsight, such notes will help you to 'place' yourself, to form your own taste and style, to act as reminders of what you have been thinking, and of what you might have hoped for about your own writing.

These notes might also very easily suggest an idea for a piece of writing of your own. Even the simplest observations might be valuable. For example:

- How long is the short story or novel?
- Are there chapters? Sections? Parts?
- If it's a short story, how is it structured?
- When and where is it set, how do these things appear to matter, and how are they conveyed?
- From whose point of view is the story being told? Is it the story of one, or more than one of the characters?
- Is there dialogue? If so, what does it contribute to the story? What does it tell you of the characters?
- Is the language modern, plain, elaborate, colloquial?

- Are there short or long sentences?
- Are the sentences 'properly formed', or broken down? For example, 'Get this. Bravery. That wasn't even in it. Heroism? Maybe that was nearer the mark.'
- Would you say that the story was a 'page-turner'?
- Is it full of 'researched facts'?
- Is there much 'internal' psychological or emotional detail, or is most of the novel or story taken up with 'external' events or description?
- How do you learn of the main characters?
- Are the minor characters sufficiently clear or too flat?
- In your opinion, is it clearly aimed at a certain type of reader?

Activity 7.2 Reviewing an extract

Read the extract from the opening pages of Toni Morrison's novel, *Jazz* below. (It is also available as a [PDF](#) for your convenience.) Consider its overall impact, and whether you think it works.

Is it a page turner? Also, think about the following:

- setting
- point of view
- type of language
- sentence structure.

Identifying the techniques and methods of other writers will influence and help your own style.

Toni Morrison – *Jazz*

Sth, I know that woman. She used to live with a flock of birds on Lenox Avenue. Know her husband, too. He fell for an eighteen-year-old girl with one of those deepdown, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going. When the woman, her name is Violet, went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face they threw her to the floor and out of the church. She ran, then, through all that snow, and when she got back to her apartment she took the birds from their cages and set them out the windows to freeze or fly, including the parrot that said, 'I love you.'

The snow she ran through was so windswept she left no footprints in it, so for a time nobody knew exactly where on Lenox Avenue she lived. But, like me, they knew who she was, who she had to be, because they knew that her husband, Joe Trace, was the one who shot the girl. There was never anyone to prosecute him because nobody actually saw him do it, and the dead girl's aunt didn't want to throw money to helpless lawyers or laughing cops when she knew the expense wouldn't improve anything. Besides, she found out that the man who killed her niece cried all day and for him and for Violet that is as bad as jail.

Regardless of the grief Violet caused, her name was brought up at the January meeting of the Salem Women's Club as someone needing assistance, but it was voted down because only prayer – not money – could help her now, because she had a more or less able husband (who needed to stop feeling

sorry for himself), and because a man and his family on 134th Street had lost everything in a fire. The Club mobilized itself to come to the burnt-out family's aid and left Violet to figure out on her own what the matter was and how to fix it.

She is awfully skinny, Violet; fifty, but still good looking when she broke up the funeral. You'd think that being thrown out the church would be the end of it – the shame and all – but it wasn't. Violet is mean enough and good looking enough to think that even without hips or youth she could punish Joe by getting herself a boyfriend and letting him visit in her own house. She thought it would dry his tears up and give her some satisfaction as well. It could have worked, I suppose, but the children of suicides are hard to please and quick to believe no one loves them because they are not really here.

Anyway, Joe didn't pay Violet or her friend any notice. Whether she sent the boyfriend away or whether he quit her, I can't say. He may have come to feel that Violet's gifts were poor measured against his sympathy for the brokenhearted man in the next room. But I do know that mess didn't last two weeks. Violet's next plan – to fall back in love with her husband – whipped her before it got on a good footing. Washing his handkerchiefs and putting food on the table before him was the most she could manage. A poisoned silence floated through the rooms like a big fishnet

that Violet alone slashed through with loud recriminations. Joe's daytime listlessness and both their worrying nights must have wore her down. So she decided to love – well, find out about – the eighteen-year-old whose creamy little face she tried to cut open even though nothing would have come out but straw.

Violet didn't know anything about the girl at first except her name, her age, and that she was very well thought of in the legally licensed beauty parlor. So she commenced to gather the rest of the information. Maybe she thought she could solve the mystery of love that way. Good luck and let me know.

She questioned everybody, starting with Malvonne, an upstairs neighbor – the one who told her about Joe's dirt in the first place and whose apartment he and the girl used as a love nest. From Malvonne she learned the girl's address and whose child she was. From the legally licensed beauticians she found out what kind of lip rouge the girl wore; the marcelling iron they used on her (though I suspect that girl didn't need to straighten her hair); the band the girl liked best (Slim Bates' Ebony Keys which is pretty good except for his vocalist who must be his woman since why else would he let her insult his band). And when she was shown how, Violet did the dance steps the dead girl used to do. All that. When she had the steps down pat – her knees just so – everybody, including the ex-boyfriend, got disgusted with her and I can see why. It was like watching an old street pigeon pecking the crust of a sardine sandwich the cats left behind. But Violet was nothing but persistent and no wisecrack or ugly look stopped her. She haunted PS-89 to talk to teachers who knew the girl. JHS-139 too because the girl went there before fooling around in vocational classes, since there were no high schools in that district a colored girl could attend. And for a long time she pestered the girl's aunt, a dignified lady who did fine work off and on in the garment district, until the aunt broke down and began to look forward to Violet's visits for a chat about youth and misbehavior. The aunt

showed all the dead girl's things to Violet and it became clear to her (as it was to me) that this niece had been hardheaded as well as sly.

One particular thing the aunt showed her, and eventually let Violet keep for a few weeks, was a picture of the girl's face. Not smiling, but alive at least and very bold. Violet had the nerve to put it on the fireplace mantel in her own parlor and both she and Joe looked at it in bewilderment.

It promised to be a mighty bleak household, what with the birds gone and the two of them wiping their cheeks all day, but when spring came to the City Violet saw, coming into the building with an Okeh record under her arm and carrying some stewmeat wrapped in butcher paper, another girl with four marcelled waves on each side of her head. Violet invited her in to examine the record and that's how that scandalizing threesome on Lenox Avenue began. What turned out different was who shot whom.

(Morrison, 1992, p. 6)

7.2.1 Week 7 quiz

The following quiz will encourage you to think further about spotting technique.

Complete the [Week 7](#) quiz now.

Open the quiz in a new window or tab then come back here when you've finished.

7.2.2 Editing revisited

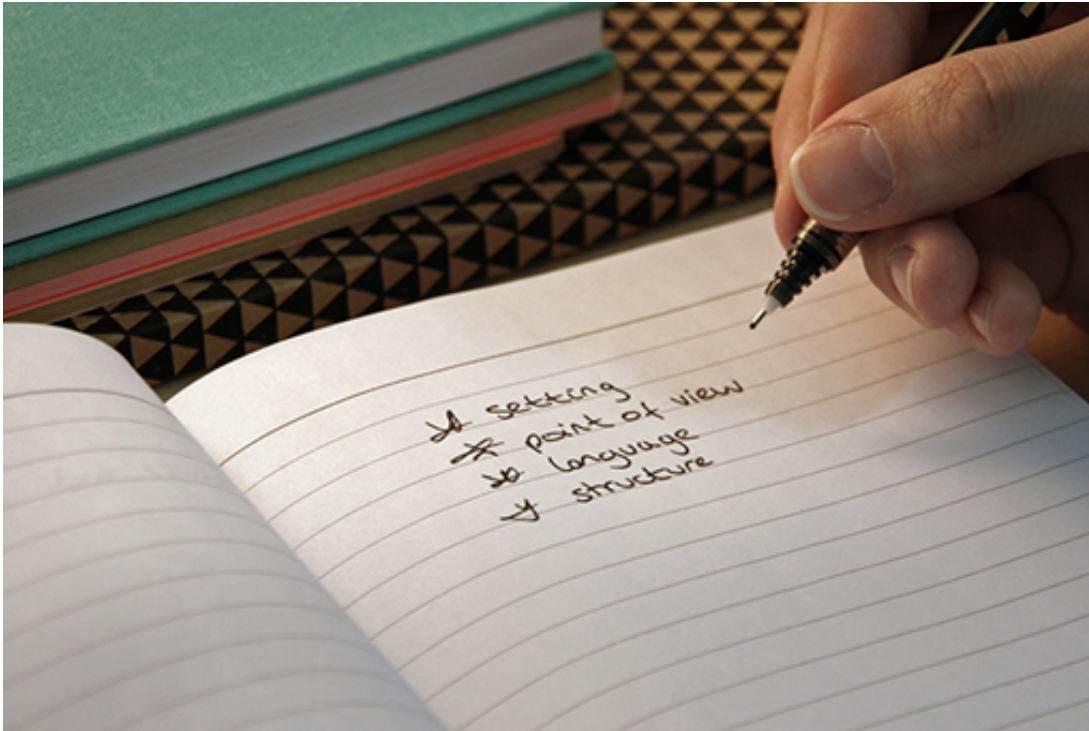


Figure 6

Continue editing your short story, and consider the points we've just explored:

- setting
- point of view
- type of language
- sentence structure.

7.3 Questions to ask

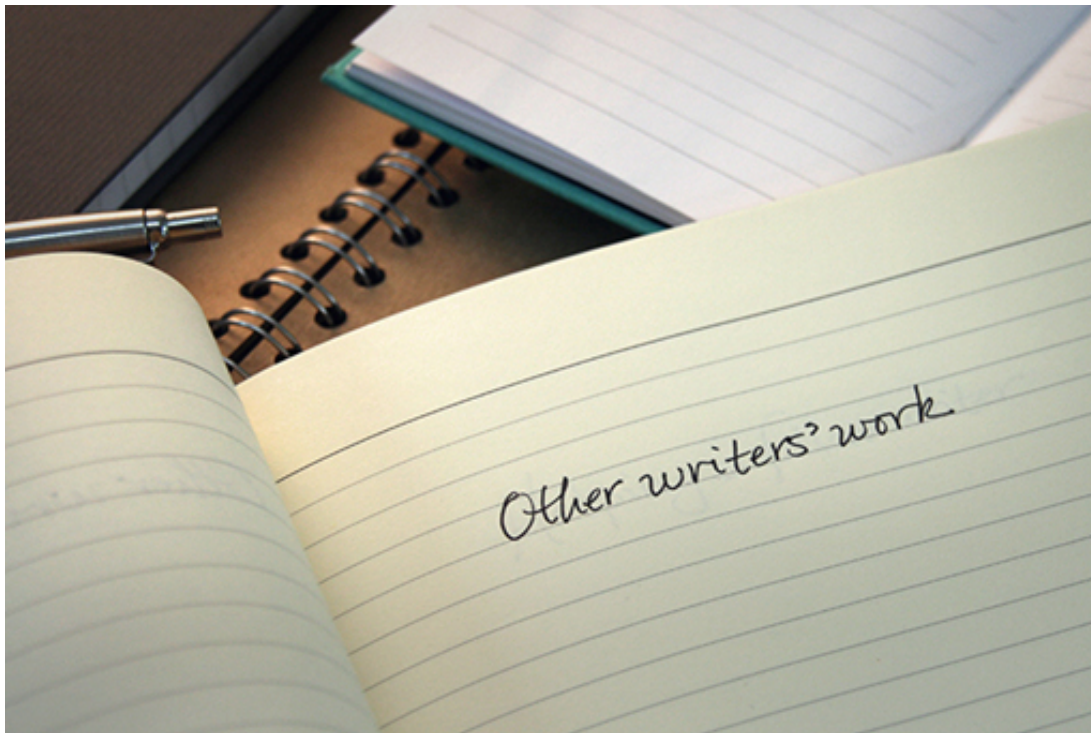


Figure 7

It is much easier to give criticism than it is to receive it. Useful questions to ask when considering other writers' work should cover more than the technical aspects about setting, point of view, language and sentences.

Here are some other questions to ask of the work:

- Does the piece intrigue you?
- Do you find it involving?
- Are the characters involving?
- Do you want to know what happens next?
- Are there any parts of it that you find unclear or confusing?
- Are there any examples of language used in fresh or surprising ways?

Asking and answering these questions when you are reading the work of others will help you to reflect on your own writing.

7.3.1 Giving feedback to other writers



Figure 8

Just as you need feedback on your writing, other writers need it too. Later in Week 8, there'll be an opportunity to give feedback to any fellow writers, and you'll need to consider how to make your comments helpful.

- Make sure you are neither too enthusiastic about a piece nor too critical.
- If you think something works well, try to analyse why, but also look for its faults. Usually there will be some aspects that could be developed or enhanced.
- If you think something doesn't work, again analyse why. Make sure you look for the parts that might be working better in the piece. Almost always there will be positive things to say alongside your critical points.
- Try to go beyond: 'Oh, I liked this, but I didn't like that'.
- Remember that you are trying to help the other writer to develop their work further, so being specific and analytical about why you like or dislike something is essential.
- In helping a fellow writer, in effect you are helping yourself to improve your own editorial and writing skills.
- Take a look at the [Feedback guidance PDF](#).

7.3.2 Receiving feedback

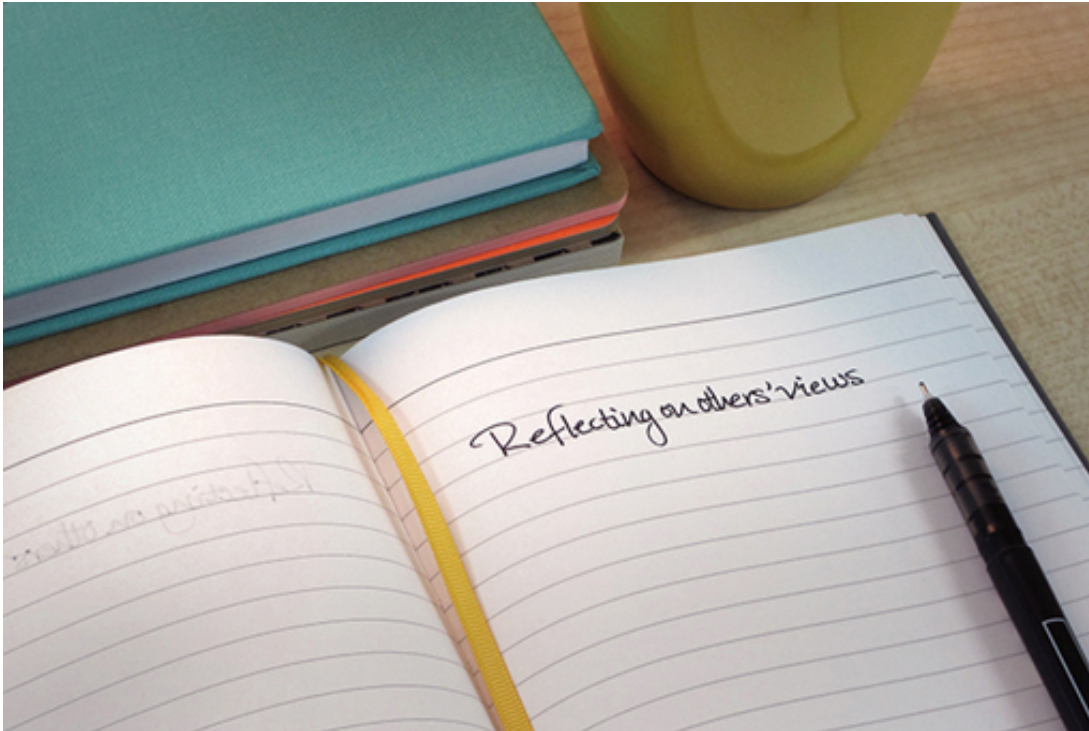


Figure 9

It is important to remember that people give feedback in order to help you to improve your writing. It is not easy to take criticism. All writers find it difficult, but comments that help us to reflect on the success and flaws in our writing are invaluable.

It is very rare for writers, however experienced they may be, to get it right first time. You will see that many published novels acknowledge the help of those who have read and commented on the early drafts. Learning to be a good writer means recognising that we need to hear from others about what they think of our stories. We then need to reflect on their views and decide whether they help us to develop our work.

In assessing comments you receive from others on your work you may wish to rewrite your story. You may wish to tweak it a little or just leave it as it is. You may choose to accept some comments and reject others.

It's important to keep a balanced attitude when receiving comments about your work. Always remember that some of it will be useful, but some of it won't. You are the final arbiter of what you take on board and what you reject.

Remember that receiving comments from others just helps speed up the editing process. Please check the [Feedback guidance PDF](#).

7.4 Summary of Week 7

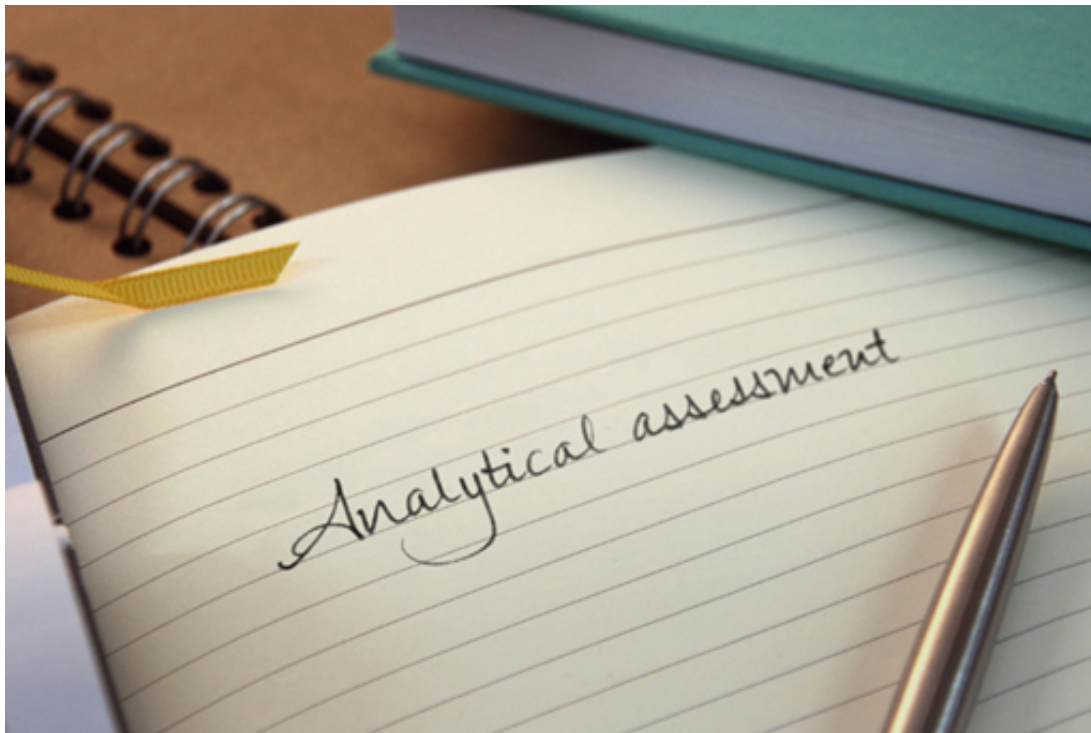


Figure 10

Reading the work of other writers is a valuable learning tool for every writer. This week you learned the skills necessary to assess writing in an analytical way.

You have also reviewed and edited your story and learned how to give and receive feedback.

Week 8 is the final week of the course. You'll submit your short story for review, receive feedback and explore where to take your writing next. You can move on to Week 8 now.

If studying this week of *Start writing fiction* has inspired you, take a look at the area specifically created for you to explore more about writing fiction on [OpenLearn](#).

Week 8: Your final story

Introduction

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Having learned some of the benefits of giving feedback on the work of your fellow writers, and some techniques for doing so, now is the time to test those skills.

After finishing your final story, and giving and receiving feedback from fellow writers, you'll have a chance to reflect on the main tools introduced during the course – those to do with creating characters, portraying characters, and turning characters into short stories. And you'll reflect on how you used your reading, your notebook, and your powers of observation.

You'll consider all of this – and where next to go with your writing.

8.1 Sharing your story

You should be coming to the end of the editing of your short story. It may not be exactly as you want it to be, but you still have some time to continue to work on it.

Activity 8.1: Submitting your story for review

Bring your story to a point where you are relatively happy with it, then submit it for review among the readers or writers you know. Do not exceed the 1000 words limit. Length limits are important and can help instil discipline in your writing and in many circumstances they are there for a reason (as with story competitions).

Assignment guidelines

Ask your reviewers to give you feedback on the following aspects of your assignment – make sure to consider these when writing:

1. What were the strengths and weaknesses of the character portrayals?
2. Were there any very clear, or any confusing, elements of the story (relating to the approaches taught on *Start writing fiction*)?
3. Did the story have a plot, causality and conflict? How did it engage you?

8.1.1 Being your own critic



Figure 1

Before engaging with any comments on your story, write a short reflection passage in your journal on what you think of your work in the next activity.

Activity 8.2 What is working well and less well in your story?

In 200–300 words, analyse what you feel is working well and less well in the story using the following prompts:

- Are the main characters consistent and clear?
- Have they enough conflict and interest?
- Is the setting established?
- Have you done enough research?
- What would you like to develop further?
- Do the language, style and voice fit the characters and content?

8.1.2 Benefits of group work

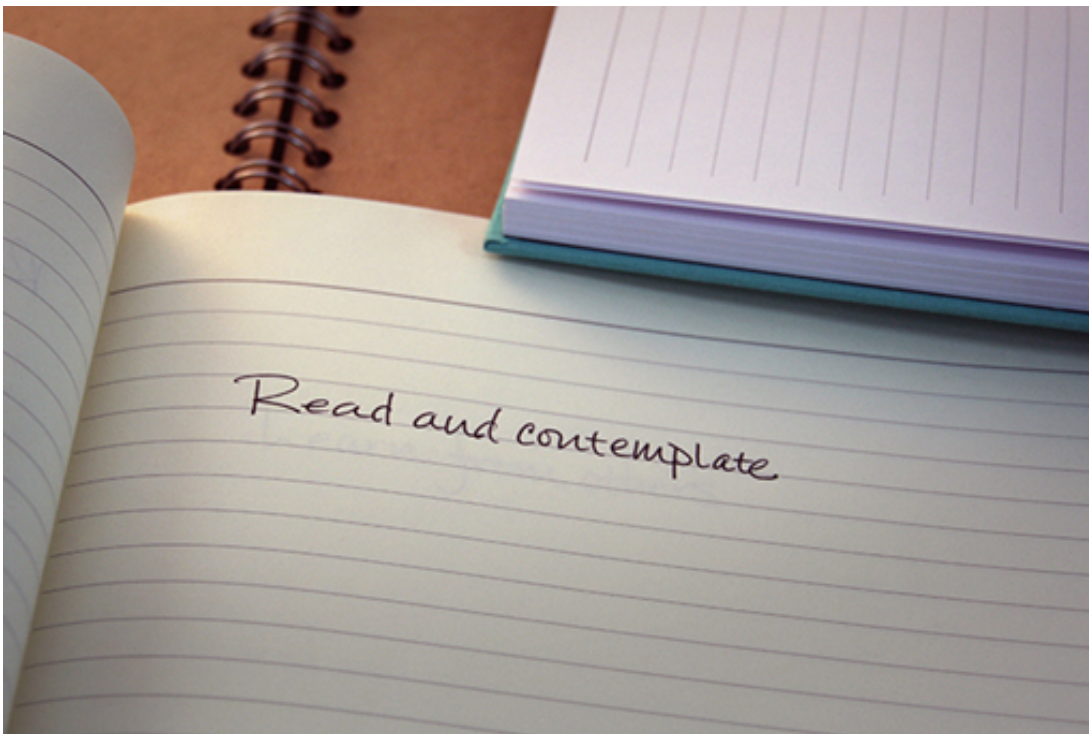


Figure 2

Often, you can learn as much, if not more, from making commentaries about the work of your peers, as you can from the feedback on your own work.

In courses on creative writing, such as those offered at [The Open University](https://www.open.ac.uk), writers get to read and contemplate the feedback that other writers provide, not only on their own work but on the work of other students.

This course has given you a glimpse of the sort of work undertaken in the writing process, along with the sort of collaborative workshops and critiquing that typify further creative writing study.

Obviously, you will be particularly interested in the feedback on your story, but always try to be patient and study the work of your fellow writers. This will help you to better gauge the feedback on your own story.

Learning from others' successes and failures is one of the great benefits of studying creative writing in a group – it accelerates your development as a writer. There are tremendous benefits to be gained from commenting on each other's work and working with fellow writers who have a mutual interest in giving feedback.

8.1.3 Reflect on the feedback



Figure 3

Now it's time to engage some feedback from earlier. You will need to reflect on what has been said before you decide how to act on it. It's crucial not to act too quickly.

Activity 8.3: Reflecting on feedback

Review the comments on your own work and ask these questions:

- Has more than one person made the same point about an aspect of the writing?
- Has anyone said something about it that has surprised you?
- Is there something you thought worked well that someone else has found less successful?
- Is there anything that people think worked better than you did?
- How did the editorial comments compare to your own earlier reflection on the story – the one you wrote in Being your own critic?

Reflect on these comments and decide what you agree with and what you are not sure about. You may need to reflect over several hours, or even days. Do any of the comments help you to think about how you could change the writing for the better?

Try to resist the inevitable urge to defend what you've written, and be open to others' suggestions.

Remember: the point of exchanging feedback on work, and discussing work with fellow writers, is to help you to think about how to improve your writing.

8.2 Editing again

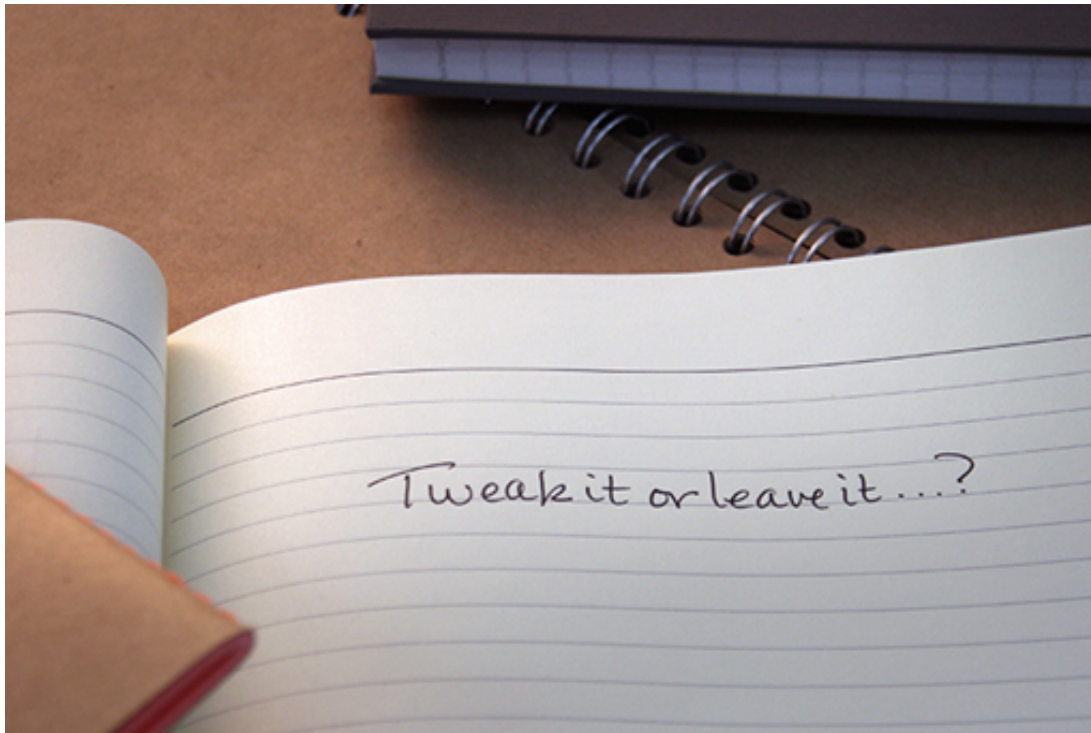


Figure 4

Work on editing your story on the basis of the comments you have received. This may take you some time. That is quite normal.

Remember what was said about receiving feedback:

- In assessing comments you receive from others on your work you may wish to rewrite your story. You may wish to tweak it a little or just leave it as it is. You may choose to accept some comments and reject others.
- It's important to keep a balanced attitude when receiving comments about your work. Always remember that some of it will be useful, but some of it won't. You are the final arbiter of what you take on board and what you reject.
- Remember that receiving comments from others just helps speed up the editing process.

8.2.1 Reflecting again



Figure 5

It pays dividends to not only pause when receiving comments on work but also to write about it.

Activity 8.4 Writing down your reflections

Think about these questions:

- How did you go about the rewrite and why?
- What editorial criticisms did you reject and why?
- Did you agree with all of the recommendations? Sometimes the most difficult thing to do is to cut an apparently successful aspect of a story because it jars with the rest of the story. It might be good but doesn't fit.
- What do you consider to be working well in the story?
- What in the story still needs work?
- How did the editorial comments compare to your own earlier reflection on the story – the one you wrote in Being your own critic?

Now write a reflection in your notebook of 200–300 words on your responses to the editorial comments and your subsequent decisions.

Next, you'll reflect in a different way, in a quiz summarising your journey on this course.

8.3 Week 8 quiz

This final quiz gives you an opportunity to test yourself on what you have learnt from this course.

Complete the [Week 8](#) quiz now.

Open the quiz in a new window or tab then come back here when you've finished.

8.4 The next steps

Video content is not available in this format.



Now you've started writing fiction, where will it take you? The only way to develop as a writer is to keep doing it.

Start writing fiction is designed to give you tools that help with your writing. But eight weeks is a very short time, and it cannot be more than a starting point. Writing is an ongoing activity, and the only way to develop as a writer is to keep doing it.

We hope that you feel inspired by the work you have done during the course, and that you'll use the ideas we have explored here to take your writing further. Find out [how Creative writing is taught](#) at The Open University. You may be interested in continuing your learning by pursuing a qualification in English and Creative Writing:

- [BA \(Honours\) English Literature and Creative Writing](#)
- [MA in English](#)
- [MA in Creative Writing](#).

Well done for completing *Start writing fiction*! Whatever the next step, we hope you've enjoyed the course and found the writing activities useful, and wish you good luck with your future writing projects.

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This course was written by Derek Neale.

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Activity 7.2 extract from Morrison, T. (1992), *Jazz* (p. 6), Chatto and Windus.