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CREATIVE WRITING IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM.

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IN CREATIVE WRITING, UNLIKE IN FORMAL COMPOSITION, STUDENTS CHOOSE THEIR OWN FORMS AND MATERIALS TO EXPRESS THEIR THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS. SUCH AN OBJECTIVE DEMANDS A CLASSROOM ATMOSPHERE IN WHICH STUDENTS CAN EXPRESS THEMSELVES FREELY AND CONFIDENTLY WITHOUT FEAR OF HARSH NEGATIVE CRITICISM. IN ADDITION TO WRITING EXTENSIVELY, STUDENTS CAN BE AIDED BY EXERCISES WHICH HELP TO DEVELOP THE SKILLS NECESSARY FOR EFFECTIVE CREATIVE WRITING. EXAMPLES OF EXERCISES INCLUDE (1) "THE THOUGHT-CARD," ON WHICH STUDENTS RECORD POTENTIAL STORY IDEAS, (2) "THE DEEP WELL," THE UTILIZATION OF A REFLECTIVE PERIOD EACH DAY TO RECOLLECT EXPERIENCES, (3) "THE PERSONAL IMAGE," THE CONSCIOUS ATTEMPT TO CONVEY IN WRITING THE PERSONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF AN IMAGE OR OBJECT, (4) "THE DIALOGUE," THE CREATION OF IMAGINARY DIALOGUE, (5) "THE CONDENSATION," THE REDUCTION OF A LENGTHY MANUSCRIPT TO 15 OR 20 WORDS, PERHAPS IN POETIC FORM, (6) "THE EXPANSION," THE DEVELOPMENT IN PROSE OF A THEME FROM A POEM, (7) "THE CLICHE," THE DELIBERATE ELIMINATION OF ALL CLICHES AND TRITE PHRASES FROM MANUSCRIPTS, AND (8) "THE REVISION," A REWORKING OF A MANUSCRIPT AFTER IT HAS BEEN CRITICIZED BY PEERS OR THE TEACHER. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "THE ENGLISH JOURNAL," VOL. 53 (OCTOBER 1964), 500-503.) (DL)

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Creative Writing in the English Classroom

William C. Dell

If students are to write creatively, they must have a relaxed classroom atmosphere and helpful, constructive reactions to their work. In addition, says this writer, they might use one or more of the exercises described here to develop their skills in writing. William Dell is Assistant Professor of English, Montclair State College, Montclair New Jersey.

MUCH HAS been written lately regarding the need to promote creativity in the classroom. As English teachers, we can do a great deal to foster creativity through writing, if we recognize the difference between creative writing and formal composition. In this article, I will describe eighteen exercises which I have found useful in stimulating students to write creatively.

Creative writing is quite different from formal composition. Students can choose their own materials and forms. Most often they will write from the "I" point of view. Creative writing starts and ends with what is behind the words—the expression of students' own feelings and thoughts—more than with the words themselves or the rules used to put words into composition. Creative writing is emotional and sensual. That is, students are encouraged to express their feelings, even if at times irrational, and to involve as many of their senses as possible in the expression.

The objectives in teaching creative writing are different from those in teaching formal composition. Most often, formal composition is included in the English curriculum to make students proficient in the skills of expository writing: grammar, theme construction, research techniques, paragraphing, spelling, punctuation, etc. I teach creative writing as well, to make students proficient in

knowing and expressing their own feelings and thoughts. Such self-knowledge is an important educational goal.

Students can get a clearer picture of what their feelings and thoughts are by seeing them down on paper. "Through the communication aspect of [their] writing, [students] can secure an audience, a recognition of the validity of [their] ideas, a sense of being understood and accepted, and a measure of social discipline."¹ Students gain a constructive sense of power through seeing their own words, their own feelings and thoughts in print.

Setting the Atmosphere

The classroom atmosphere for teaching creative writing is quite often different from that for teaching formal composition. The teacher's attitude is all important in stimulating creative expression. Negative criticism and fear that one's feelings and thoughts will be judged, censured, or considered unacceptable or unworthy tend to inhibit creative writing. The students must be able to relax and express themselves without fear of censure. Both teacher and students must accept and build up manuscripts rather than reject and tear them down. Grading creative writing should

¹Lawrence H. Conrad, *Teaching Creative Writing* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1937), p. 9.

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be avoided. The manuscripts should be read carefully and constructive comments made. In addition, the instructor should pose alternatives and make suggestions without imposing his own feelings and thoughts on his students. He lets them have, *create* their own.

Creative Writing Exercises

The greatest part of writing creatively is believing that you can do it. A relaxed atmosphere of acceptance in the classroom can foster such a belief within students by building their confidence. In the following paragraphs, I should like to list and describe, as I would explain them to a class, some specific exercises I have found useful to stimulate students to write creatively. I offer them to students mainly as suggestions, not as assignments. Students are free to choose their own materials and forms and pursue their own individual projects in consultation with me. Most often, the students work out the following exercises when they discover that they need them. However, if students did not have the confidence that they could express in words their own feelings and thoughts, and write creatively, these exercises would be of little use to them.

1. *The Frame*.² Find a place by yourself and stay there awhile observing one single object that interests you. Then make a cone from a rolled sheet of paper and look at the object through your cone, i.e., *framing* it. This should sharpen your perception by excluding extraneous details. Write down what you see. Learn to observe things as if they were in frames. Many people, considering this the perspective of the creative artist, think it explains why he is aware of so much detail. Try also framing abstractly an emotion, a person, a sense impression,

²For a comprehensive discussion of "The Frame," see John Lord Lagemann, "Stop, Look, and See," *Reader's Digest* (July, 1963), pp. 128-131.

a specific idea, yourself. Record what you perceive.

2. *The T. C.*³ T. C. means *thought card*. Carry a pack of 3 x 5 inch cards with you at all times. Whenever you have a thought or feeling or observation about anything that strikes you, write it down any way that suits you. Turn in your T. C.'s to the instructor once a week for comment.

3. *The R. C. R. C.* means *reaction card*. When you are assigned readings or asked to experience various other art forms or cultural events, write down on 5 x 8 inch cards how these things make you feel and think—how you *react*. Write your reaction in any form that suits you. Turn in your R. C.'s to the instructor for comment.

4. *The Deep Well*.⁴ When is your most reflective time of day? At this time, take advantage of those things that put you in a reflective mood—setting, position, lights, music, clothes, etc. Put yourself adrift. Go back and down into the well of your past. What do you see, remember, think, feel? Pump it out. Write it down.

5. *The Fantasy*. Kay Boyle, writer and teacher at San Francisco State College, calls this "the night mind." Try to become more aware of your night mind. It is full of interesting material for writing. Try to recall your dreams at night and also your daydreams.

6. *The Image*. Fantasies are replete with imagery. So is all of life, if you are looking for it. Make an observation of something specific and *frame* it. Live with it, involving all of your senses. Then see if you can write down the image in a way or in a context that it becomes symbolic, i.e., represents more than what

³For the concept of "*The Thought Card*," I am indebted to Dr. Sidney B. Simon (Queens College, New York City) and Mr. Neil E. Cook.

⁴For the concept of "*The Deep Well*," I am indebted to Professor Charles N. Schirone (New York University).

it really is. An example: a typewriter becomes for you more than just a typewriter, perhaps a symbol of your feeling about industrialized society. When you find an image, what does it suggest to you about yourself and your world?

7. *The Personal Image.* All of us have our own personal images which may carry meaning only for us, but we are not always aware of these images as such. Examples might be a certain color, a ring, a particular flower, a fire helmet, a piece of newsprint, or a toothpick. List the images that you have and try to become more conscious of others and their meaning. Work these personal images into your writing. Make your writing more *you*.

8. *The Improvisation.* Dramatics, particularly improvisations, can stimulate creative writing. Improvisations are done with two or more people. There are at least two kinds: adaptation improvisations and set improvisations. In the first, think of an opening line indicative of the character you wish to play and the situation. The other persons adapt themselves to the character and situation immediately with their very first impulse, which should reflect their own honest feelings and thoughts. Set improvisations work in much the same way, except that they are based on prearranged themes, characters, situations, and conflicts. Through using improvisations, not only can you gather material and observe characterization, but you can study the development of dialogue. When a writer writes dialogue, he, in a sense, must improvise it. Do some improvisations. Record (in writing or even by tape recorder) some of the dialogue and other usable material. Watch how the dialogue flows out of yourself and the other players. Keep this process in mind when you write dialogue.

9. *The Dialogue.* Imagine yourself in a dialogue with another person, with a group of people, or with yourself (interior monologue). Improvise it on paper.

The trick is that you have to play all of the parts. To learn how to get into other people's shoes, you might try exchanging roles in the improvisations described above so that you have played all of the characters that emerge. Also, you might record a dialogue or conversation you have had recently that particularly interests you. Analyze what you and the other persons said—and why—to get some insight into the dynamics of dialogue and of the people involved.

10. *The Character.* Again, working with improvisations can be a way of learning how to create a successful characterization. Does the character you have played come across as believable? Why or why not? What could have been done? How about the other characters in the improvisation? Written characterizations by you and other students, as well as by published authors, can be analyzed in the same way. Observe and *frame* a certain person who interests you. Study and record the specific details you note about him. Does he seem to have any personal images (see exercise 7)? What is his story? Let your imagination run wild.

11. *The Characterization.* After you have collected your data, write out the characterization, using as images any details of the character that may have become for you symbolic. Your character needs to come alive as an individual in the context of the story and its characters. The character himself may have become an image (see exercise 6), although he must remain believable and realistic. Read some famous short stories. Do the characters in these stories *live*? Why or why not?

12. *The Story.* Recall an informal anecdote or an emotional experience that you have been told or that has happened to you. It should be something that especially interests you. Think through the sequence of events and list them. These form the skeletal structure of your story. From this outline, write a short

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story. In the writing, try to develop a character who comes alive through your words. Does there seem to be any conflict between two or more characters? If so, clarify it. Giving free rein to your imagination, sharpen or add details of plot and dialogue. See if you can work an image into your story. Bring your story to a climax that establishes the theme or emotion that you intend. Go over your story and pick out anything that does not seem real. Why does it seem unreal? What could be done? As you read literature, and experience the cinema and drama, note how the artist handles characterization, conflict, dialogue, imagery, climax.

13. *The Condensation.* Take one of your own prose manuscripts of sizable length and try to reduce it to fifteen to twenty words. What is the overall or strongest emotion of your prose manuscript? Get an image through which you can project this emotion. A good image like a good picture can condense countless words. Perhaps "The Condensation" will take you into the area of poetry.

14. *The Expansion.* Take one of your own poems and try to express it in prose. What is the predominate theme of your poem? Think it through as a logical progression of ideas. What is the best way to represent these ideas in prose—essay paragraphing, sequential plot development, characterization, or interior monologue? "The Expansion" may take you into any number of creative prose areas.⁵

15. *The Cliché and The Trite Line.* Go through all of your T. C.'s, R. C.'s, creative writing exercises, and projects. Underline any wording that resembles a cliché or is the slightest bit trite. Learn

⁵"The Expansion," as well as "The Condensation," can be used as exercises not only with students' writing, but with readings suggested by the instructor.

to avoid all such expressions. Have a friend read over your work for "The Cliché" and "The Trite Line." He can be more objective. You may have only one line in a whole manuscript that is uniquely *you*. Start there; throw the rest out.

16. *The Ditto Anthology.* That you might study carefully the writing of other students, and they yours, type on a ditto sheet an example of your best writing. These sheets, duplicated and compiled, will give you an anthology of student creative writing to be read and discussed in and out of class.

17. *The Critique.* Do a critique of one or more selections from "The Ditto Anthology." Then do a critique of one or more of your own manuscripts. Emphasize the positive in your critiques. What is good about the writing? What constructive suggestions can you make for the improvement of the manuscript? The author wants to see what gets across to the reader and what does not. He can then decide what needs to be done.

18. *The Revision.* Do a revision of one of your manuscripts that need reworking. Take into consideration relevant comments noted on the manuscript by the instructor and any critiques done by yourself or other students. Clarify for yourself exactly what you are trying to do. What are your objectives with this manuscript? What is the emotion you are trying to project? What is the theme? What precisely is the form that you are attempting to use, and does it fit the content?

Creative writing has its own particular objectives, classroom atmosphere, and writing exercises. Writing creatively, students learn the process of becoming aware of and expressing their own feelings and thoughts. That it can promote such a significant educational goal as self-knowledge should give creative writing an important place in the English curriculum.

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