
UNIT 1 WHAT IS CREATIVE WRITING?

Structure

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1.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Writing is an art, and more so creative writing, which is an expression of your creative urge.

You will find this course not only informative but it will also stimulate your creative impulse. This course not only discusses the various aspects of creative writing, but also helps you mould yourself into a writer.

In this first Unit, certain fundamental ideas are discussed. We start by defining creative writing and go on to the assumption that writing is a social act, and that man writes because he must share with others what he thinks and feels.

By the end of this unit you will be able to:

- answer the most fundamental question i.e. whether creative writing can be taught,
- distinguish between creative and non-creative writing,
- follow the tips that we will provide to begin writing in a creative manner.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Man is a social animal. Once his primary needs such as food, shelter and clothing are met, it becomes necessary for him to fulfil the social need of communication. He must communicate with other human beings not only to seek and impart information, but also to share with them his experiences, his joys and sorrows. The signals man makes through speech, action or artistic creation, all have this common purpose—to be understood by others.

Why does one write? There could be some easy yet inadequate answers to this question, such as money, vanity, or drive for fame. All these might be true to some extent. But, basically and more importantly, the answer lies in the urge of the writer to communicate a thought or a feeling that is, to express himself. As T.S. Eliot has said, ‘You write because you feel the need to free yourself of something’. This means that it is a psychological and aesthetic compulsion. It also becomes a social need when you write about and for other people, so as to be able to establish a bond with them. As for the reader, when he goes through the work of a master, he will be entering a new world, with its unique social situations, characters and emotions.

1.2 WHAT IS CREATIVE WRITING?

All writing can be broadly classified into two categories; (a) creative and (b) non-creative. Let us first consider the non-creative writing. It deals with ideas, its purpose is to inform and it adds to your information and widens your knowledge. Books on history, religion and science, etc., belong to this category. In order to achieve this purpose of informing, a writer would have to be analytical in his approach, and present his arguments methodically and lucidly so that his writing is easy to comprehend.

On the other hand, creative writing is almost a spiritual activity. Its purpose is not to inform, but to reveal. A highly creative writer meditates on either concrete things of the world, or on abstract thoughts like love or divinity, and pours out his feelings in his writing. Or, bringing his unique imagination into play, he may interact with life around and write about social situations and events, so as to enlighten, uplift and transport, in a manner all his own—as in the novel or short story. You can sense his individual vision in his writings.

Although, on the basis of the subject-matter, all writings can be divided into creative and non-creative, it is not unusual that a highly imaginative writer can produce a non-creative work in a creative manner. And such a work uplifts even as it informs. Conversely, in the hands of an ordinary writer, even a novel or a short story can make very dull reading, duller than any non-creative work.

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Why does one try to communicate with others?

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- ii) Distinguish between creative and non-creative writing. Can the distinction be maintained in all cases?

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of the Unit)

1.3 ASPECTS OF CREATIVE WRITING

Every literary work, big or small, essentially consists of four aspects:

1.3.1 Content

The essence of content is experience. Experience is what one acquires from the life around, through one’s senses, by observing things that happen. No writer can possibly write in a vacuum. He would have seen life around him in its various situations, happy and sad, harsh and poignant, and he would have made mental notes of everything. When, suddenly, it occurs to him to write a story with a certain event as its centre, with a particular set of characters and the right elements, which he had once accumulated in his mind and which have in the meanwhile undergone a strange transformation within him, will begin tumbling out of their own accord and take a new life on paper. Even when one invents a story, its elements would somewhere resemble the real. Otherwise, the writing will lack credibility and authenticity. A well-written work should always give the reader the feeling that it is real; it should never make him say, ‘Oh, how could this ever happen!’ Hence, it is necessary for a writer to keep his eyes and ears open and closely observe the life around so as to be able to stock those images for use in the future.

1.3.2 Form

Form has two meanings: Firstly, literary form and secondly, structural form.

For literary form, the content itself generally decides what form it should take. Whether a particular insight should come out as a story or a novel, or its nature and quality are such that nothing but a poem expresses it fully, is not generally decided consciously. It comes on its own with the idea of writing itself. Occasionally, the writer may be in a dilemma and has to decide, taking all factors into consideration, which form to choose.

1.3.3 Structure

As for its structural sense, the guiding principle should be easy communication for easy comprehension. In order to achieve a good structure, the writer should first of all order his material, that is, decide –(a) how much of what should be in the work, and (b) in what order. Logic, commonsense and experience, drawn from one’s wide reading, will help here. Just as a 500-page novel cannot be managed with only two characters, an eight-page story cannot have two dozen characters, unless the writer is a genius. One cannot go on describing the locale of the story for seven pages, reserving all the action and its denouement to the

last page. As for the order, the Aristotelian ‘beginning-middle-and-end’ is a time-tested sequence. But a gifted writer can always make variations. Literary tradition has provided us with several acceptable models; but if the writer is innovative he can create newer models. It is important to bear in mind, however, that ultimately structure is only a means to an end, and one should choose only that in which the content comes through best.

In its totality, a piece of writing is like a work of architecture, where every stone is well-cut and fits into the other as if the two are one piece. Nothing in it should stick out. The total structure should make an aesthetically satisfying whole. The stone metaphor above applies to every single element of writing—first the word, then the sentence, the paragraph, the chapter and finally the book itself. Each word in a sentence should work like the right musical note, and each sentence like a bar and the book as a whole, like a symphony, harmonious in its total orchestration.

1.3.4 Style

Then comes style. It is possible that two works written on the same subject, or with the same theme, should both be structurally satisfying, yet stylistically one may be better than the other. Style is a manner of expressing one’s thoughts and feelings in words. It is the result of long-cultivated awareness of words and sentences, of the way a writer connects one sentence with another. For one writer, ‘succour’ may be acceptable, while ‘help’ may be more appropriate. ‘Procrastination’ is tongue-twisting, while ‘delay’ is more expressive. For many, more than two adjectives at a time may be bad writing, but for a poet like Walt Whitman, a chain of them was normal. Style is a very personal thing; it identifies the writer.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) What are the essential aspects of a literary work? Does content mean only the transcription of actual experience?

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- ii) What does ‘structure’ mean?

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of the Unit)

1.4 CAN CREATIVE WRITING BE TAUGHT?

Writing is not something which “Do it Yourself” books can teach entirely. No one can fully teach another how to become a writer. What you get from others or,

for that matter, from this Unit are only a few guidelines based on experience. Having said that, we must add that the art of writing creatively is not a nebulous activity available to some anointed few. It is not mysterious and unteachable. Story is teachable, style too is teachable, just as tone and theme are.

The arguments for and against about whether creative writing is a subject that can be taught have gone on endlessly. According to Hanif Kureshi, the author of *My Son the Fanatic* and *Buddha of Suburbia*, creative writing courses are a waste of time as he feels that most of his students show no talent and cannot tell a story. On the other end of the scale we have someone like William Faulkner who feels that talent does not matter so much. The important qualities to become a creative writer are an innate curiosity to wonder, to ponder over why a certain thing happens. And if one has those qualities, talent becomes secondary.

Again, there are those who believe that teaching basic music scales to someone cannot turn them into a Mozart or teaching someone basic drawing won't turn a student into an M.F Hussain. And then there are others who advocate that studying works by Masters and imitating them while learning craft techniques allows students to develop their skills. So like any other art form—be it painting, music, sculpture, choreography—creative writing CAN be taught. Granted that you can teach it within the limits of a person's potential. But how can we know the potential of a student unless we start teaching them?

So when we are teaching creative writing, we are actually teaching:

CRAFT: What makes a good story? What part does narration play? What is the importance of characterization? How important is plot, atmosphere and what are the basic elements of a story?

TECHNIQUE: how does one control words, grammar, rhyme, prosody, structure?

PROCESS: how to recognize ideas and how to look for them. Eventually, what to do with them?

HOW TO READ: the difference between merely reading and studying in order to learn a craft.

POWER OF WORDS: the effect of words, the rhythm, the finer nuances – in fact the magical quality of words.

Therefore, to say that creative writing cannot be taught would be a fundamentally flawed position to take. The question perhaps is not “Can it be taught?” but the question should be How **well** can it be taught?

1.5 GUIDELINES FOR CREATIVE WRITING

1.5.1 Read in order to write

For anyone who aspires to become a writer, the first requirement is to be a good reader. One can learn a lot from reading the best in all literatures. Perhaps, there is no one in the world who has become a writer without having read a single word of what others have written. When we talk of reading, we do not mean reading casually for entertainment, or because there is nothing better to do. What

really matters is reading critically, analyzing for oneself every detail of the work, asking questions at every step as to why the writer has devised his plot in a particular manner, or has made the characters act the way they do, and whether it could have been done in any other way. Long years of close reading in this manner builds up a writer's equipment. It increases his vocabulary. It often provides ready answers to the questions which crop up in the process of writing.

1.5.2 Allow your experience to ripen

The experience, which you draw from the life around you, should not be put on paper as it is. That would make it a mere matter-of-fact, hackneyed piece of journalism. You should learn to make that experience your own, by internalising it. You should allow it to gestate within your mind, in the process of which you may reject a few details and add a few others from similar experiences. This kind of gestation will also make it personal, intimate and authentic. Hence, it is not desirable to rush for pen and paper as soon as there is a desire to write. We have used the word 'gestation'. The act of writing is like giving birth to something. It should come of its own, after it is ripe enough and when it can no longer wait. It serves no purpose to wrench it out by force.

1.5.3 Write about your experience differently

Before writing about anything, you should ask yourself whether it is something trite which others have already written about or something new. If it is new, there is nothing like it. It is not that a writer can always hit upon new things to write about. Life does not have a new theme to offer everyday to everyone. It is the same birth, the same hunger, the same love and the same death always. But though the themes are few and limited, their variations are unlimited. Here lies the scope for an imaginative mind. You will have to ask yourself whether you can write about the same old thing differently, bringing your own insights and perceptions into it.

1.5.4 Start with your diary

Before launching out on more ambitious projects like short stories and novels, it is best to start with your own diary and reminiscences. A few months of consistent writing of the diary, for your private reading, will give you confidence to undertake more difficult types of writing later on.

1.5.5 Visualisation, outline and design

Once you have the basic idea of what you want to write, and you are convinced that it will make a fairly good literary work, keep thinking about all its aspects, such as the theme, plot, situations, characters, dialogues, etc. Jot down every small detail that occurs to you. Then put down everything sequentially and prepare an outline to show how it will start, develop and end. Before finally putting pen to paper, you should have a clear picture in your mind of the entire work. This is called visualization.

There are many gifted writers who, at the time of starting, have only a vague idea of what they are going to write. But as they proceed, the unconscious mind takes over and the writing takes very different turns and twists to produce interesting results. This method may not be advisable for the beginner.

The beginning and the end of a work are vital as in a musical piece. The first few pages are like a leash and you should be able to hold the readers with it and lead them on. In fact, there are some readers who, if they do not find the first few paragraphs interesting enough, would just put down the book.

1.5.6 Some do's and don't's

- i) If there is any one single quality which distinguishes most great works, it is clarity—clarity of thought and clarity of expression. Your writing should not be dense or dull, but should shine like a mirror.
- ii) Precision is another such quality—precision both in respect of your thoughts and the words you use to express them. Take your words seriously. Do not waste them. When you use a word, make sure of its precise meaning. Tools like the dictionary, thesaurus, etc., will help you to understand the correct meaning of words and their usages.
- iii) Do not overwrite. The days of ornate prose are over. It is possible to achieve miracles even with simple sentences. No wonder, the Bible is still considered a model of good writing.
- iv) Similarly, avoid being pompous. Don't be very flippant either. Choose your words and expressions according to the mood of your work.
- v) Also avoid archaisms, i.e., words no longer in vogue, slang, clichés and jargon. Write, as it comes to you, effortlessly.
- vi) Length, i.e. how much to write, is yet another important factor. The length will be determined by the scope of your subject. If you are clear in your mind about what you want to say, the end will come where it should.
- vii) Do not try to explain too much. Leave something to the reader's imagination also.
- viii) Let your writing be sprightly. A touch of humour, if it is not against the basic mood of your work, is always welcome.

1.5.7 Learn to be your own critic

After you have written a piece, read it aloud to yourself to test it on your ears. You will find several false notes, both in your statements and expressions. You will be surprised that quite a few things which you found exciting when you first put them on paper now seem banal. Remove them mercilessly. Every writer should learn to be his or her own critic.

Once your first draft is ready, put it aside till such time as it is out of your mind. It may have to be for a week, a fortnight, or a month, or even more. Now read it again. You will then see it in a fresh light. At places, it may even make you wonder how you could have been so silly as to write certain things. There will be more work for you, and the typed pages will be filled with corrections. But you should not be dismayed.

1.5.8 Seek others' opinions

For every writer, it is important to build up a close circle of creative writers and discriminating readers who are on the same wave-length and who can read through

his/her manuscript patiently and give an honest, unbiased opinion about it. It is necessary to shed one's shyness to be able to show one's work to others and also curb one's ego to consider their criticism, however drastic it might be. But, in the end, it will be good for the work. If even after all this, a work fails to pass muster, better forget about it rather than hunt for a publisher. The world will not be the poorer by that one work which failed to come off. You can always make it up with your next work.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Did you ever feel the urge to unburden yourself of any experience, pleasant or unpleasant, in your life? Write about it in not more than 200 words. (See the hints given at the end of this Unit).

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1.6 GENUINENESS OF THE CREATIVE IMPULSE

You should make sure that your creative impulse is genuine. Assuming that the impulse has troubled you on the emotional plane, as it often does, the question you should ask of yourself is charming and overwhelming as it may have been at the given moment, was it not rather a transient and hence a superficial emotion? Just as an auntie of the neighbourhood bursts into tears at the sight of a puppy in distress or a bride leaving her mother's home? Could it have happened that you were taken in by the setting or the atmosphere? In a certain romantic atmosphere of moon and faraway music and what have you, you found the dialogue of an old couple particularly cute, and you thought you could write a poem on the theme of 'Love in the Night'. Or while passing through a slum you were moved by the sight of a young, good looking mother being harassed by a brood of unkempt and potbellied children, and you thought you could write a story on the theme of 'Roses in the Dust' etc. It may well be that you can write a powerful piece on either. But let the confidence grow in you over a period of time, after you have satisfied yourself that (i) such emotive reactions have been fairly recurrent with you in similar situations, and (ii) you can identify reasonably well with the old couple or the young mother in the course of their lives.

Distancing is necessary for creative effort. Conversely, do not trust the impulse for **immediate** action, if it is much too intense, being acutely personal. Here one remembers the famous phrase of Wordsworth, 'emotion recollected in tranquility' as the base of poetry. Let the storm settle into a calm surface; it is only then that you can write on it effectively. Truman Capote, a contemporary fiction writer of repute, writes in a similar vein 'I have to exhaust the emotion before I feel clinical enough to analyse and project it...My own theory is that the writer should have dried his tears long, long before setting out to evoke similar reactions in a reader'.

What he means to say is that insofar as the emotional stimulus is concerned, a certain distancing is necessary for creative effort. To cite an example: you have lost a loved one. You are naturally overwhelmed with grief and, being a writer, you wish to release yourself in verse or prose. You may surely do so for therapeutic reasons, just as you could release yourself in a flood of tears. But the best results in terms of literary merit can be achieved only when you can look upon the event from a distance—thanks to the passage of time, among other things—and can call upon other people to share those intense moments with you. Your literary piece would then be both authentic in terms of emotional experience, and objective in terms of expressed thought, the ideal combination that any writer could devoutly wish for.

Do not misjudge the stirrings of an abiding motivation for a creative impulse. Suppose you are strongly motivated, by temperament and conviction, to expose the evils of social justice. Undoubtedly such motivation would govern your outlook on the human condition, and you would smell injustice in a situation, which to some others may be no more than a curiosity in terms of interpersonal conflict. There is nothing inherently wrong in such coloration that is bound to creep into the works of a motivated writer (the motivation covered could well be cultural, philosophical or any other). But what is important is that the genesis should indeed be a creative impulse to start with, which could later be wedded to the motivation, and not vice-versa. As a writer you should consider the impulse as creative only when you react to a situation primarily because it is interesting from the human angle, and only additionally because of its social implications.

The late Bhagabati Panigrahi, a noted writer who was also one of the founders of the Communist Party in Orissa, wrote a story named ‘Shikhar’ which has acquired considerable fame and has also been turned into a movie entitled ‘Mrigaya’ by Mrinal Sen. Here the theme, obviously, is of social injustice—the oppression of poor tribals by the moneyed henchmen of an alien administration. But one imagines that Bhagabati Panigrahi must have been impelled to write the story when he came across, through his observation-cum-imagination, a character such as Ghinua, a simple tribal who could never understand till his death, by hanging, the strange logic that he did not deserve an award more than any average hunter, for having chopped off the head of a well-known oppressor and presenting it to the local Commissioner. It is the bizarre simplicity of truth embodied in the personality of the character that lends particular charm to the story and not the well-known fact of social injustice in the colonial times.

And so, look for the seeds of an illuminating circumstance in human terms—absurd, funny, or tragic—as the case may be, in the impulse you have had to write a certain story or poem and you could consider later whether it would also serve your cherished motivation.

A story with a motivation written into it should indeed be richer, for it gives an extra dimension to the story. But let it not appear that the characters have been directed to ‘prove’ the truth of the motivation; for that may be self-defeating. On the other hand, give them the importance of being human and the freedom that goes with it. Freedom to love, weep, howl, fight and act in all sorts of funny and foolish ways, in situations that may be called socially evil, and you will see how your motivation shines through the intensely human narrative.

Check Your Progress 4

i) How will you distinguish a creative impulse from an emotional reaction?

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ii) Why is distancing from the object necessary in any creative writing?

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iii) Explain the connection between the creative impulse and motivation.

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of the Unit)

1.7 SUMMING UP

- Man tries to fulfill not only his primary needs like food, clothing and shelter, but also his social need of communication with others so as to share his experiences.
- One writes primarily to express oneself and not necessarily for money and fame.
- Writings are of two types non-creative and creative the former to **inform** and the latter to **reveal**.
- The three essential aspects of a literary work are **content, form** and **structure**. **Style** is the way in which the work is expressed—the manipulation of language. But whatever is written must be credible and authentic.
- Writing cannot be learnt but can only be cultivated, and for this, critical reading is necessary.

- The art of writing is like giving birth in that it is preceded by a period of gestation of ideas, etc.
- There are some do's and don'ts. Clarity of thought and precision of expression are necessary. Overwriting and over-elaboration should be avoided. A touch of humour always enlivens the writing.

1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- Man, being a social animal, has an innate compulsion to communicate with other human beings, not only to inform them or know anything from them, but also to share his experiences with them—his joys and sorrows. It is a means for overcoming loneliness and for fulfilling his social urges.
- Non-creative writing **informs** while creative writing **reveals**. The distinction between the two becomes blurred when a non-creative writing is expressed in poetic language and moves the reader as any creative writing does.

Check Your Progress 2

- Form and content. No, if it is a mere transcription of actual experience, it becomes journalistic writing. The facts, whether 'real' or 'invented', undergo transformation in the writer's mind before they are presented in the form of a story, a novel or a poem. Only then will they interest and move others.
- Structure means the ordering of the story material, as in architecture. It applies to every element—plot, character and language.

Check Your Progress 3

Hints: Since this is a very subjective question we are not giving you a ready-made answer- only a few directions:

- Write in the first person 'I' form.
- Your vocabulary should include a large number of words and phrases describing your feelings, thoughts and emotions.
- You can use abbreviations, slang and figures of speech.

Check Your Progress 4

- An emotional reaction to a scene or incident, however strong, is a passing phase, unless it continues to recur in similar situations and disturbs you deeply. A genuine creative impulse is distinguishable by a persistent emotional turmoil as well as a capacity for identification with the object
- Distancing is necessary to get away from excessive personal involvement, in order to control the overflow of emotion. Creativity needs a measure of calm and detachment.
- Every creative impulse has a deeper and more pervasive human perspective than motivation which constitutes a strong sense of purpose in a writer. In any great writing, motivation does not dominate the creative impulse but only subserves it.