

Virtually every writer has different advice to give about how to write creatively. Some like to outline, some prefer free-writing, some write only at night, some never use dialogue—and this myriad of opinions is fine. Still, a few writing principles in particular can help you start writing and learn to make your own practical decisions as you progress.

## Read, Read, Read

Just as you can't learn to cook well without eating, you can't learn to write without reading. Read something new every day—a short story, a novel, an essay, a blog—any writing will do. Read critically, not just for entertainment, but for technique, asking yourself questions like these:

- What do I like about the piece? What do I dislike?
- How does the writer use literary devices, like metaphor, symbolism, or imagery? What do the devices accomplish for the piece?
- How does the piece make me feel? How does the author evoke that feeling?

Consistent reading yields familiarity with the written word, which will help you feel more confident trying new things in your own writing.

## Write, Write, Write

You also can't learn to cook without cooking. Write something new every day. Don't worry that your writing won't live up to your expectations; most writers have many pieces of bad writing to show for every good piece they produce. The important thing is to **practice**. If you have trouble thinking of what to write, consider trying the following:

- Keep a writing journal.* Write down the literary impressions you have throughout the day. Keep the journal somewhere you can get to it easily.
- Use writing prompts.* Countless books and websites offer prompts that can help you think of what to write. Try using one different prompt per day.
- Freewrite to start your day.* As soon as you wake up, grab a pen or your computer and start writing. Don't stop until you fill up one page. This might not produce what you want to do creatively, but morning freewriting can help break down the mental barriers for when you *do* write later in the day.

When you are ready to refine your work, critique yourself honestly, always paying attention to how you can improve your writing as well as your writing method.

## Authenticity

A word on these writing exercises—William Faulkner said that a writer must have at least two of three things: experience, observation, or imagination.<sup>1</sup> What experiences have you had, what things do you observe, what things can you imagine? Your individual knowledge can improve the literary canon in a way that literally no other person can. Don't write like you think people want you to write, but be true to yourself, and what *you* can bring to the table. It will give your writing heart.

## Audience

Writers need readers. Since your readers are participating in your writing, it is your responsibility to provide them with a degree of clarity and purpose. As you write, think about your audience. Remember that you are writing *to* someone, rather than *at* them. As appropriate, try to connect the dots for your reader, especially as you design plot, dialogue, and theme. Ask:

- If I were the reader, would I understand the piece?
- What could my reader misunderstand or misinterpret in the text?
- What should I clarify for the reader? What should I make more mysterious?

Consider having someone read one of your rough drafts and offer feedback. Getting a reader response can help you find ways to improve your connection with your audience.

## Form

Whatever you choose to write will assume some kind of literary form. While only you can decide which form to use, make this decision deliberately, carefully considering which form best matches your audience and content. Remember the old saying, *Content dictates form*. Let *what* you write determine *how* you write it.

It may be helpful to remember that there are some things which only certain forms can accomplish. Think about these differences, and how you can use them to your advantage:

- How would my piece function differently as a novel, poem, screenplay, or essay?
- What does each form (novel, poem, screenplay, or essay) do that no other form can do?
- What effects do I want to achieve in my piece? Does any particular form lend itself to producing those effects?

This might seem like a lot to think about, but take things one step at a time. Creative writing takes time and practice. If you want to talk about your writing with someone, consider joining a community group for local writers. You can also come to the Writing Center anytime you want feedback on your work.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Stein. "An Interview with William Faulkner." In *Writers at Work: the Paris Review Interviews*, edited by Malcolm Cowley, 133. New York: The Viking Press, 1959.