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# A-level Creative Writing

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## Teaching Resources: Approaching First Teaching

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A series of essays, written by the A-level Creative Writing senior examining team, offering advice and guidance on how to approach the first term of teaching creative writing in your school or college. This document is not intended to be a definitive 'how to' guide but to give some ideas and suggestions that can be adapted to suit particular students and particular teaching environments.

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## Organising the First Term of Teaching

Lyn Lockwood, Chief Examiner

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### Introduction

This can only be a series of suggestions - you may be teaching a small number of mature students at a community centre, a class of 10 in a sixth form, or 25 in a college, you may be teaching alone, you may be teaching in a pair - you may have 5 hours a week or 2 hours a fortnight. Everyone will know what is best for their particular circumstances. This is just to give you some ideas about;

- your expectations of students and some 'ground rules'
- long term and medium term planning
- resources
- lesson planning

There is more material in this booklet that offers guidance on specific areas of the course, such as the commentary writing and the workshop structure.

A word about teaching. It's *not* advisable to divide this course between staff by unit, along the lines of CREW1 and CREW2; *both* are intended to be the culmination of the workshop and journaling process and a holistic approach is essential to build the skills required. It would be expected that both teachers would follow a similar path and maybe divide teaching in terms of form, or genre. For example, one teacher may lead on poetry and another on script (although this could be quite fluent in itself). The most successful approaches will be integrated and shared between teachers, with the freedom for students to explore, write, read and work towards the shared goals of both CREW1 and CREW2.

### First things

You might want to start by establishing some ground rules with your students, because the way that this course should be approached will be distinctly different from A-levels in English. I approach the course as an expressive art, and borrow some of the structures of art and technology courses. My ground rules are;

- Everyone maintains a writing journal or blog, and they commit to regularly writing something in it; at least three times a week (even if it is only a sentence or two)
- Everyone commits to a regular reading habit - you should be open to reading books, journals, articles, poetry etc that may be outside your comfort zone

- A writing task that is attempted by all the class will be workshopped ie. You will be expected to share/read out your writing regularly at various stages of drafting. You are not expected to read out something that would make you feel really uncomfortable, but you need to start the course remembering that it is training you to work in the style of professional writers/artists. This means you assume a public audience for your work and you write accordingly.

These rules should be openly debated and discussed - it is essential that the students understand their significance. They may want to add/alter, but I think the spirit of the rules should largely be maintained. I would also intervene very quickly with a student who continually refuses to read/share because they are probably not on the right path to success! You could use the analogy of an artist who refuses to let anyone look at their paintings, or visit art galleries that they are unfamiliar with, or practice drawing in a sketch book, and who works in the studio with curtains draped around their canvas so no-one can see what they are doing!

The CREW1 (the AS examination) and CREW2 (the AS coursework) are both designed to be a natural culmination of the acquisition of skills and knowledge acquired through regular reading and writing practice. This is not a courses in which students can coast and then cram at the last minute. CREW1 will present candidates with a wide variety of tasks, which means confidence and flexibility are essential skills. In CREW2, two pieces of writing should arise from work that the students have done throughout the year, and this should be a range; short stories, blogs, radio scripts, travel writing articles etc. The idea is that the students will practice writing in lots of different styles, but the coursework will be the full development of two pieces that they enjoyed the most and will reflect an authentic journey as a writer. This authentic journey will then underpin the CREW2 reflective commentary.

To return to the art analogy- art students will spend the year using oils, pastels, water colours, felt tips, photography, clay- and they will be encouraged to choose their favourite medium and style for their final pieces. Just as no A-level Art student would expect to be **told** they are producing a water colour painting of a church for their final piece, no Creative Writing student/class should be directed to a particular genre and type of writing. It would also make the journaling, workshopping and drafting processes rather redundant, in which case the CREW2 commentary writing would be virtually meaningless.

So how do we manage that as teachers?

### **Week to week ideas**

Encourage a varied diet of reading and writing activities. There is guidance on this in the specification (in terms of what kind of texts students are expected to be familiar with and able to produce), but you may want to arrange this thematically or by genre. You might want to consider covering the four forms (prose fiction, prose non-fiction, poetry, script)

For example; a typical first six 6 week stretch might look like this;

Week 1-2 **travel writing** - From Our Own Correspondent radio scripts, online travel blogs eg <http://blog.travelpod.com/travel-blog-entries>, Robert Frost poetry

Week 3-4 **short stories/expressive prose fiction** - short stories by Jackie Kay, Tim Gatreux, Ali Smith- <http://www.induswomanwriting.com/Indian-Short-Stories.html>, Radio 4

Week 5-6 **satire** - In the Thick of It script (BBC), Stewart Lee *How I Escaped My Certain Fate*, extract from Private Eye (New Coalition Academy), <http://www.theonion.com/>, Sophie Hannah poetry

You could alternate between factual and fictional writing.

In a typical week I would expect students to undertake one writing task and one piece of research, read at least one item directed by the teacher and share at least one piece of reading or writing with the rest of the class.

I would build in an hour's timed writing once every two weeks or so, as writing to a brief within a time limit is an essential skill to practice. Peer marking could cut down on the assessment burden for colleagues with larger groups.

**I would say a typical 90 minute session should contain at least two or three of the following**

- **a warm up writing task** (taking no more than 10 minutes, with prolonged staring into space 'thinking' being banned - to be shared immediately, or returned to later - This could connect to a text you want to introduce)
  - 'HANDS' Think of someone close to you. Describe their hands. Share. Read Ted Hughes poem and discuss the challenge of descriptive writing)
- **a reflection on the previous lesson's topic** (What's stuck in your mind? Any further thoughts/questions)
- **a drafting or re-writing task** (with maybe a good 15-20 minute stretch of silent writing, which could be longer as you build up to the exam) in response to a stimulus- an extract from a film, a picture, an opening line etc.
  - NEWSPAPER SPRINGBOARDING Give out a range of short newspaper articles about notable events- maybe a murder, a fire, bad weather - turn it in to a first person account maybe as a poem, blog or script
- **a reading activity** (either as a class, small groups, or individuals)
  - Collect some samples of essays that writers have written about writing itself- from Stephen King to TS Eliot - writers like to do this. In groups, read the extract and explain what it says about writing and to formulate arguments for and against- this could lead to writing your own 'writer's manifesto' in an Orwellian list, or a short reflection on what they think writing is about. The class could collect their own quotes and maybe rank order them in terms of who they most/least agree with.

- **a presentation/reading of more drafted work**
  - Each student could pre-arrange a 'performance' slot of something they have been working on, with an introduction to the piece, a reading and a discussion - this is a more formal type of workshop activity.
- **a discussion of the reading journals**
  - This could be a response to a particular reading task, or a less formal discussion of what they have been reading and their responses to it.
- You could bring in book reviews, or look at, for example, John Mullan's book club articles in The Guardian, or listen to one of the Book Club programmes broadcast on Radio 4- these give a real insight into how writers work- I particularly like Roddy Doyle (Fri, 1 Oct 10 Duration: 28 mins) discussing *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, as he talks about how to combine writing with having a hectic life (he wrote this novel while working full time as a teacher with young children at home). There is an amazing archive of writers discussing their books and the writing process, all available to download, plus there are links to other book groups.
- Meet 'real' writers! I would try to develop opportunities for students to meet some local writers- they could be journalists for the local newspaper, free magazines or radio station, the education officers for the local museums, professional web designers and copywriters, local writers groups, open mic night organisers and participants, Creative Writing BA/MA students from nearby universities- there are national organisations such as the Ministry of Stories- there are already writers that have expressed an interest in this course and would probably see any involvement as good for their own practice. Try contacting NATE and NAWA, libraries, the council etc for advice on local practitioners.
- The workshop activity - (as outlined in more detailed in separate section)

I would encourage the students to be increasingly autonomous, and to be able to follow their own tastes and passions, but equally to be adventurous and open to new ideas. I would imagine that the first term will be strongly teacher led, but after that I would start to push students to plan and deliver activities eg:

	Activities/Resources	Goals/eventual outcomes
Term 1 September - December	Cover as wide a range of writing styles as possible, through a variety of activities as outlined above. Develop a workshop environment where the students feel comfortable sharing work. Set regular tasks for homework to encourage independent learning/development. Lessons should be more student led towards the final few weeks. Regular workshop lessons Covering all 4 forms of writing	By Christmas; Students will have a rich working notebook Students will have completed 8-10 distinct pieces of writing, for a variety of genres and audiences Students will have produced 'commentaries' as discussions, presentations, formal writing tasks, workshop participation
Term 2 January-May	More timed writing tasks in the style of the CREW1 paper tasks-students should also suggest tasks and activities, as well as using specimen papers and past papers. Choosing the writing tasks from their portfolio/journal to develop for coursework.	Two pieces of writing that have a clear development pathway from workshops-journals- drafting- final pieces, all of which will be discussed in the commentary. Confident understanding of the exam structure and techniques.
Term 3 June/July	If your centre requires students to begin the A2 studies now, you could spend the time looking at the 'four forms' of writing, and mapping their writing to date.	An understanding of the A2 requirements.

## **Becoming a Writer**

**Jane Bluett, Principal Examiner**

*Jane Bluett teaches A Levels and IB at Bilborough Sixth Form College in Nottingham. The college has 1760 students and will be piloting the Creative Writing A Level in September 2013 with a group of about 20 year 13 students. As well as being a published writer, she holds a PhD in Creative Writing and is currently Principal Examiner for CREW3.*

### **Introduction**

One of the most important things to establish from the outset is that our students, by signing up for the course, are acknowledging themselves as writers. We need to explore with them what this means and establish a good set of writerly habits. Although writing is often an isolated activity, we need to make students feel part of a writing community, both as a class and in the wider context of the writing environment. We will be expecting students to share work with one another and to provide constructive feedback. It is therefore imperative that our classes know each other and trust each other. A key priority for the first term is therefore team building and learning about each other as writers. Our students should also be aware of their teachers as writers who will be working with them throughout the course.

### **Writing habits**

Students coming from GCSE will be used to writing for specific purposes but will probably not be explicitly familiar with the idea of writing as process. Although they will have done drafting they will not be fully aware of the purposes and potential of drafting, neither will they have any experience of reflective commentary writing. A crucial element of the first term's work therefore, is the introduction of good journal practice.

Every student should be equipped with a journal at the start of the course, either provided by the institution or the student. At least one session should be given over to exploring the purposes of the journal and explaining that recording thought processes and observations is essential to the course and to themselves as a writer. The journal should also be the place where the students keep records of their reading. Journals are as individual as students. I like to keep notebooks for daily work and journals for reflection and drafting. Journals can, of course, also be digital.

There are lots of really helpful websites about journal keeping and writers' journal practice online. Try [www.flavorwire.com](http://www.flavorwire.com) for starters. This site includes famous writers on their journals and diaries and nice visuals of famous writers' journals. We should aspire to get students to 'love' their journals and / or notebooks (paper or digital) and take them with them everywhere.

The following activities should encourage students to develop writerly habits:

Activity: Ask students to record their thoughts and observations of the world in their journal every day for the first two weeks of term. They should then share with the class anything that has given them an idea for a piece of writing.

Activity: Ask students to 'eavesdrop' on conversations, in college, on the bus, at home, and record interesting snippets of dialogue. They should then work one of these up into a piece of writing. (Preparation for CREW2)

Activity: My Life as a Writer. Ask student to write a reflective piece about how, when, where and why they write. This could be used as a basis for discussion or simply handed in to us. They, or we, can then file these and let them reflect upon their progression at a later date. (Preparation for CREW1 and CREW2 Commentary Writing)

## **Tools of the Writer**

A big discussion of the tools available to the writer should happen early on in the first term. We should encourage students to consider the relative merits of the pen and the word processor. Every student should know about dictionaries and reference books, as well as the free spaces in the community where a writer can practice.

The following activities will introduce students to some of the tools of the writer:

Activity: Set up a structured introduction to the library. Get students to see books as writing resources to be exploited. Introduce them to reference books.

Activity: Ask students to visit their local library and join, if they're not already a member. Each student should bring a book of interest into class and introduce it.

Activity: Ask students to spend one hour in a local public place. This could be a café, a park, a shopping mall, a museum. They should make notes on what they observe and work these up into a piece of writing.

Activity: Ask student to write 300 words about their writing practice with a pen. Then get them to word process the piece as a document. Ask them to write a short reflection on the process.

## **The Writing Community**

It is really important that we, as teachers, are aware of the local writing community. Our students need to feel empowered as writers and know that they are part of a wider landscape. We need to make sure that we are on local mailing lists for writing events and writing groups and have contact with local HE institutions that provide Creative Writing courses. In the first term, ideally, we should try and invite in a local writer and take our students to a writing event. National Poetry Day falls in the first term as does NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writing Month) and these might be ideal opportunities to exploit the wider resources available. Also look out for the AQA Creative Writing Competition. Ask the students if they know writers who might like to come in and talk, they often do. HE providers are very keen to get into sixth forms to promote their work and may offer their services for free. Competitions are also a great way of motivating students, so find out what's going on. The best way of accessing this information is through National Association of Writers in Education. [www.nawe.co.uk](http://www.nawe.co.uk)

Preparation for CREW1 and 2. These activities will begin to develop students' awareness of the local writing scene:

Activity: Ask students to research the local writing scene. This could include famous historical writers of the area. What opportunities for writers are there in the local community? They could read listings magazines, college and university prospectuses read local writers and so on. In Nottingham, for example, Byron and Lawrence were forced into exile and Sillitoe wrote his best work abroad – why?? Alison Moore has recently been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize.

Activity: Many local papers publish poetry. If yours does, get students to analyse the type of poetry that gets published. Ask them to write something and submit it to the paper.

## **Building a Creative Writing Group**

Students who regard themselves as writers often see themselves as individuals, somehow different to the student body en masse. The Creative Writing group should exploit this and maximise the potential for drawing out connections between them. Mutual respect and trust are essential. In the first half term we should be providing opportunities for the students to get to know each other as writers. Taking them out of the classroom is highly desirable. Whether it be simply outside the building or to an art gallery or museum or other place of local interest, demonstrating that the world is a writing environment is important. For those of us lucky enough to be in travelling distance of London, the British Library is currently running free writing workshops for A Level students,

<http://www.bl.uk/learning/tarea/secondaryfehe/writehere!/writehere.html> Local galleries and museums are also keen to promote creative writing in response to collections. Find out what's available.

Preparation for CREW2. These activities should help students to become a writing group, rather than simply a class. They need to develop trust to really get the most out of the workshop experience.

Activity: The Rights of the Writer. Get students to set their own agenda. Create your own classroom poster.

Activity: Non Fiction. Ask students to interview each other and write a short biography of their class mates.

Activity: Set up an interactive wall in the classroom where students can post favourite quotations, extracts, websites. If this becomes an on-going 'habit' students can track how their preferences and interests change throughout the course.

Activity: Get a writer in. No matter how hard we try, students will always perceive external visitors as 'proper' writers and us as teachers. The sooner we introduce them to 'the professionals' the better. Always make sure the students have read some of the writer's output before the visit.

Activity: Write a collaborative piece. Wallace Stevens' 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird' is an ideal stimulus for this. Each student takes responsibility for penning a stanza about a topic of the class' choice, books, writers, etc. The class then have to decide which order of stanzas is most appropriate and complete the poem as a group. The number of stanzas depends on the size of the group.

## Researching Writers/Writing as Research

Writers need to see themselves in context. In the first term, students should be encouraged to find out about writers and celebrate the writers they admire. Students should be encouraged to share their reading experiences and defend their writers of choice. As teachers, we should join in with this process and hopefully discover that there are many more good writers than any A Level Literature specification might suggest.

Preparation for CREW2. These activities will introduce students to writers and attitudes to writing:

Activity: There are lots of 'writers on writing' quotation sites online. Select a good handful and make them into laminated cards. Students can then read and discuss and decide which ones they agree with or not.

Activity: Watch some of the many 'Writers on Writing' clips on Youtube. Discuss attitudes to writing with the group.

Activity: Present your writer. Ask student to do a 10 minute presentation on their favourite writer. This should include a short reading of their work and an argument in favour of other students engaging with it.

Activity: Penguin has produced a great resource '100 Postcards from Penguin Modern Classics'. Put the postcards out in the classroom and get student to choose a writer that looks interesting to them. They should then research the writer and their work and produce an A3 poster for display.

Our student writers should be aware, as soon as possible, that a good writer can write about anything. A good writer can make any subject appeal to an audience, however unpromising. Encouraging them to understand that writing is research and without research it is impossible is another key aspect of the first term.

Preparation for CREW1

Activity: Ask student to write a 300 word piece on topics that they know nothing about. These could also be unpromising topics in terms of general interest: Broccoli, The Allotment, Wind Farming, The Cockroach etc. Write each topic on a piece of paper, put them in an envelope and get students to choose one.

In the first term we need to establish a mind -set that will encourage autonomy and reflective practice. Students need to be empowered to feel confident in themselves as writers and to take risks. 16 and 17 year old writers are particularly sensitive about their work and need to develop a sense of detachment from the written word. This is a huge responsibility for us as teachers and the more we can embed an understanding that the writer is not alone, the better. The first term should be a space for exploration and the establishment of good habits. We need to unpick the writing process and, above all, convince students that writing doesn't 'just happen'.

## **Writerly Reading: Establishing a Programme of Reading for A-level Creative Writing**

**Gordon Wilson, Principal Moderator**

*Gordon Wilson teaches English A-levels at Franklin College, a 1500 student sixth-form college in Grimsby, North East Lincolnshire, where approximately fifty Year 12 candidates will be studying Creative Writing A-level in September 2013. He has an M.A. in Writing and is a published poet and feature writer. He has wide experience as an examiner at A-level and is Principle Moderator for CREW4.*

### **Introduction**

I intend to establish course activities in reading that will alert students to an extensive range of creative options and inform creative decision making and problem solving in their writing.

In the earliest days of the course I aim to promote productive reading habits among my students as a means of identifying potential style models across a wide generic and formal range. Initially, this will take the form of workshops focussed on such topics as style and voice, point of view, presentation of ideas and language choices. Progressively, and quickly, this will lead to closer and broader issues such as generic conventions, poetic and narrative techniques, speech and dialogue, and grammatical devices.

The focus will be on explorations of short extracts, from a variety of writers, at word, sentence and paragraph level. This approach will provide a model for later workshop critiques of students' independent work. I will stress how the knowledge, skills and techniques shared, practised and developed in these reading workshops will powerfully inform the construction of their own reflective commentaries in CREW2, 3 and 4.

Primarily, the material will be chosen by me but I will soon expect students to bring examples of their own reading and to conduct small group workshops themselves in the classroom and, hopefully, beyond.

To facilitate this wide reading, I intend setting up a dedicated course-library with donations of books and magazines from students and colleagues. I expect this to provide a richly varied resource for students to draw on.

In the first half-term I will cover the four prescribed writing forms through a variety of generic examples. I will expect students to have done the same in at least three of the four forms as they move toward important decisions about individual choices for CREW2.

I also expect this approach to better prepare students for the choices they will make in CREW1.

In the opening week of the course I will spend time with students looking at examples from Grimm's Fairy Tales, from proverbs and Biblical parables and asking them to consider the relationship of these to the ideas of Aristotle and Politi about the nature of story. Students will be invited to think about how such ideas reflect their own understanding of story in films, plays, books,

jokes and their own life experiences. From this, I anticipate a more confident student approach to creativity will arise across the prescribed forms.

### **Fiction**

I will emphasise to students that they are free to choose their own style models and to stress the validity of genre fiction, should that be their choice. With this in mind my fiction workshop materials are likely to be a mix of the 'literary' and the 'popular' drawn from the work of Raymond Chandler, Sebastian Faulks, O'Henry, Stephen King, Katherine Mansfield, Stephenie Meyer, Alice Munro, Annie Proulx, and J.K Rowling. I will also employ models from Paulo Coelho and Anton Chekhov to broaden cultural awareness beyond what they may perhaps have experienced at GCSE.

The reflective and advisory works of Margaret Atwood, Dorothea Brande and Stephen King will provide source material for the beginning of discussions about the writing craft. Students will be encouraged to explore the *Paris Review* 'Interviews with Authors' series, and other available on-line interviews/journals, to independently study the ideas of established writers.

### **Script-writing**

My students will explore the practice of script-writing through the study of extracts from Caryl Churchill, Alan Bennett, Brian Friel and John Godber. I will encourage them to explore the BBC Writers' Room where script models and advice are available alongside interviews with scriptwriters to inform understanding and appreciation of the creative opportunities in writing for sound and screen. To develop awareness of the relationship between page and performance, I will encourage the downloading of archived scripts available to buy or watch/listen to again. I will put particular emphasis on the study of radio scriptwriting, a form with which many students will be unfamiliar and yet which may prove invaluable in developing sensitivity to the potential for dramatic voice production.

In my teaching of script-writing I will also refer to Robert McKee's *Story*, Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey*, and to David Edgar's *How Plays Work*. I will also encourage the reading of scripts available through online sources as listed in the bibliography.

### **Poetry**

I will be offering poetry models from Foyle Young Poets of the Year awards anthologies; from Poems on the Underground collections; from a range of contemporary poetry magazines; and I will be directing students to internet resources at the Poetry Society and the Young Poets' Network. I will also direct students to the extensive range of poetry sites online. The reflective works of Seamus Heaney, Peter Sansom, Stephen Fry and Ruth Padel will provide starting points for discussion and employment of ideas about poetic content and form. In anticipation of some reluctant student poets I will offer translations from Rumi and Basho to demonstrate forms that may, early in the course, seem more accessible for experiment and emulation. The contemporary Polish poet, Tomasz Różycki explores themes of childhood games and journeys while also reflecting on the writing process in a way that is accessible to A-level students. I will offer these as a potential source of ideas for CREW2 commentaries.

## **Non-fiction**

I will highlight the biographical and autobiographical work of writers such as Lorna Sage, Andrea Ashworth, Alexander Masters and Blake Morrison.

I also aim to explore the travel literature of Colin Thubron, Bill Bryson and Garrison Kiellor. I will draw material from, and direct students to <http://www.travelwriters.co.uk/journalists.htm> where links can be found to a host of authors and journalists whose work is freely available on line.

I will also focus on investigative, column and sport journalism using models from the works of Martha Gelhorn, Robert Fisk, Kate Adie, John Simpson, John Pilger, Decca Aitkenhead and Henry Winter. I will be encouraging students to take up the free subscription to [www.journalisted.com](http://www.journalisted.com) to facilitate regular access to the work of other journalists they may discover and enjoy themselves.

Tom Wolfe's *The New Journalism* is partly an anthology of creative non-fiction. Lee Gutkind's *The Art of Creative Non-fiction* is an illuminating exploration of form and technique in this field with a rich variety of models. I aim to draw on these too.

## **Twitter**

I will encourage "tweeting" students to seek out practising writers in all forms to follow on the Twitter platform and to exploit the rich store of links to blogs, websites and articles that offer insights which that portal provides into the writing process.

## **Personal reading blogs**

I will want to be confident that students are fully engaged in independent wide reading to facilitate regular reflection on, and exploration of, aspects of the writers' craft. To this end I will encourage students to create personal 'Writer's Reading Blogs' on which they will post weekly observations about writers they have explored or "discovered" and what they may have learned from them. These blogs will be 'live' for classmates to share while also enabling me to monitor individual progress and development.

The blogs will enable students to develop their widest possible reference base to inform current and future work. Content will be appropriately referenced and indexed, providing valuable material for eventual productions and reflective commentaries.

An alternative approach might be to incorporate these reading observations in a Writer's Journal that, it is recommended, students should maintain throughout the course. This journal might contain personal experimental work, reflections on conventional and alternative approaches to form and genre, research notes gleaned from the ideas of successful authors on the writers' craft and a wide range of other invaluable sources and reference points to eventually inform reflective commentaries.

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Vogler, C, *The Writer's Journey*, 0752205579, Boxtree, 1996

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## **Websites**

*Paris Review Interviews*

<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/#list>

*BBC Writer's Room*

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/writersroom/>

*Simply Scripts*

<http://www.simplyscripts.com/>

*Internet Movie Script Database (IMSD)*

<http://www.imsdb.com/>

*The Young Poets' Network*

<http://www.youngpoetsnetwork.org.uk/>

*Travel Writers' Blogs*

<http://www.travelwriters.co.uk/journalists.htm>

Journalisted – a portal for access to hundreds of journalists writing in the United Kingdom

[www.journalisted.com](http://www.journalisted.com)

## **The Commentary**

**Karen Buckley, Principal Moderator**

*Karen Buckley is Deputy Head of English at Loughborough Grammar School where she will be introducing the new Creative Writing A-level from September. She has published poetry and short fiction, has a PhD in Creative and Critical Writing, and has many years' experience of teaching Creative Writing in Higher Education.*

### **Introduction**

The commentary is a piece of writing of a maximum of 1500 words for AS CREW2 Exploring Creative Writing and 2000 words at A2 CREW4 The Writing Portfolio. In the commentary pupils demonstrate their engagement with their own writing process from stimulus to final draft in the coursework pieces submitted for assessment. They will be expected to reflect on the influence of published work, both in print and online, and of other sources of inspiration and observe how these have influenced their own writing. They will need to chart the development of the pieces in terms of initial aims, choice of form, response to feedback and editing decisions.

At the start pupils might need guidance in finding a voice that lends itself to the commentary, which is both a critical and analytical document and personal and reflective. It is unlike the written work generally produced in English and more akin to evaluative pieces produced by candidates in Theatre Studies. However, the journal and writer's notebook, if used in a sustained and detailed way throughout the course, will allow an appropriate voice to develop.

It would be advisable to set aside teaching time to focus on commentary writing and to provide pupils with sample commentaries as well as with extracts from writers' journals, letters and interviews. They will then assimilate not only the range of concerns that writers express, but also the ways in which these concerns can be conveyed to a reader in an effective and often engaging way.

In CREW2 a single commentary of 1500 words that explores the writing process, making connections between the two pieces and lessons learned, will potentially lend itself to a more exploratory and discursive investigation than two separate commentaries reflecting on each piece of creative coursework as a discrete item, although the latter is admissible.

In terms of the structure of the commentary, pupils might use the following headings from the Specification in order to organise their ideas in class discussion, in their journals, and in the final writing up. However, the more able candidate might usefully demonstrate the ways that these areas blend and overlap and write according to their own plan.

### **Inspiration and aims**

The commentary might begin with a brief description of the starting point for their writing. Inspiration might be straightforward to pinpoint. It could be, for example, an exercise introduced by their teacher or a text, image or object used as a stimulus in class. However, the starting point can

sometimes be more elusive and attempts to locate it can in themselves open up some fascinating exploration. For example, pupils might note that they tend to begin their writing most often in response to a fleeting visual image or an overheard snippet of conversation. A line of a song might have provided a possible opening for a script. A smell might have conjured an emotion. A film or a line from a poem might have inspired a startling connection. They might observe that work develops best if they have an idea about an ending before they begin or a set form within which to frame their vision. Alternatively, they might feel that their writing is largely a journey into unknown territory that begins with a random word or phrase. They might like to begin with a title or a given line.

Similarly, the aim of a piece of work might be expressed in simple terms such as ‘I decided I would like to experiment with different poetic forms and therefore produced a sequence of sonnets,’ or ‘My intention was to write my first play script based on a story we had discussed in class.’ However, especially as learning progresses, aims might become more precise and specialised, showing a sense of the writer’s concern with their work as a whole. Pupils might write, for example, ‘I wanted to see whether I could vary from my usual first person voice and still create a believable character,’ or ‘I wanted to write another travel piece, but this time with a comic twist.’

It would be useful to invite pupils to have a question, a thesis, a premise or a sharp focus that they wish to explore in their commentary. This will lead to a more probing and more cohesive piece of evaluative writing. They might write, for example, ‘I was sure that the processes involved in drafting poems and stories were very different and wanted to explore these differences,’ or, ‘I thought that writing non-fiction would involve fewer surprises for the writer than writing fiction and wanted to test this theory.’

## **Influences**

During the course the journal or notebook can become a repository for notes on the influences that surround and stimulate the observant writer. It might contain, for example, an interesting quotation from a poem or a line from a film, notes on a body of work by another writer, a useful tip from a visiting writer or a fragment of a response in an interview on an Arts programme.

Influence need not always be textual, but pupils should be exposed to as wide a range of writing and writers as possible. They will then, without necessarily limiting themselves, develop a well-informed sense of the types of writing they are interested in producing. Writers tend to write the kind of thing that they would like to read and are aware of the literary genre in which they are working and of other writers working in similar ways. Notes made in response to published work and input by other writers can become very useful starting points for reflection in the commentary.

Writing exercises that involve modelling work on published texts or playing with form can also be an enjoyable but disarmingly instructive way of engaging with the writing process, and these kinds of activities might again furnish pupils with some very precise material for evaluation. They might note how they have enjoyed creating a haiku after reading Basho, for example, and how lessons learned about economy of expression have filtered through to their longer poems. They might have noted, in writing a love poem, the ways in which conventions of a form can be subverted for comic effect. They might quote from these other sources in their commentary, precisely relating parts of the work of other writers to their own writing way.

Wide reading is essential in fuelling the work of developing writers and shaping their critical awareness of their own work, but the process of writing will also make pupils more critically informed readers. By reflecting on work produced by writers who are both similar to and different from themselves, they will be able to write more convincingly about their own writing decisions, setting their own work in a literary context in a helpful way.

### **Choice of form**

Pupils should examine their choice of form in the coursework pieces submitted, in line with the forms stipulated in the Specification. Their writing could have been initiated as an experiment in a particular form. They will need to show an understanding of that form and chart the ways in which they learned to shape their writing accordingly. They might reflect, for example, on the challenge of the line ending in free verse or the need for visual detail to hold the reader's attention in a monologue. They should show an awareness of other published examples of writing in this form and they might wish to discuss the ways in which aspects of the work of other writers taught them lessons about form. For example, the short story writer might consider how their work was stimulated by Carver's beginnings or by his use of dialogue. The scriptwriter might explain the ways in which Pinter's stage directions inspired theirs.

Alternatively, pupils might have begun their writing with an image, a phrase or a thematic idea and they might then chart their journey in playing with different forms and coming to a decision about the most suitable form for expressing their creative ideas. They might discuss too what they learned by writing about the same theme, character or setting in different forms, drawing comparisons between a poem and a short piece of fiction or a script and a piece of non-fiction, for example.

### **Creative problem solving**

Pupils will be required to submit a complete draft of each piece of work along with the final version in their coursework portfolio. They will be expected to explore in detail the changes made between drafts, explaining the ways in which the writing developed and improved. It is usual for the writer of a commentary to quote from their own work and to compare, with precise supporting quotation, words and phrases from both versions. They might wish to keep additional drafts because, although these will not be submitted, this will allow them to chart the development of the writing.

If pupils are encouraged to think in terms of problems to be solved and questions to be answered during this drafting process, noting their observations in their journal or notebook, this part of the commentary should begin to take shape organically.

They might reflect, for example, on some of the apparently simple but realistically tricky technical challenges in writing. They might consider how to write economical dialogue that reveals vital information to the reader without drawing attention to itself, or how to create seamless transitions in time without the rather awkward discourse markers such as 'Three weeks later.' Examples can then be given in the commentary. Alternatively, they might explore wider concerns such as how to dramatise a personal experience for it to resonate sufficiently for the reader or how to create a sense of place in a piece of fiction without resorting to mere factual and superfluous recording.

## **Responding to feedback and editing**

Much of the pupil's learning will arise out of feedback on their work. The workshop will furnish them with a range of responses to each piece submitted for discussion and the teacher's feedback on their drafts should ensure that potential areas for development are consistently brought into sharp focus. Pupils should be encouraged to seek feedback from other readers too. Indeed, a frank response from a family member or a non-writing friend, or an alternative view from a visiting writer or teacher who is not familiar with their work as a whole, can furnish them with a bewildering but nevertheless challenging assortment of views. This will allow them to weigh up, reflect on, assimilate or discard feedback and to explain this process in their commentary.

It is the response to this feedback that makes for incisive and interesting commentary writing. For example, if the ending of a short story triggered some debate during the workshop, then the writer might balance their own preference for a subtle, open ending against the demand for a clearer resolution, deciding on a small addition in the final paragraph.

As pupils develop a greater awareness of their own writing processes they will inevitably learn some interesting lessons about their editing decisions. The commentary can illustrate and evaluate methods used, such as reading aloud to check for fluency, allowing time between drafts so that flaws and unclear or redundant parts suddenly become more easily identifiable. Pupils might also draw some conclusions about the kinds of decisions they have tended to make. Some, for example, will reflect on the cutting of superfluous dialogue or description or of overt telling rather than showing. Others may be more concerned with developing further detail to bring their writing to life and adding in more information to help the reader share their imagined world more effectively.

## **The Writers' Workshop**

**Karen Buckley, Principal Moderator**

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### **Introduction**

The writers' workshop is an integral part of a Creative Writing course. The objective is for pupils to offer drafts and to elicit feedback before redrafting. Pupils will learn a great deal by both giving and receiving purposeful critical feedback as well as by listening to the feedback given by their peers and teacher. Teachers might allocate a minimum of one hour a week to workshop activity with their group throughout the A Level course.

### **Setting up**

A work shop involving the whole group and teacher can be dynamic and extremely instructive for all; it allows for a good variety of forms of writing for discussion as well as a good range of voices offering their responses to each piece of writing. The teacher should expect to prompt and lead workshop discussion at the start of the course but might gradually become a facilitator, allowing pupils to structure and lead sessions where appropriate. Visiting writers might also be recruited to participate in or lead workshops.

There are different ways of conducting a workshop. One of the most effective is to establish an organised system of collecting pieces of work for photocopying and distribution a week in advance of each session. The teacher and pupils can then read the pieces at leisure and annotate with their responses. After discussion at the workshop the annotated pieces can then be passed back to the writer.

Workshops should be brisk. Simply dividing the time by the pieces submitted and stopping the discussion if this exceeds ten minutes per piece works well. Word limits can be enforced for workshop photocopies if necessary. Pupils should not feel that they have to fill the time with their feedback. If it becomes obvious that some have little to say or have perhaps not read the material properly, then it is time to move on.

Another approach is to invite pupils to read their work aloud, either instead of distributing photocopied versions or as an additional feature of the workshop. There are benefits to this approach. Reading aloud can help the writer to engage with their own work more fully, so that weaknesses such as inconsistencies in voice or rhythm, accidental repetition, problems with pace or awkward expression can come to light. Writers often tend to read aloud when composing and not just for poetry or scripts, and pupils might be directed to this helpful method.

## **Building confidence**

Teachers should not under-estimate the degree of confidence involved in offering one's writing up for critical feedback, let alone in reading one's own work aloud.

Discussion and feedback can be devolved into pairs or small groups where this might be useful in building confidence at the start. In fact, at any point during the course, smaller workshop groups might be organised for a specific purpose. For example, the teacher might try seating all the poets together or, conversely, mixing up writers of different forms. In this way the scriptwriter can be invited to focus on responding to the voice in another pupil's short story or the prose non-fiction and prose fiction writers might share their thoughts on the narrative structure in each other's drafts.

Expectations will need to be set early, requiring pupils to contribute work for a minimum number of sessions. The teacher should avoid the pitfall of simply taking in the work and returning it to the nervous pupil rather than encouraging exposure to the range of responses possible in the workshop. If the workshop is conducted well, in an atmosphere that is safe and supportive, writers will inevitably be encouraged to participate so that the year might even culminate in a class reading to an audience.

Some pupils might prefer to nominate someone else to read their work aloud and this might be another pupil or the teacher. This too has its benefits. Hearing work as someone else reads it, with different nuances of expression, can shed new light on a piece for the writer.

## **Feedback**

Members of the most dynamic amateur writers' groups often complain about the overwhelmingly positive nature of the feedback that nevertheless provides little food for thought. Although support and encouragement are vital, the workshop should have learning at its heart. The outcome should be an improvement in the quality of both the pupils' writing as well as of their feedback.

A useful way to embark on feedback is to discuss the following preliminary questions:

- What would you hope to achieve by sharing your work with other writers in the class?
- What kinds of advice might you give to your fellow writers?

Pupils could then be invited to each offer one positive feature of the writing under discussion and one thing that they consider could require further editing or development, giving reasons for their observations. An early session could then be devoted to drawing up lists of possible workshop comments in a collaborative way. Where necessary the teacher could offer suggestions such as:

- The most memorable part for me was...
- The use of language that I found most striking was...
- This line ending worked well...
- These stanza divisions....
- The voice seems to slip a little here...
- The title maybe gives too much away...
- I like the way the present tense is used...

- This passage seems to be telling rather than showing...I wanted to experience more for myself...
- The ending seems a little abrupt...
- Maybe more paragraph breaks would have helped the reader make sense of the passage of time...

Less productive contributions tend to be:

- There are typos and other errors here...
- Maybe you could have ended it this way...
- I would have included this...

The teacher should model the content and tone of the feedback and might even consider asking pupils to warm up by giving feedback on a sample piece before focusing on work by the group.

### **Some ground rules**

It is a good idea to establish some tried and tested ground rules about the writer's role in the feedback process. The writer will gain most from listening to feedback about their draft if they do not contribute to the discussion. Explanations and apologies from the writer should be discouraged. Writers are often prone to preface discussion of their work with, 'It's not very good' or 'This is a rough draft,' or to attempt to explain intentions and ambiguities in a way that is unhelpful. The teacher may need to reassure pupils repeatedly that everything in the workshop is to be treated as a draft. Learning to let go and to be alert to possible reader responses is part of the art of writing, no matter how inexplicable and frustrating those responses might seem to the writer at times.

During the workshop the writer's job should be simply to listen to the range of feedback on their work. They might, however, with the teacher's agreement, be invited to open the discussion with one or two questions of their own that they would like their readers to explore. They could even note these down very briefly on the work to be photocopied. For example, they might want to ask, 'Do you think the dialogue in the middle part of the story serves its purpose in revealing character?' or 'Could you give me your opinions on the ending of this poem?' Another possibility is to allow the writer a very limited time to respond to the feedback at the end of the discussion of their piece. If the piece being discussed is part of a longer work, such as a novel, encourage pupils to submit a brief accompanying note or synopsis so that lengthy narrative explanations are unnecessary. Listening and reflecting are vital. Learning for the writers will involve deciding which feedback to reject and which to take on board. For example, they might decide to experiment a little with point of view or tense in their short story but they might defend their right to use two characters with similar names. They might be pleased to hear that an image with a particular resonance to them has worked for others too. Conversely, they might be surprised to learn that others have read and interpreted aspects of their work in an unexpected way. They might even learn, to their surprise, that they often return to a particular theme in their writing or that one form suits them more than another. Pupils should be encouraged to use their journal or notebook to make notes on workshop feedback and their responses to it and these notes can then be developed in their commentary both for CREW2 Exploring Creative Writing and CREW4 The Writing Portfolio.

Pupils might wish to submit the same work in progress for discussion at various stages in the drafting process and this should not be discouraged. However, the perfectionist pupil might be made aware that the objective is not for their peers and teacher to rubber stamp a final version. Any writing they offer will inevitably invite a range of critical comments, as does any published writing. The pupils should take heart that many writers feel that even their published work is just another version, submitted by a deadline. On this course the deadline has to be the coursework submission date and the work they submit will be the most well-crafted pieces they can achieve by that date.

### **Sensitive material and difficult reactions**

Writing demands a great deal of personal investment and, whether or not it emerges out of life experience, it may be emotive both for the writer and, sometimes unexpectedly for the readers. Teachers should feel privileged that pupils are prepared to share their writing in the workshop as it suggests that the necessary atmosphere of trust has been established. If a pupil should become upset or begin to reveal something of a personal and difficult nature during the workshop this can be handled just as it would be in any other class.

However, a good policy is to state at the start of the course that your job is to keep the spotlight on the writing. By suggesting that preliminary statements such as, 'This happened to me three years ago' are unhelpful, the teacher can set the tone. A useful tip is to treat every piece of work as fiction, considering the 'I' in the work as a narrator, just as one would when studying a text in English Literature. Pupils should be discouraged from asking questions such as, 'So what happened after that?' or 'Is it all true?' For the writers themselves an understandable response to a criticism about a piece of work is, 'But that's how it was.' It can be a hard lesson to learn that perceived veracity is just that and that ultimately all experience has to be transformed by craft in order to create a successful piece of writing. This rigorous approach to 'the truth' in the workshop can actually be liberating for pupils so that their work is allowed to be that interesting blend of experience and invention that good writing inevitably is.

### **Offensive material**

Work that tests the boundaries of acceptability can provide a useful focus for discussion and teachers might channel strong responses to controversial writing in a positive way. It is not uncommon for writers to experiment with violent or sexual content in such a way as to cause offence to some readers. Conversations about intended audience and censorship can be fruitful. However, teachers should use their judgement and remind the pupils that their work is for public consumption once submitted for assessment. Occasionally, work can cause concern even for the more open-minded reader. Fiction is fiction and pupils should feel free to experiment in their writing, but should there be any serious concerns about work which might reveal child protection issues, for example, teachers should treat these in the same way as they would any other welfare concern.

Overall, a well organised and supportive workshop will provide a collaborative environment in which critical reflection on the craft of writing can flourish and as the course progresses each pupil will quickly begin to find their voice both as a writer and as a critic.