

# Creative Writing 1.1: Essential Writing Skills



# Introduction

## [Welcome to Creative Writing 1.1: Essential Writing Skills \[video\]](#)

The course unit is designed to give you the skills you need to start writing creatively. You'll learn basic tips and techniques, such as keeping a writer's notebook and commonplace book, using freewriting to release your thoughts, observation and the five senses and building descriptive prose from observation. You'll also learn about writing about people – observing and describing people in prose: your emotions, character, possessions, motivation and history. You'll discover how to make your characters speak: dialogue, point of view and creating variation and balance within the text. You'll learn fundamental techniques in style and language: writing styles (formal, technical, journalistic, etc.), narrative voice and persona, using language with simplicity, economy, clarity and accuracy, using imagery. And you will begin learning about plot and structure: getting inspiration, creating interest with character and conflict, mapping a plotline, beginnings, middles and ends, plot structures (the quest, rebirth, etc.) and themes - as well as the importance of redrafting your work.

## **Course Aims**

The course unit was written by experienced academics and creative practitioners in collaboration with OCA and aims to:

1. Give practice in writing creatively from research, direct sensory experience and detailed observation of people.
2. Explore language and style in prose.
3. Develop skills in drafting, evaluating and editing texts.
4. Develop your reflective skills.

## Learning Outcomes

The **learning outcomes** for the course unit are:

1. Write effectively, drawing on observation, research, imagery and sensory experience (A1).
2. Show development of language, variety, style, voice and expression within your writing (A2).
3. Demonstrate the practice of writing as communication in drafts, editing and critiquing (A3).
4. Critically reflect on your own learning experience (A4).

## Course Breakdown

The course unit is divided into **ten projects**, each with a series of research tasks, exercises, and assignments.

**Project 1** is a general introduction to the unit.

**Project 2** is called Starting to Write, which will introduce you to some of the principles of creative writing. Get rid of any ideas that creative writing can't be taught - it is all about craft and technique!

**Project 3** introduces the technique of sensory description and you will begin to think about creating characters.

In **Project 4**, you will continue to build on these characterisation skills. Readers need to care about your characters before you can start creating stories for them!

**Project 5** introduces the skill of plotting - and putting your characters into particular situations.

In **Project 6** you will learn about writing dialogue and how to balance this with your prose.

**Project 7** discusses Point of View - in other words, who is telling the story. This, you will find, is one of the most important decisions a writer should make as you start a piece of work.

**Project 8** considers style, voice and language.

**Project 9** looks at structure - and the importance of beginnings, middles and endings.

**Project 10** will consider the importance of redrafting - because no writing comes out perfect the first time, and even the best writers need to redraft and refine their work.

## **Feedback and Assessment**

You will be supported through the course unit by receiving formative feedback from a tutor, to help you develop your work. At the end of your course unit, if you are working towards a qualification, you will be able to submit for **summative (formal) assessment**.

For assessment you'll need to submit a cross-section of the work you've done on this course unit, as outlined in your assessment guidelines.

You can access both Assessment Guidelines and Assessment Criteria via the [Assessment Guidance](#) section available on OCA Learn.

If you've any questions regarding assessment, please speak with your tutor.

## **Course Resources**

For this specific course unit you'll need: pens, notebooks (they don't need to be fancy or expensive!), access to a computer and the internet.

Being a writer doesn't require much in the way of equipment!

You'll find the reading list for this unit in the [Resources section](#).

## Getting Started

If you are new to OCA and to distance learning, the following sub-course will help you get started. It will introduce you to OCA study, what it means to be an OCA student, and provides guidance and signposting of essential and useful resources, contacts and details on joining in with the OCA Community. If you have already studied another unit or Foundation course with OCA, you may want to use this as a refresher, or to help guide you around OCA Learn.

### [Getting Started: An Introduction to OCA Study](#)

Another important area for you as a student will be your degree **department space** (available under 'My Courses'). Here you will find links to your course materials and additional resources which are designed to support your learning. You can connect with your fellow students, and can also use this area to access online group sessions, ask questions to the tutor team and send messages to your tutors and peers.

## Starting your course unit

You should now be ready to start your course unit. Don't worry if you are still getting to grips with using your blog, adjusting to this form of learning, or don't have all the resources you need. There's plenty of time to develop these as you progress. Remember that if you get stuck along the way there's support available from OCA and encouragement from your fellow students.

### Here are three things to keep in mind:

1. There will be a **regular group meeting** to welcome all new starters. Look out for an invitation to this.
2. Join your **course forum** and say hello to your fellow students.
3. If any of the course exercises ask you to **join a discussion online**, make sure you take part. You'll be surprised how much you can learn from your peers.

# Project 2: Starting to Write

In Project 1 you laid some foundations that will be helpful for you for the rest of your writing life. You should now have a writing diary, at least one notebook, and a commonplace book, and you should have met your tutor as well as some of the other students on this unit.

In Project 2 you will focus on **developing some more writing skills**. You'll be learning how to write descriptively, using imagery and other literary techniques such as similes and metaphors, to create precise and vivid pieces of prose.

At the end of Part 2 you'll prepare and submit your **first written assignment** to your tutor. This will consist of approximately **1000 words** of creative writing and a **500-word Reflective Commentary**.

# The Blank Page

Many writers feel reluctant to get started. They look at the blank page in front of them and feel that whatever they write will be rubbish. This is a very common fear. To overcome it, and get writing, you need to silence your inner editor and let yourself write, with no concern for whether it's any good or not. **Just write.**

Once you've got something on the page, you can redraft and make it better. But you need to get the first draft on paper before you can improve it.

Your first draft is a private draft, seen only by you, so don't worry about its quality: Nobody else will read it! Allow yourself to write lots and lots of first drafts, just to enjoy the sensation of writing. The truth is that the only way to learn how to write well is through practice. You need to dive in, and write lots – every day if you can, even if it's only for twenty minutes or so at a time.

A useful technique for writers who are confronting the blank page and feeling daunted about putting down any words, is **freewriting**. It is a form of writing that takes the pressure off, because it's about the act of writing, not about the finished product.

## Exercise 1: Freewriting

- **Choose a topic**, perhaps a single word. (At first you'll choose your topics at random, but later you might wish to explore specific themes that interest you). If you're stuck, choose one of the following:
  - lunch
  - gardens
  - car
  - zoo
  - yellow.
- **Next, decide on a time limit.** At first, make this quite short; ten minutes, for example. If you don't have a timer handy, give yourself the challenge of writing to the bottom of the page.
- **Start writing.** It doesn't matter what you write. It doesn't matter if the topic changes.

- This is the most important rule: **once you start writing, you mustn't stop.** You mustn't lay down your pen at all. If you run out of things to say, write 'I can't think of what to say', or 'what shall I write, what shall I write,' or repeat the last word you wrote or any other repetitive phrase over and over until you get going again (it won't be long).
- **Don't stop to correct your work.** Don't correct spellings, grammar or punctuation, or the proper sequence of events. Don't cross things out. This is not the time for editing, it's the time for keeping going.
- **Use your memories to keep writing.** For example, perhaps your subject is 'sky' and you begin by writing about stars. Then a memory of lying on your back watching the clouds comes to you, but as you write about that, you recall what you did before or after watching the clouds, so you write about that, and as you do, you get interested in writing about the people you were with. When memory runs out, make stuff up.
- **Remember** that none of this needs to see the light of day, so it really doesn't matter what you write.
- **Read through your work straight away,** especially if you don't think you'll be able to read your handwriting later. Use a highlighter to indicate any words or phrases that interest you. Perhaps you like how they sound, or perhaps you realise you've more to say about them. These can provide prompts for further writing exercises at a later date, so keep a note of them.

Freewriting is extremely useful as an exercise to get the writing muscles working before you start anything else in your writing day. With freewriting, you're not allowed to constantly correct your own writing, so you can switch off that inner editor's voice that tells you that your writing isn't good enough.

## Exercise 2: Morning Pages

**Try freewriting when you first wake up in the morning.**

By writing in this half-trance state, you lift the lid to your internal world. Also, your inner critic will still be half-asleep!



## Freewriting as a routine

Aim to get into the habit of freewriting for about ten minutes at the start of your writing time – or you may prefer to do it on waking each morning. You might use one of your existing notebooks, or you could select a notebook that you use only for freewriting.

Don't be afraid to write at great speed or to plunge into what may seem like incoherence. As you write, make no judgement about what is interesting and what isn't. Freewriting can tap into the deepest levels of your thoughts and ideas, and may generate ideas for more structured pieces of writing; it often unearths forgotten events or images. Think of the writing as having a life of its own and let it run through you onto the page.

### Reading Task: 'Write about what you don't know'

Read Part 3 'Write about what you don't know' in [Andrew Cowan, \*The Art of Writing Fiction\* \(2011\) Taylor and Francis Group](#) available on the UCA online library.

### Exercise 3: Further freewriting

To **get you started on a regular routine** of freewriting, have another go now.

- **Grab a notebook** and put one of the following phrases at the top of the page:
  - I'm walking through a forest at night
  - I'm walking through a city at night

Notice that as soon as you write the words (in fact, as soon as you read them), associations come into your mind.

- **Get your pen onto the paper and write**, however ridiculous or clumsy it might feel at the time.
- **Keep going for at least five minutes.** Try ten minutes if you can.
- You may feel quite excited about how this helps the thoughts flow onto the page, so **start again and this time, choose your own words.** You may find opening a book at random and picking a sentence from the open pages can also be a helpful prompt.

## Reading Task: Permission to write

**Read** Chapter 32, 'Who Gave You Permission?' in [Natalie Goldberg, \*Wild Mind: Living the Writer's Life\* \(2011\) Open Road Integrated Media, Inc](#) via the UCA online library. **Reflect on your reading in your writing diary.** Does the chapter resonate with you – do you feel you need permission to be a writer or are you confident enough already to take the plunge?

# Observational Writing

The ability to observe, understand and write about your experiences is an important part of being a writer. If you want a reader to understand what a particular experience was like, you need to pay attention and try to convey the experience in words in such a way that the reader feels like they've walked in your shoes.

If you've seen something new or surprising in an everyday object, it's your job as a writer to convey that experience through the quality of your writing, just as an artist does; like Vincent Van Gogh tried to convey what he saw in a vase of sunflowers.

Read the following passage and pay attention to the visual imagery:

My father's bed was against the south wall. It always looked rumpled and unmade because he lay on top of it more than he slept within any folds it might have had. Beside it, there was a little brown table. An archaic goose-necked reading light, a battered table radio, a mound of wooden matches, one or two packages of tobacco, a deck of cigarette papers and an overflowing ashtray cluttered its surface. The brown larvae of tobacco shreds and the grey flecks of ash covered both the table and the floor beneath it. The once-varnished surface of the table was disfigured by numerous black scars and gashes inflicted by the neglected burning cigarettes of many years.

Alistair MacLeod, *'The Boat' in Island: Collected Stories (2002)*.

Writing in this way is related to painting, drawing, photography or film; although we are using words, we are creating visual pictures in a reader's mind. What's interesting about the passage above is that the description of the room also starts to suggest something of the person whose room it belongs to. In Project 4 you'll explore in more detail how possessions can be used to suggest character.

The important thing is to learn to see clearly and accurately. The problem should not be *'What shall I write?'* but rather, *'How can I do justice to the richness of the world around me?'*

## Reading Task: Description

**Open a novel at random** and study the words on the open pages. How much of it is description? If you've opened to a page that's mostly dialogue, try another. Are these things ordinary or unusual? How much detail does the author give the reader? **Reflect in your writing diary** on how well you think your chosen writer makes use of description.

### Exercise 4: Describe an ordinary object

- **Find an object to write about** – it could be anything: a thimble, a pebble, a coffee cup or a houseplant.
- In your notebook, **make a list of all its characteristics and physical qualities**. In other words, write down what you can see in front of you as accurately as you can. If visual observation is difficult for you, focus on its texture.
- **How easy is it to describe?** Can you start to move away from predictable imagery, and **describe the object in more surprising ways?** For instance, you might have chosen a jar of marmalade. A straightforward description might include: clear glass, printed label, orange colour, screw top lying on the table, sticky inside. But how about: tiger-striped, tacky like glue, bubbling jelly, open-mouthed welcome-mouthed, crystal tangerine contents, a jar ripe for fishing trips – all it needs is a bit of string, marmalade like a bubble-filled glass paperweight.

**Let your imagination run free as you describe your chosen object** - it doesn't matter how far-fetched you become.

### Exercise 5: Describe a location

- **Close your eyes and visualise a location** that you experienced fairly recently. It could be your local shop or a room in a friend's house.

Make this a stationary experience, rather than a busy, moving one. **Don't bring dialogue or action into this writing.**

- **Start to describe the scene, being as precise as you can.** Again, begin with accuracy and physical characteristics, but then be more imaginative – don't worry about moving from truth into fiction.

## Exercise 6: Editing your descriptive writing

Return to the work you produced in Exercises 4 and 5.

- **Using a highlighter pen**, pick out the parts that you think are the freshest and most original or interesting.
- **Use a red pen** to strike through those parts you feel aren't working.
- **Type up your description** onto a screen, omitting any parts you've scored through. Start to tweak any bits that could be improved and delete anything else that could go.

Don't feel this has to be a perfect, definitive descriptive piece. Just attempt to **make a draft** that you feel happy with.

### **Tip: Observe as much as you can**

Your observations are your writer's archive. Everything you observe can be stored and used, and absolutely nothing is without interest for the writer. Anything can be the starting point for a new piece of writing. Keep your mind alert as you move through the world – try to see things with a fresh, imaginative slant – and store your thoughts in your notebooks.

# Sensory writing

Give a baby an object and it will suck, smell, feel and listen to it. It is only as we get older that sight and language assume pre-eminence. So having now explored sight in some depth, you'll consider the other senses.

“If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.”

Poet and illustrator, William Blake.

Blake’s words hold an important message for us as writers. Some people fear that they can’t write because their lives are too ordinary, but there have been great writers – such as Janet Frame, Emily Dickinson, Jane Austen or the Brontë sisters – who could be said to have led very restricted lives. Their inner selves burned with such curiosity that they could create extraordinary new fictional worlds from their everyday experiences. William Blake’s *‘doors of perception’* can be opened in many ways.

## Reading Task: ‘Don’t tell me...’

**Read** Part 4, *‘Don’t tell me...’* in [Andrew Cowan, \*The Art of Writing Fiction\* \(2011\) Taylor and Francis Group](#) available on the UCA online library. **Reflect in your writing diary** on the advice to *‘show, don’t tell’* in your writing.

## Exercise 7: Touch, taste, smell, hearing

- **Move around your environment now, searching for things to feel.**  
Run your fingers along walls, over fabrics. Touch your cheek with objects that are shiny or furry. Sense the movement of cool or warm air over your skin. Recall painful sensations, and agreeable ones.
- **Now turn to taste.** Move into the kitchen and spend time delighting (or shuddering) at the things you can put on your tongue.
- **Search for things to smell.** You could find these in bedrooms, bathrooms and kitchens.
- **When it’s dark, turn the lights off and wait for tiny sounds.**  
Concentrate on listening and be patient – it may take a minute or so to start to notice sounds that you’re usually used to tuning out.

**Make notes** on all these experiences, recording anything that comes to mind.

### **For example**

Here is an extract from *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr, in which Marie-Laure, a young blind girl, finds her way around a museum where her father works. Here, Anthony Doerr describes how each section of the museum smells to Marie-Laure:

“Sixteen paces to the water fountain, sixteen back. Forty-two to the stairwell, forty-two back. Marie-Laure draws maps in her head, unreels a hundred yards of imaginary twine, and then turns and reels it back in. Botany smells like glue and blotter paper and pressed flowers. Paleontology smells like rock dust, bone dust. Biology smells like formalin and old fruit; it is loaded with heavy cool jars in which float things she has only had described for her: the pale coiled ropes of rattlesnakes, the severed hands of gorillas. Entomology smells like mothballs and oil: a preservative that, Dr. Geffard explains, is called naphthalene. Offices smell of carbon paper, or cigar smoke, or brandy, or perfume.”

Anthony Doerr, *All the Light We Cannot See* (2014) Fourth Estate. p.44.

Doerr uses Marie-Laure’s point of view of this section, so he only tells us the things she knows (because another character has told her) or the things she perceives. Doerr mostly uses the sense of smell to create the world of the museum. The final sentence lets the reader know that this isn’t a novel set in the contemporary period – not many offices smell of cigars these days! In fact, this novel is set during World War Two.

## Exercise 8: Using non-visual senses

**Look back** through the notes you have written so far and **use a highlighter** on description that went beyond the purely visual. It isn't easy to capture the sense of smell or taste on paper because we have a much more limited vocabulary for such sensations. One useful way to explore the other senses is temporarily to shut off the faculty of sight.

- **Choose a small household object** – preferably one that might have taste, sound or smell.
- **Shut your eyes and explore the object**; touching, smelling, even listening to it. Then put the object down and, without looking at it, **free-write your sensations**.
- **Now look at the object** and add to your notebook all the things you can see.
- **Read through your notes and redraft them**. Add the thoughts you now have that didn't occur to you at the time.

### Letting it flow

Once you begin to write in this way you may find it difficult to stop, because the flow of sensation itself never stops (although it may slow down or speed up). Indeed, you should now be well on the way to realising what William Blake meant when he '*cleansed the doors of perception*' to find the world infinite. Recording perceptions like this is a good way to overcome writer's block. You can think of this as stepping into a new dimension of the imagination.

### Reading Task: Capturing the Moment

Read Chapter 2, '*Capturing the Moment*' from [Ailsa Cox, \*Writing Short Stories\* \(2016\) Taylor and Francis Group](#), available on the UCA online library.



## Exercise 9: Moving outdoors

If you can, **sit outdoors or by an open door or window**, with your eyes closed.

- Try to **focus** on what you can perceive. Take your time.
- Now **write down your experiences** – smells and sounds, and any sensations that you become aware of: the feel of grass under your feet or the bench you sat on; the touch of wind, sun or rain.
- **Repeat** this exercise with your eyes open and your notebook on your lap. Add all the things you can actually see to your notes.

## Exercise 10: Writing and walking

**Go out for a walk** if you can, or visit a different location and take your notebook with you. **Write down everything that is happening around you.**

- This time, **record every sensation**; from the contact your feet make with the ground to the feel of the wind in your hair. Try to keep up a flow of words, and **leave no sensation unexplored or unrecorded**. Touch the things around you – walls, railings, hedges – as you pass by. Dip your hands in water if there is any. Inhale and record any scents: a bonfire; new paint, flowers, or traffic fumes. **Write it all down.**
- **Type up your initial notes**, adding any information or thoughts that didn't occur to you initially.

You now have lots of experience at writing down your observations and recording sensory details. This will stand you in good stead when creating fictional scenes, as bringing in these kinds of precise details will help you to create a vivid and convincing world for your readers to enter.

# Similes & Metaphors

The effective use of imagery is one of the most powerful skills that a writer can master. Imagery works by triggering memories of things that your readers have already experienced and inviting them to apply that knowledge to the object, person or place you are describing.

**A metaphor is an image that works by describing something by means of something else.** A metaphor isn't literally true, but we use them in speech all the time. Some are so familiar that they've become cliches – opening a can of worms, getting cold feet, having nerves of steel.

In writing, cliches should be avoided because if you're using them, you're not writing in your own words, but in words that have been used a million times before. As a writer, you should be trying to look at the world afresh, and your images should be fresh too.

**A simile is a type of metaphor,** but one in which the comparison is made explicit by means of the word 'as' or 'like' – happy as a clam, good as gold, sleeping like a baby.

## Exercise 11: Playing with cliches

Read these familiar expressions and replace the words in **bold** with your own:

- Flat as a **Pancake**
- Good as **Gold**
- Pretty as a **Picture**
- White as a **Sheet**
- Cold as **Ice**
- Like looking for a **Needle in a Haystack**
- Hard as **Nails**
- Meek as a **Lamb**

## Research Task: Literary terms

Using all the **research facilities** at your disposal, check that you're confident of the **meanings of the following terms**:

- Metaphor
- Simile
- Imagery
- Figurative language
- Symbolism
- Cliche

## Exercise 12: Creating Imagery

Trawl through any of the work you've done on your computer or in your notebook.

- **Highlight** any object, landscape, action, person or emotion.
- **Take each item in turn and see if you can describe it more effectively.** Remember you can use adjectives, metaphors, similes and descriptions based on any of the five senses.

## Reading Task: Imagery

**Choose a book you've been meaning to read for a while.** Read it with your writer's mind.

Keep your writing diary beside you and **jot down any thoughts** you have about the writer's use of **imagery and description**. Does the writer use metaphorical language? Are things precisely described? Is the language lyrical or pared back – or somewhere in between? How effective do you find the writer's use of imagery?

# Descriptive Prose

'I love getting lost in other people's writing.

And nothing more so than in a well-written piece of descriptive prose - something that is so vivid I have to pause and relish it a moment longer.'

*Matthew J Morrison (2016) Examples of Descriptive Prose to Inspire Your Writing [Online blog article].*

## Exercise 13: Adding detail

- **Sift through your notebook** for a **description of a holiday** or a time when you were away from home for a few days. (For example, as a result of the exercises in Project 1).
- Use a highlighter to **indicate any parts you're happy with** and a red pen to **score out parts you don't think are working**.
- Ask yourself:
  - Am I focusing on detail?
  - Could I improve it by including more detailed descriptions?
- **Type up the parts that you are happy with**, and add imagery, observations and sensory details to enrich the piece, whether or not it really happened.

## Close-up detail

Skimming over a description loses readers; close-up focus absorbs them. The following passages give us insights on subjects with a holiday flavour by building words into sentences and paragraphs that focus on tiny details:

I pulled the cornetto apart. It was still warm and flaky because it was so fresh. It oozed apricot jam. I watched Adolfo as the man kept carrying in the boxes of cakes, and carrying out empty ones when Adolfo had finished with them.

The glass case quickly filled up with flat tarts full of yellow custard and scattered with crushed almonds; pies covered with heavily glazed fruits; rolls of apple strudel full of spice, sultanas and pine-nuts. The last box carried in contained savoury things, which were set in a space reserved for them on the left: crisp bread rolls with cheese and salami protruding from them; long savoury pastries full of smoked ham and egg.

I admired the speed and neatness with which Adolfo emptied the boxes and filled the case, gently layering some of the flat cakes like tiles on a roof.

Deirdre Madden, *Remembering Light and Stone* (2014).

Deirdre Madden uses a listing technique to create a sense of luxuriance, building layer upon layer of language, just like the cakes are layered in the display cabinet. But if you read the passage aloud you'll hear how delicately each word balances upon the next.

## Exercise 14: Close Up Detail

**Return to an old piece of writing** and read it over with an eye for the details. Are there any places where you're vague or where you generalise? Could these be improved by using more close-up, specific detail?

- **Rewrite the piece**, focusing on specific, precise detail as much as possible.

**Compare the two versions** and decide which you prefer. Perhaps each has its strengths, and a version somewhere between the two would be the strongest.

- **Write the piece again**, making use of the strengths of each version.

# Thinking Reflectively

“I have lived in writing, like a spoonful of water in a river.”

Mavis Gallant, Canadian short story writer.

In this section you'll begin by reflecting on some of the techniques used by other writers, before analysing your own writing techniques and reflecting on your strengths and weaknesses.

No one decides to compose a symphony without first listening to a lot of symphonies; and no one becomes a painter without first looking at a lot of painting. And so it is with writing; **if you want to write, you must read**. Immerse yourself in your chosen artform and learn from those who've gone before you.

Writers are unconsciously influenced by everything they read, watch, listen to and think about, as well as by their everyday experiences. But influence can also be something conscious. Many writers start off by imitating others, and as a new writer yourself you may already have favourite authors whose style you admire and which may influence your own. There is nothing wrong with this. Indeed, you might find it helpful to experiment with writing in a number of radically different styles.

## Exercise 15: Analysing the work of others

This exercise is designed to introduce the idea of **analysing and reflecting** on the work of others.

**Choose a short story or novel** that you have to hand and read the first **200 words**.

In your writing diary, **jot down your responses** to the following questions:

- What is this excerpt about? Who's in it and what happens? Is it just a piece of descriptive writing?
- Imagine you're describing the work to somebody else. What would you say about it?

- Do you like it? Hate it? Do you find it intriguing, influential or outdated, and if so, why? Does the work connect to wider ideas or to other writers' work?

Don't worry about 'getting it wrong' or 'missing the point'. This is your own opinion about a writer, your personal response, so there's no possibility of having the wrong response.

## Exercise 16: Assessment criteria

- **Read the assessment criteria** for this unit, which you'll find in the [Assessment Guidance](#).
- **Review** how you think you are doing in each area and **make notes** in your writing diary.

## Reflective Commentaries

With each assignment you submit to your tutor, you're asked to write an accompanying **500-word Reflective Commentary** (apart from the final assignment, which requires a longer reflective piece). This commentary should **focus on the creative work you are submitting** to your tutor and **analyse the writing techniques** that you're making use of in your work. You should also refer to what you've been reading, and suggest how your reading has influenced your own writing.

## Research Task: How to Write a Good Reflective Commentary

**Read** the weareoca blog post '[Writing a good reflective commentary](#)'.

Remember to use the **Harvard Referencing Style** for any quotations you include from the work of other writers. You can find a guide to the Harvard Referencing Style in The Library Guidance.

## Reading Task: The Critical Writing Guide

**Read [The Critical Writing Guide](#)** which is available on OCA Learn. As well as having lots of guidance on how to write a **Reflective Commentary**, it also has plenty of examples by other students.

## Length

Your creative pieces may be **around 200 to 700 words** at present. Think of them as parts of incomplete whole stories rather than being disembodied accounts. **Leave them open-ended** so that they can be continued, rather than trying to sum-up with some well-chosen phrases at the end. As you move through the unit, the length of the pieces will inevitably increase.

Different types of writing can be divided up into different forms, and in fiction, word count is one of the most important ways of defining form. You may have heard of **'flash fiction'**, a term for very short stories that can range from **6** (yes, 6 – that's not a typo!) **to 750 words**. Flash fiction is popular all over the world and is also known as micro-fiction, nano-fiction, short shorts and sudden fiction.

Anything **over 1000 words** is getting rather long for flash fiction and is entering the domain of the short story. Novellas are longer than short stories but shorter than novels, and are often between **17,500 and 40,000 words**, but the dividing line between a short story and a novella is blurred. Many short story competitions specify lengths of **between 2000 and 8000 words**, so this is a good ballpark figure.

Novels vary considerably in terms of word count, but most are upwards of **80,000 words** (and can be much higher, especially for fantasy and sci-fi where the authors need to do more 'world building').

In this course the longest assignment you'll be asked to submit is **3000 words** (Assignment 5); this might be a complete short story or an extract from a potentially longer piece of work.



## Exercise 17: Analysing your own work

**Look through** your creative pieces so far and **collate a list** of your favourite pieces of roughly **300-700 words each**.

When you've got three or four pieces of work in your list, **read through** each one and **think about** the following aspects:

- What techniques are you using? (refer back to the blog post, '*How to write a good reflective commentary*' for a list of possible techniques).
- What is working well in the writing in your opinion?
- What would you like to improve? How could you go about redrafting it?
- Has it been influenced by anything you've read? Any stories or novels, or any books or articles on the craft of writing?
- Look at the **Learning Outcomes** for this unit and reflect on how well you're moving towards meeting them (these are listed in the introduction).

**Make notes in your writing diary for each of your chosen pieces of work.**

# Assignment One: Getting Started

This first assignment is not submitted for formal assessment, but it will help your tutor to get to know your work better so they can start to give you helpful advice for developing it further.

**Read through each section in Project 2 again.** You may need (or want) to repeat some of the exercises – make sure you’ve done each one at least once.

**Choose the two pieces of writing you like the best.** If you want to do any further work on them, this is your opportunity. **Write around 1000 words** in total (no more). Each piece might be around **500 words** each, or you might submit a longer and a shorter piece that together add up to **1000 words**.

Up until now, you may have kept your writing to yourself so that you don’t feel inhibited about writing. But sooner or later you’ll want to show your finished work to someone else. On this unit that person will be your tutor, and the act of showing anyone a piece of writing is a symbolic one: it recognises that you are taking your work from the private to the public domain. Even though your relationship with your tutor is a personal one, you should think of them as your writing audience.

Ensure you put your name, student number, course name (“1.1 Essential Writing Skills”) and assignment number on all pieces of work you are submitting. Put this information in the header or footer field so it appears automatically on every page. Double space your work and number your pages.

When you have finished the creative component of this assignment, you should **write your 500-word Reflective Commentary**, using the earlier guidance.

Submit your work using OCA Learn before moving onto the next project. Please refer to the [Getting Started: An Introduction to OCA Study](#) for information on how to submit your work using OCA Learn. **Once submitted your tutor will give feedback on this assignment.**