Chapter Two

The skills you'll need to study creative writing

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The previous chapter will have given you a better understanding of what to expect on a creative writing degree course. The purpose of this chapter is to get you thinking, perhaps before you've even chosen the course you want to take, about the sorts of skills you'll need in order to get the most from a creative writing degree. It's important to note from the outset that you won't necessarily need to master every skill listed here. Some of the skills listed are more applicable to those who wish to specialise in journalism, others to poetry, while others still are more relevant to fiction writers. Also, there are elements of writing that some writers are better at than others. Furthermore, not every novel, poem or script is 'built' in the same way. The point is that a good writer should know how they are built and what goes into a poem or novel or screenplay.

A willingness to learn

Perhaps the most important advice to give any first-time student is that you should be open to learning new things. This may sound obvious, and you would hope that all students would come to class with this mindset. But in the case of creative writing courses you are perhaps more likely to meet students who have a passion for writing and who

have spent time practising their craft before arriving at university. However, this can lead to writing students believing that they are already writers and that there is nothing more to learn. In which case, why are they studying for a writing degree? No aspiring writer is going to develop their craft if they think they already know everything. The key thing I always tell students is that you don't have to agree with everything you are taught. There should always be room for debate in literary and creative studies. That's part of what being a student is about. But you can't have that debate until you know the facts and are familiar with the theories. For example, a writing student who doesn't read widely might think their work is highly original, when if they'd only done their reading, they would have known that lots of books have been written in that style or published on that topic.

Evening classes and writing groups can give you the opportunity to write and meet other writers. However, a degree provides you with the opportunity to spend three or even four whole years learning and growing.

Learn to read as a writer

The importance of reading cannot be understated and rightly deserves an entire chapter in this book. Suffice to say here that you don't have to be well read before you start your course, but by the time you finish you will have been given every chance to become so. Your department will provide you with a reading list. Your library will provide you with resources, including (in most universities) a subject liaison librarian who will specialise in your area of study. With these opportunities available, the most

important aspect of writing is to learn to love reading (if you don't already) and to love storytelling in all its forms.

However, I would add to this that you should also learn to enjoy reading theories of writing. I'm sure that for most young writers, reading textbooks about *how* to write doesn't seem as much fun as the actual creative process, but the more you write the more you want to understand how to do it better. You don't have to agree with all the theories you'll read, but you should be aware of how they can help you. The more you begin to understand about the process of writing the better your work will be for it. These books can also help you to become more aware of the fact that everything you write adds to an existing heritage of the written word.

The power of description

Young writers are often preoccupied with coming up with ideas for stories and thinking of subject matter for non-fiction. With this in mind, you might think I'd say that the most important thing for a creative writing student is to be full of ideas. However, many students forget that first of all they need to get to grips with description. You may be very good at coming up with ideas, you may have an incredible awareness of what people want to read, but you'll still need to practise how best to describe what you want to convey.

Writing that's simply a series of events or 'what happened next' and has no detail or description is little more than a synopsis. Being able to write a synopsis is a useful skill in its own right. The point here is that there's a lot more to writing a story or play or poem than coming up

with an initial idea. Even non-fiction writers don't simply write a list of events. They describe them. They may research the events and organise them to make the best possible sense of the facts, but good writing, good storytelling in all forms, is about *how* we tell stories.

A writer needs to be able to fill in the details. If you choose to describe a stately home, then you must be able to make this establishment come to life for the reader. How does this specific stately home smell? Does the odour of polished oak linger in the air? What noises can you hear? Is it bustling with servants or can you hear the creak of every floorboard? Even if the reader has been to a hundred stately homes, you want to make sure that they can differentiate the one you are writing about from all the others. If it's a real place and the reader has been there, you want them to be able to recognise it from your writing.

A writer's work is unique because he or she makes their writing specific. If you're a fiction writer, for example, you may be able to think of the greatest storyline ever for a novel, but if you can't make the reader care about your characters, and, crucially, if you cannot describe all the scenes that make the plot move forward, then it's unlikely to be a success. Have you ever jumped in the back of a taxi in, say, London? That's a place where you'll hear a lot of interesting stories, but this doesn't mean that every taxi driver is a writer waiting to be discovered. There is a craft involved in using words in writing, as opposed to other modes of storytelling. It isn't always the best plots that succeed. It is technically possible to write without a plot, but it is virtually impossible to write even the most abstract work without description.

One technique you can use to become a better writer is to try describing a few scenes from particular story ideas you've come up with. You don't need to write like Tolstoy, lavishly describing every single aspect of a scene. There are different levels of description. Another good idea is to practise writing about the most mundane things (going to the shops, walking up your stairs, sitting on a bus), and making them interesting.

Also, be experimental in your reading. Try reading heavily descriptive works *and* the works of minimalist writers. See the different ways scenes can be described. This may also help you to discover whether you are a novelist, playwright, screenwriter or poet. Perhaps you're the sort of person who reads a book and is immediately able to imagine vividly what it would like as a film or sound like as a radio play. Thinking of *how* you want to tell stories is a good starting point. It could also help you choose the type of creative writing degree course that you want to follow (e.g., one that's more general, or one with a strong focus on, say, screenwriting).

But first of all you need to test yourself to see how much you actually like writing. Are you are prepared to advance beyond thinking up ideas for stories and actually start writing?

Memorable use of language

Poetry, in particular, is all about finding the right words, and the enduring popularity of Shakespeare also has a lot to do with his use of language. If we consider the dialogue in a Shakespeare play, we care about *what* is being said and the meaning it has within the wider context of

the play, but mostly we remember *the way* it is said. Think about Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' speech. He is questioning whether it is better to live or die, and there are so many ways to say that. But Shakespeare didn't just write, 'Shall I live or die? Wouldn't it be easier to just give up instead of face the troubles of life?' We can debate endlessly what makes writing quotable and memorable (e.g., vivid imagery, choice of vocabulary) but we know instinctively that 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' sounds better than 'the troubles of life'. In your own work, try to experiment with finding better ways to say what you want to say. Read your work aloud, whatever genre you're writing in, and listen to how it sounds.

The screenwriter and novelist William Goldman says in his book *Adventures in the screen trade* that there are only a handful of scenes in a film that an audience will remember. They will remember what the story was about and the overall plot, but the quotable moments are the ones that last. Your choice of language gives you the opportunity to make your work memorable. You don't have to use big long words. The writer John Steinbeck, for example, is remembered for his effective use of simple language. Making your language memorable doesn't have to mean using words that will have the reader reaching for the nearest dictionary.

In the introduction to his book, *On writing*, Stephen King notes that readers often overlook the fact that even horror writers care about the language they use. It is often assumed that all genre fiction is plot-driven, while literary fiction relies on beautiful language to be successful. The truth is that all writers use language and want their language to be memorable. Some just use it better than others, and some produce more quotable work than others.

While it is easy to become fixated on plot and ideas, perhaps the best thing to come to class with is a love of words. In preparation, think about what you find most quotable in your favourite pieces of writing and why. Again, this could help you choose your course and decide what kind of writing you're best suited to.

The ability to organise your ideas

Planning and structuring are essential skills for any kind of writing. Consider your descriptive work and your use of language as the 'bricks and mortar' of your writing. Once you have these, you'll need to think about what you want to build with those bricks.

Many writers believe that good writing doesn't need a plot. It is true that some works simply show us a world that we visit and explore while reading yet where perhaps very little happens. Even in these cases there's always a plan, a structure. A good example is the Bret Easton Ellis's novel *American psycho*. If you were to describe the 'plot' of this novel you could say only that it is a book about a man who kills a lot of people, with each murder more gruesome than the last. He is not pursued. He is not caught. He is not remorseful by the end. We do get an insight into the horrible world of the psychopath and we do feel we have been on a journey, but how would we describe the plot?

If we define 'plot' as everything that happens then, as not much happens in the novel, we could say there isn't much in the way of plot. But there is definitely a structure. If there wasn't, the order in which Ellis has events happen wouldn't matter. Why not start a book called *American psycho* with a murder? Why does it take until more than

a hundred pages for the first murder to occur? However, the author is building to something. He is pacing. He is stirring an emotional response in the reader. Plot is *what* happens. Structure is *how* it happens, the order in which it happens, and the appropriate place for every scene.

If you are a confident writer, it's easy to believe that everyone will be bowled over by your elegant prose, your cleverly thought out scenes and captivating dialogue. However, sometimes even these things still aren't enough. Even if you believe that plot is relatively unimportant, you do have to understand that structure is essential. I challenge anyone to pick up a book or watch a film or play that they regard as having little in the way of plot and see no structure in it.

There are many books about how to structure your writing, such as David Mamet's *A whore's profession* and Rob McKee's *Story*. Both express the idea that every scene has or should have a purpose and every scene ends when it reaches that purpose. There is an art to making the reader want to keep on reading. On a creative writing degree, you will learn to plan, but having a plan is not the same as knowing how your writing will conclude. You may not know the ending. Or you may think you know it, but it changes and it could change again before you reach the last scene. But you should be able to set out with a road map of where you want to go and the sights you want your reader to see along the way if you learn to structure.

Some writers write extensive plans, and it's standard for non-fiction writers to submit lengthy proposals (which in themselves need planning) to agents and publishers. Some fiction authors claim to have no written plan at all, but even they have some sort of plan in mind. They have a

starting point and ideas about where they want to go and where they could possibly end. No writer is ever completely without a plan. As a writer, I always have a distinct idea where I'm starting and where I want my protagonists to go. I know a series of events that I want to write and I know the logical order for them to go in. All of this is written down in a plan that I can consult as I go along. Pieces of plot and dialogue regularly get added and moved around. I don't know how I'd retain all this information and keep track of the shape of my work without it.

Lots of ideas

Even if having lots of ideas is not enough in itself to make you a good writer, it does help. What's the point in having great organisational skills if you have nothing to organise? You should be a compulsive note-taker, stockpiling scenes and ideas. You may not use every single one, but at least you will have them in reserve. Never throw away even the ideas that you think are not that good. A discarded short story could provide the inspiration for, or form the bones of, longer pieces of work. An incomplete poem could become a great monologue. Ideas for one novel that never seemed to work out could provide a backstory or subplot to the next one. I find that when I have many ideas and scenes and snippets of dialogue and well-described locations, then concepts for stories and poems are easier to come by.

Good research skills

Gathering, investigating and assessing material is important in any job, and research adds authority and believability

to any kind of writing. Non-fiction writers can find their reputations discredited by inaccuracies. However, you may think that in fiction, where the writer creates his own world with its own rules, that there is no need for research. But fiction is dependent on creating a literary world that we can all relate to, one that has a resounding familiarity. In other words, we want our audience to be able to relate to the work.

I was once given a short story to read that was set in an American diner. It had interesting characters with interesting issues and the dialogue was sharp. The scene was well described. Yet I didn't find it engaging at all. The biggest problem was that the setting matched every diner scene I'd seen in every small independent American film and all the characters were young, 'cool' and messed up on drugs. The writer's voice lacked authority because it seemed like someone else's idea of an American diner. No real research had been done. I had no sense that this writer knew the world he was writing about. It quickly becomes clear to the reader when you're guessing what something is like. Your work seems the weaker for it.

Research also makes your study more enjoyable and allows you to become more involved in the world you're creating. It can even give you a better insight into your own work. Everything and anything can be research to a writing student. For my own creative writing master's dissertation, I had written a novel in which the protagonist had studied Russian history. I knew why the character had done so. What I didn't know was anything at all about Russian history! The only way to get around that was to research the subject. Not only did I enjoy doing this, I also understood my protagonist better. I started to think of

reasons why Russian history and literature would appeal to him, and, as a result, I could make him seem more believable as a person. Researching the background to my novel in this way made me feel more involved with the work. It made me think about it in new ways and, in turn, I was able to incorporate my research into the work. Ultimately, the research provided me with more ideas and more to write about.

Attention to detail

Literary agents and publishers often say they can tell from looking at just one page of a manuscript whether or not it is a publishable piece of work. This idea is alarming, especially if you've spent months or years completing and rewriting your 100,000-word manuscript.

Even as a writing student, your aim should be to produce work that looks professional. Your course will demand it and your tutors will want you to adopt good habits that you can nurture throughout and beyond your degree course. You will need to demonstrate that you have taken time and care over your writing. You should always use the spell-check facility on your computer, but don't rely on spell-check alone as it does not catch every grammatical error. Sloppy spelling not only doesn't look good but your tutors will also want to see that you are aware of, and have adhered to, industry standard. Proofreading shouldn't just be left to editors.

Similarly, page layout is an integral part of writing and not an afterthought. Layout can influence the pacing of a piece of writing. Pauses and blank spaces are important. This is perhaps most evident in poetry. If you were

to try to imagine a poem, any poem, on a printed page, it wouldn't look like a novel. But whether you're writing poetry, novels or plays, you always need to be aware of layout. If you don't believe me, try reading a page of text that's one solid block of words, with no paragraph breaks. It can be tiring. That's not to say that you can't write a solid block of text if you want to. You wouldn't be the first to do so. But you should be aware that the way your text looks on paper could affect how it is read and, potentially, an agent or publisher's willingness to pick it up.

Conclusion: have as many strings to your bow as possible and be open to new ideas

The desire to learn more about writing should drive your desire to study. If you already have a love of the written word and of stories, whether they're told in fiction or non-fiction, poetry or prose, then you'll want to learn more about them. You can take issue with the order in which I've listed the skills I've referred to here, and you yourself may put more emphasis on some than on others, but ignore any of them, and you'll be at a disadvantage.

While it's true that some writers are better at certain aspects of writing than others and while there are particular skills required of the journalist or the novelist, writing is writing and you need to be open to all forms. Also, while I've emphasised here how the skills I have listed can help you become a better writing student and, in the long run, a better writer, these same skills (how to research, attention to detail, spelling and layout) can be used throughout your life and in many different employment situations.

Having read over the list of skills above one final time, I'm aware that much of what I've said sounds obvious, but it can be easy to forget and to take certain aspects of writing for granted. There is so much to learn about writing and there are many questions you will want to ask. But before you even think up those questions, you should ask yourself if you can do the basics. If you can, then you have good foundations on which to build.