



# Creative Writing Activities

## (for teachers)

Writers don't all do the same thing. I've had other writers recommend creative writing books to me that I hated, and over on Scribophile the "plotter vs pantsers" debate is second only to the "self-publish vs traditionally publish" one. It's important to note that while there might be writing or editing "rules", there are no rules for the creative process. So with that in mind, here are some exercises that encourage whatever existing creativity is there and teach skills, rather than a beginning-to-end process.

### Fortunately, Unfortunately

When I was a kid, I used to play this game with my siblings, usually in the car or somewhere we had little else to do, and we didn't often write it down. It works like this: one person starts with a person/people and situation e.g. A man is driving a car. The next person says "unfortunately \_\_\_\_" e.g. Unfortunately, he runs out of fuel. The next person says "fortunately \_\_\_\_" and resolves the problem. Because there were 3 of us, we'd take turns being the problem maker or solution maker, but it was a small enough group that our turn came around frequently. I think this is a great game for small groups of 3 or 5 students. What you end up with is something that looks a bit like this:

"A man is driving a car. Unfortunately, he runs out of fuel. Fortunately, a family stops by the side of the road to take him to a petrol station. Unfortunately, the family turns out to be murderers intent on kidnapping him. Fortunately, the man brought his mobile phone and calls the police. Unfortunately, the phone runs out of batteries and he can't complete the call. Fortunately, emergency services trace the call. Unfortunately, when they arrive they arrest the man for abandoning his car at the side of the road."

Not much of a short story, right? But look at what it does teach.

Plot complications. Every "unfortunately" is an exercise in adding obstacles to the character's goal.

Rising tension. Play this enough times and you'll notice a pattern where the complications rise and fall in severity and gradually become harder to overcome. As that happens, your students have to think outside the box to solve (or create) problems.

It's also great for getting students who "hate writing" or "can't think of anything" to start. Writing is often seen as a solitary exercise and lots of kids struggle to get going without anybody to bounce their ideas off. Boiling it down to single sentences helps them to realise that stories can arise out

of anywhere there is conflict; they don't need a fantastic original premise to begin an original story. And because there's a challenge to "stump" the others in their group or to prove themselves, students start to take more risks and throw in things like "fortunately, the man can walk through walls".

## Teacher-driven plot outline

I picked this one up in a university tutorial. The idea is to take the pressure of "premise" off students so that they can focus on the building blocks like character and description. So, you give them the sequence of events, but instead of opening with "you have 20 minutes to write a story about a character called Mildred who goes to a park and loses something valuable" you do it bit by bit. You say "your story is set in a park at nighttime. Describe the park to me - what does it look/sound/smell like? What objects are there?" and you get them to write for a few minutes. Then add "a woman called Mildred has just arrived at the park. What does she look like? Why did she come there? What does she think of the park?" and give them some time to write that. Then "Mildred drops something valuable. What is it? Describe the item. Does she know she has dropped it? How does she feel about it?" and so on. This is a great one to get peers to critique afterwards; they'll be interested to see what other students did with the same basic story and critiquing is a practice that everybody benefits from.

## Swap books

Not for critiquing, this time. Here you give a prompt, first sentence, location or whatever you need, and get students to just start writing. They don't have to know where they're going with it. After a few minutes, get them to swap their book with another student - it might be mid-sentence or even mid-word. Then finish the other students' story.

This is not a new idea, but I'm including it because I think people underestimate what it does. In every classroom you'll have some creative students who find writing easy, and others who struggle to get two sentences out in the same amount of time. If you pair up your students thoughtfully, the ones who struggle will get a story where an idea is already starting to take shape, and the pressure to come up with one is lessened. The ones who find writing easy are challenged to abandon their story and work with something different, often one that is still short and open with lots of possibilities. This also teaches students to search for common ground with kids whose creative approach might be quite different to theirs and, depending on how late you make the swap, focus on good endings.

## Tell a lie

At youth groups, camps or with new classes, I like to play a getting to know you game called "two truths and a lie" where people say three things about themselves and the others in the group have to guess which is the lie. In writing, I like to play this game with my characters. It doesn't create a story. It's not supposed to. What it does, is create three-dimensional characters. It's the lie aspect

that's most compelling, because when you think of your character's lie you also must think *why would they lie?*

Are they lying because of who they wish they were? Because of an aspect of themselves they're ashamed of? To reach a goal that is important to them? To avoid something they're afraid of? If they *wouldn't* lie, why not? When has a lie torn their life apart so badly as to push them to extreme honesty?

Get your students to create a character and then have their character lie. That's it. They don't need a narrative to go with the character just yet, all they're thinking of is who this person is and what motivates them.

## Put Yourself in Their Shoes

Like many great characterisation exercises, this one comes from the drama classroom. I remember being given an assignment to look for an elderly person and study them, paying close attention to the way they move so that I could then replicate it in drama. Here, the basic principle is the same: challenge your students to write an ordinary scene - getting up and making breakfast, catching a bus, doing a load of laundry - from the perspective of a person who is different to them. Like in Drama, I started this with an elderly person, having students describe the thoughts and movements that a person might have. I've also done it with different genders. You could do it with disabilities, different races, different sexual orientations. At the end, talk with your students about what they found easy or difficult.

For the most part, I think describing action becomes easy with practice. A man in a wheelchair stores his cereal in a lower cupboard, the word "walked" becomes "wheeled myself", the bus driver helps him onto the bus and he pulls the brake on his chair. What is difficult is the thought process - would a girl who has always had ADHD define herself by her diagnosis? Would she even mention it to the reader? How else might you be able to tell? This kind of exercise is challenging for more advanced writers, while being simple enough for weaker students to have a go and not have to worry about a "good story". Again, it won't get them to the end, but you may be surprised which students excel at this. The writers who have a natural imagination and can come up with fantastic stories tend to get the better marks on creative writing assessments, but here any student who has empathy can create a beautiful piece. And that breeds confidence.

## Body Language

Tell your students to imagine they are watching two people have a conversation – or, play a scene from a movie in which two characters have a conversation, and press the mute button. You cannot hear the words they are saying, but there is still plenty to observe and deduce. Have students write what they see - focus on the characters' movements, facial expressions, impressions of their emotions. These are things they can include when writing their own dialogue.

## When You Say Nothing At All

Watch some "Two Line Vocabulary" from "Whose Line is it Anyway" (available on YouTube - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0OM2Nnkfr4w&list=PL1584B46A86E7C3F5&index=7>) Note how exactly the same phrase is given different meanings dependent on the context and the delivery of the line by the actor. Your students' task is to write a conversation between two people where one of them has just one repeated line - "I love you". Using everything *around* the dialogue, ask them to show this line being delivered in two completely different ways.

## Take It to the Max

Choose one of the following adjectives and build a character around it. Take this description to the extreme, where it is the one attribute that *defines* your character and best determines how they will react in a situation. Then select one of the simple scenarios. Put your character in that scenario and write away...

Adjective list: obedient, surly, polite, confident, merciful, vain, cheerful.

Scenario list (from cloudcuckoo.co.uk):

- First day in a new job
- Taking a pet to the vets
- Buying a second hand car
- Having a photo taken
- Choosing a gift for a partner
- Pushing into a queue
- Visiting someone in hospital
- Firing someone
- Ordering a Wedding Cake
- On a spying mission
- The first men in space
- Getting a signature
- Hypochondriac at the doctors
- Slow service in a restaurant
- A has just finished decorating when B comes home and doesn't like the colour
- Two construction workers find buried treasure
- Two criminals on the run
- Stuck in a car teetering on the edge of a cliff
- Helping a friend deal with amnesia
- Breaking the news of a dead pet to a friend
- On Noah's ark
- Two people on a train with the ticket collector coming

I hope these help, and if you do happen to use any of them in your classroom I'd love to hear how they went for you! Use the "contact me" form on my website [www.justkeepreiding.com](http://www.justkeepreiding.com) or chat to me on twitter or instagram @reidwriting.