Shaping

Dish showing a mermaid by Thomas Toft, 1671-77, Museum no. A.18-1913

There is a myth that says that when a writer is inspired, the words flow out of the pen and require few changes. The truth is nearly always very different. Serious writers expect to put their work through repeated drafts until they are satisfied.

Many pieces of writing begin as a mass of notes: ideas, words, phrases and images. These the writer expands, rewords, tweaks, adds to, rearranges over many painstaking hours while a coherent piece of work builds up.

Other pieces of writing arrive on the page in a more connected and lucid form. Even so, it is usual for them to need a good deal of careful reflection, development and rewriting before they are satisfactory.

The process of writing is different for everyone. However, it is safe to say that the following issues are among the ones that all capable writers are likely to keep in mind.

Finding a good way to begin

A piece of writing often takes shape more easily once you have found a good opening line or sentence.

This said, it is possible to write a good deal of a poem or a prose work without being entirely sure of how it will start. Try not to get so concerned about your first line, sentence or paragraph that you develop a mental block about going on with the rest of it.

Finding a good way to end

Some writers like to have an idea right from the start of how a piece of work is going to end. Others prefer to leave this open and trust their imaginations to come up with something when it is needed.

Either way, sooner or later you will arrive at your final line, stanza or paragraph. Aim to make it a good one. It will have an important influence on the final impression that your reader (or listener) is left with.

Conveying meaning precisely and effectively

Meaning is produced when words are interpreted in relation to the other words around them. Every time you change a single word you ensure that the passage to which it belongs will be differently received by the reader.

'St Jerome' manuscript painting, 15th century, Museum no. L.475-1918

Ask yourself continually whether what you have written expresses precisely what you want it to express. Always look for the most accurate word or image, the phrasing that conveys most clearly the sensations, feelings and ideas that you are trying to convey. Keep a dictionary to hand for those times when you are not quite sure of the full meaning of a word.

Think about the likely impact of your words on your readers.

Is your work intended to be widely accessible? If so, are you writing in a way that your intended readers would follow comfortably? Review your work for potential barriers to comprehension, such as unnecessarily difficult vocabulary or tangled sentence structure.

On the other hand, not everything can be expressed in straightforward language. And 'difficult' writing has its own pleasures and satisfactions. You should feel free to make demands of your readers.

Listening to how the words sound

A piece of writing is a pattern of meaning, sound and rhythm. The effects of sound and rhythm are usually more obvious in poetry, where devices like rhyme and alliteration call attention to the sound of the words, and rhythms are more regular and insistent. However, prose has looser rhythms of its own.

By manipulating sound and rhythm, a writer can:

- place emphasis on important words and passages
- affect the emotions of the reader (sometimes powerfully)
- speed up and slow down the movement of a story or poem
- produce elaborate patterns that give pleasure to the ear

Finding a title

Sometimes poems never receive titles and are known by their first lines. However, most pieces of writing are given a title.

Occasionally the title is the first part that the writer thinks of. It is when the writer sets out to interpret that title that the piece begins to take shape.

Usually pieces acquire their titles somewhere during the writing process. You may find you try out a number of titles before you hit on the one that feels right.

Netsuke, figure of a rat, 19th century
Museum no. A.958-1910

Giving the work scope to develop

Don't feel you have to stick rigidly to your original ideas. It is common for a piece of work to change once you start working on it. Sometimes it changes a lot and becomes something completely different. Another time you may find that you explore a new possibility only to return to your first thoughts. Or a piece may split, amoeba-like, into two.

Stay relaxed

The poet and artist William Blake said, 'Damn braces: Bless relaxes.' The best state of mind and body for writing is one in which you focus intently on your work while remaining relaxed.

If you are looking for a word, phrase or image and nothing comes immediately, don't strain too hard after it. Take a few good breaths, make a conscious effort to relax your muscles, then see what floats into your mind.

If this doesn't work, try leaving the problem for now. Something may occur to you when you are walking to the shops, or doing the washing up (This is one reason why writers carry notebooks).

The writing process takes time. Be prepared to be patient.

But above all, don't forget to enjoy yourself. Allow yourself to be playful when you feel like it. Leave room for fun in your work, and fantasy.

Find out more

To find out something about how other writers work, visit the New Poems for the British Galleries in the Gallery of Poems.

See also the section Writers reflect on writing on the Resources page.

Museum stories

Aim of the exercise:
Experiment with ideas for short narrative pieces

If you are a visitor to the V&A, begin by getting a good sense of the Museum by walking around. What do you find catches your eye?

Notice the visitors. Can you pick out different groups among them: school students and their teachers, art students, tourists?

Notice the staff. How can you tell them apart from the visitors? How do they behave?

Take in the layout of individual galleries. Notice how each gallery has an atmosphere of its own. Think about how you would describe that atmosphere.

Visit the foyer and look at the giant chandelier in blue and green glass that hangs over the counter in the centre. You could say that the foyer is like a hub with galleries radiating from it. The staircases take you to other galleries, but seem like works of art in themselves.

How does the Museum make you feel?

Sit for a while in the garden and listen to the water. Then find a quiet place to write.

If you are online, take a good look at the picture on this page. Then roam around the website and take in the information about the different galleries. Look at the representative objects pictured.

(a) The curator

This is a suggestion for a short story in prose. The narrator should be the curator of one of the galleries: such as South Asia, or the Fashion Gallery.

Every day, the narrator goes and looks at a particular object. This is his or her favourite in the entire gallery.

One day, the day on which the story begins, the object seems to have changed very slightly. On consecutive days, the changes seem to get more frequent and noticeable.

The object, the ways in which it changes, and what gallery the story is set in is up to you. So is the character of the curator and his or her reaction to what is happening.

Remember that the curator knows both the gallery and the object really well. The story should contain a good description of both.

What type of story it is and how it ends is up to you. Aim to give the story a definite ending, so that it seems finished.

If you write fantasy, this exercise may appeal to you as a basis for a ghost story or a chiller. If you don't, try and use it to write something that is a little different to your usual work. Writing something that you would not normally have a go at is good for developing your skills.

(b) The chandelier

Hold the chandelier in the foyer firmly in your mind's eye. Imagine that one day it begins to ring. At first, just one of the glass curls makes a sound, but soon all of them are ringing like bells. At first only people who are in the foyer can hear the ringing. Then gradually it permeates the whole museum. People begin to follow the sound, congregating under the chandelier …

What does the sound mean?

What happens next?

This idea can be developed either as a poem or a short story.

(c) The unexpected story

Imagine a jigsaw with several pieces missing. This is how you are going to tell a story.

- The story's narrator is the curator of one of the galleries in the Museum: any gallery you like.
- An odd stranger comes in, stays, and disrupts the general running of the gallery.

Tell the story of what happens in as few words as possible (maybe give yourself five paragraphs, or possibly even less).

Tips for writing very short stories

- Devise a gripping way to open
- End on a memorable note
- Keep it simple; don't include too many incidents or characters
- Use a consistent narrative voice. Ask yourself constantly, 'Would my character say that?'
- Consider how much each sentence contributes to the story's momentum
- Remove all unnecessary words

Now for the missing pieces:

- You cannot explain the stranger's history, or where they have come from.
- The narrator never finds out enough about the stranger to know this.

Thus the reader is left to speculate over the stranger's behaviour.

When you have finished, ask yourself how not knowing these facts, or resolving them, affects the story.

The idea for this exercise is based on the short story ‘Bartleby’ by Herman Melville.