

A Guide to Personal Writing

Introduction to Personal Writing

No one else is you! Keep this in mind and it should help you write with confidence. No one else sees the world through your eyes or has had the exact same experiences as you. So, if you want to create rich, interesting personal writing, have the confidence to tell your story truthfully, just as you have experienced it. Give lots of relevant detail, write in your own honest voice and your writing will be unique because it's yours.

The importance of detail

Think in terms of brush strokes. The large brush strokes might represent the 'big picture', e.g the day you forgot your keys and got locked out of your house. It's happened to most people hasn't it? But now pick a smaller paintbrush and tell us that it was pouring with rain and you'd forgotten your jacket and your hair was wet and your feet were soaked from running through puddles trying to get home before your sister left for work. It was your turn to walk the dog that wasn't quite toilet trained and the last time he was left alone he peed on the floor. But the rain was welcome because it had been a mild and muggy day and the smell of the raindrops on the wet tarmac reminded you of long summers with no school and your gran would be pleased because her plants would get a drink.

The details you include should add to the story – the atmosphere, the plot, the characters – rather than merely be there to pad out the word count. One or two choice details that fit with the mood of your piece will really bring it to life. Take the paragraph above. Does the detail add to the idea of everything going wrong? The forgotten door keys, yes, but the soaking feet, the wet hair, the dog pee? These details reinforce the fact that you weren't having the best of days. And what about the detail of your gran being pleased because the rain would water her plants? Is that a hint that everything works out OK in the end?

Getting started

We're getting ahead of ourselves here as this level of detail will come in the editing stage. First things first, get your words on the page. Write the words just as you hear them in your head. Don't think you have to be fancy or clever. Just write. Enjoy the telling. Use humour if it comes easily to you. Try using humour even if it doesn't come easily to you. Remember, what you say is important but how you say it is even more important!

There are lots of things you can do to make your writing rich and interesting and to develop a writing style or 'voice' that is authentic to you. There are many ways of generating ideas for writing, many ways to get started on a story. You could start with a photograph or an object or a 'first memory'. You could start with a song lyric or a piece of fabric that you like the look and feel of.

This booklet will take you through some writing exercises. You'll prefer some of them over others and that's fine. If you find a couple of exercises that you like doing you can use them over and over again for different writing themes, personal writing topics or story ideas. Remember that these exercises can be used for writing both fiction and personal writing. With personal writing, even if the story you're telling isn't made up you will still need to think about how best to describe your characters (your real people!) and your setting, and you'll need to think carefully about your word choice and tone and atmosphere. Writing creatively and imaginatively doesn't need to stop when you're writing about something that actually has happened.

Activities

Using your senses to describe surroundings

A great way to paint lots of small, interesting details is to use the senses in your writing. If we're able to see, we tend to write about what things look like, but what about what we can hear or smell?

Here is a nice exercise taken from Carol Ross's Words for Wellbeing writing guide. You're going to write five short paragraphs. Each one will begin with the line:

Here in the room I can . . .

So first off, write 'Here in the room I can see' and write down everything that you can see around you. Take a good look at the walls, the ceiling, the table and the people around you. Don't censor yourself, don't stop writing, just write down everything you can see.

Next, write 'Here in the room I can hear'...Same as before, listen carefully to what you can hear and write it on the page.

Next ...Here in the room I can smell...

Next ...Here in the room I can feel...

Lastly ...Here in the room I can taste...

What senses were most easy to write about? How did it feel to really tune in to your senses? Read Seamus Heaney's poem 'Digging' to see an example of a poem that refers to lots of the senses.

Now, think back to a memory or an event in your life. What happened? Who was there? As you're writing about it, to help you make it personal and interesting, tell us what you could see, hear, smell, taste and feel.

Once you've got your words on the page and done your first draft think about where exactly you want to place these sensory details. We don't want a long list of everything you could feel, for example, but a carefully-placed mention of the rough feel of tree bark on your fingertips as you climbed a tree, for example, will make all the difference to your writing about that experience.

The importance of asking questions

Using objects as a stimulus

You can use the senses as a way to explore objects and stimulate ideas for personal writing. Take any object that you can hold in your hands. Look closely at it, give it a sniff. What does it feel like, smell like? If the object is edible please taste it, if it isn't, please don't! Make some notes on the page. Now, depending on how you're feeling, your writing could go down the fiction route or the personal writing route.

For this example, our object is going to be an apple.

Using questions and objects for personal writing

Sometimes the oddest things remind us of significant events in our lives. Does the apple spark off a memory for you? Does the apple remind you of your granny peeling a green apple with a sharp knife? Tell us about your granny. Show her peeling the apple. What were you talking about? Were you waiting for someone to come home or the postman to bring a parcel – your new football boots? Was she peeling the apple on a special occasion? A family roast dinner with apple crumble pudding? Or does the apple remind you of something else – the time you went on a school trip to a castle and you had it in your packed lunch?

It's important to ask lots of questions. If you're writing about the day you ate an apple at the top of a hill you can ask yourself lots of questions to get you started. Who were you with? Where were you? What were you thinking? What did you want?

But remember, use the senses in your writing! It's the small details like that which will make it sing!

Using questions and objects to write fiction

Let's create a character who is using the apple in some way. We will need to ask lots of questions about who has the apple and what they are doing with it.

- Is the person an adult or a child?
- Are they eating the apple or cooking with it or giving it to someone else? Why?
- Where are they?
- Is there anyone else there?
- What are they thinking about? How are they feeling?
- What do they want?
- Does the apple help get them what they want?

The apple made me think of two children sitting on a swing, sharing a juicy red apple. There are bite marks on the apple. One of them gets a bit of apple skin stuck between their teeth. One of the friends tries to hold the apple as well as the chain of the swing. He accidentally drops the apple and it rolls onto the ground and the white, fleshy part is covered in dirt. The friends leave the swings and search for somewhere to wash the apple but there isn't a water fountain in this park so they throw it in the bin. When they turn to go back to their swings, two other children are swinging in them. What will the friends do now?

If you ask questions about your characters and objects, this really helps to create ideas. For example, who is that girl and what's in the letter she's just written? Who is that man and why is he holding a guitar string? Who is that woman and why is she pasting her bus tickets into a scrapbook? See – give a person an object, ask a few questions, and you'll have the makings of a story.

Sometimes exploring an object is enough to get us in the zone and to spark off some story ideas or memories. You might make the object central to the story or it might end up just being a way to get you to a story. Don't worry if you need to dump the apple and just write about a castle!

Description

It's the unique details that bring a piece of personal writing to life. Here's a brilliant exercise borrowed and adapted from the Scottish Poetry Library. For this, you'll need to think of a particular memory – for example, your first day at school or a birthday party or the first time you went on a bus by yourself.

The exercise will help you dig deep into that memory and recall lots of interesting detail about the experience which you can then use to create lots of lovely description in your writing.

To do this exercise, first you'll need to make some notes on the questions below. Then you'll be able to 'write up' your notes into a poem or a piece of prose, being sure to include as much detail as you can.

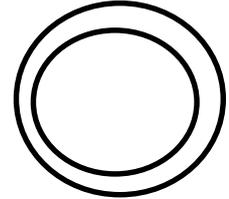
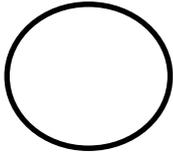
Telescoping (thanks to Scottish Poetry Library)

1. Take a memory. Maybe a first memory, maybe a recent experience that has made an impact on you. What is the memory? Write it down in a few words.
2. Now focus in some more, as if you had a telescope and were twisting it to let you see more clearly. How old are you in this memory? Where are you? What are you doing?
3. Now, focus in more closely. What else is happening? Who else is there? What are they doing?
4. More closely still. What else can you see around you, what objects or scenery?
5. Now, twist the telescope again and sharpen the focus still further. What could you hear, smell?
6. And focus in again. What do you remember feeling or thinking?
7. And focus in once more – what other details do you recall, however small, that stick in your mind from this moment?

Once you have your notes you can shape them into a piece of writing about your memory. Use all the lovely detail you've noted down, pulling the reader into your memory, adding more detail as you go.

Characters

Creating characters is fun. If you know your characters (real or imagined) you will understand their reasons for doing things, saying things and behaving in a certain way. Characters can be completely made up or based entirely on someone you know, or they can be a mix of the two. Remember to use discretion if you're writing about someone you know! Here's an exercise you can do about someone you know well or a character you're inventing based on a photograph or even someone you saw at a bus stop. Start with a small circle in the middle of your page and write your character's name and age inside the circle e.g. Annabel, 16.



Now draw a larger circle outside your first circle.

In this circle write where your character lives. For example, is it a city or a village? Is it a house or a flat? If it's a flat, how many storeys up is it? Now draw another circle around the outside. In this next circle write who they live with, if anyone. Keep drawing more circles and for each circle include the following details:

- What they do/did for a living. Or are they at school? If so, which year?
- Two things they like to do.
- Three good qualities they have.
- Three negative qualities.
- What they want.
- What is stopping them getting what they want? A person? A lack of something i.e. money? An external obstacle i.e. all trains are cancelled? An internal obstacle i.e. lack of confidence?
- Any other details you would like to add.

You will now have a good idea of your character's personality, desires and personal circumstances. Most importantly, for storytelling, you have something that the character wants and a reason why they can't have it – a great basis for drama and tension. You could try writing a letter or a speech or monologue in your character's voice telling someone about their situation. What do they want and why can't they get it? Who are they talking to? Are they able to resolve the conflict?

Think about how they speak and the words they would use. If they're older or younger than you they might use different vocabulary.

What's the tone of their speech – is it urgent, excited, feisty or angry?

Remember, you can use this technique for creating new characters or for reminding yourself about characters you already know – family members for example.

Voice

Voice is something that's hard to define and sometimes we need to play around with our writing and our editing until we get to it. Basically, our voice is what makes our writing unique to us. It's the honesty in our work, it's our writing's authenticity, it's the way we pour our very selves onto the page. It's the words we choose and the length of our sentences. It's the angle from which we look at something – is there an edge of humour, of melancholy or of boldness to our writing?

It's about putting yourself on the page.

If that sounds a bit much, don't worry, you'll find your voice, you will!

One piece of advice is to avoid cliché. Let's have no one frightening you to death, no one jumping out of their skin, no one cool as a cucumber. And replace cliché with honest, immediate writing, just as you see it.

Write simply if that helps. You don't necessarily need a page full of similes, adverbs, 'wow'-words or speech tags ('she exclaimed'). Sprinkle your writing with some apt, well-chosen metaphors or similes or adjectives, yes, but don't get bogged down in thinking you need to be clever or flowery. Just write!

Exercise

Pick a simple scenario involving two or more characters – for example, a parent and a child choosing a prom outfit, or two people shovelling snow so an elderly relative can leave their house, or two friends lost in the city centre).

First of all write a couple of paragraphs as an omniscient narrator who can see inside the heads of everyone in the scene. An omniscient narrator knows what's happened and what's going to happen and what's happening two miles down the road. They can 'see' the 'big picture' as well as what every character is thinking. If we take one of the examples above – the two friends lost in the city centre – the omniscient narrator would know that five minutes ago the friends almost went down a street that would have led them back to the train station. The narrator knows that one of the friends is blaming the other for getting them lost and that the woman who bumps into them by accident was preoccupied with her job interview later that day.

Ask yourself how it felt to write in this way. What words did you choose? What length were your sentences? Did you like the expansive feel of writing in this way or did you lose focus because there was so much you could write about and from so many different angles?

Now rewrite the paragraphs using the voice of another of your characters. Write only from their point of view, from inside their head. They don't know what other characters are thinking, they don't know what's going to happen in the future and they only have one version of the past, theirs.

As you're rewriting, think carefully about what exactly you want them to see and experience in this scene. Does some interesting tension reveal itself from writing in their point of view? Does the world look completely different through their eyes?

What words did you choose, what length were your sentences? What was the mood of the piece?

Compare the two pieces of writing. Look at your word choice and the 'feel' of each piece. Is there any one you think is more effective?

How does it feel to write from these different points of view? Was there a particular voice that you felt most comfortable with? Are you an all-seeing, omniscient kind of writer, or do you like to pick a character and see the world entirely from their point of view?

In each piece of writing you'll settle on a point of view that feels natural for you. And you'll find your voice too.

Dialogue

'Dialogue plays a vital, starring role in every piece of fiction. It demonstrates conflict, pushes the story forward, provides or summarises information, comments on actions and place, and reveals characters, emotions and relationships.'

Jessica Page, author.

Dialogue is fun to write. It's a great way of showing us how the people in your writing get on (or not) with each other. It's a way of showing what they think about others. One of the first things an actor will do with a new script is to look through it to find out what the other characters say about their character. So dialogue can be revelatory.

The trick is to make it feel natural. Listen to conversations on buses and write them down. Eavesdrop on adults' conversations or children's conversations. Think about how your characters would speak to different people in their lives. Think about the differences in speech between someone of an older generation to a younger person. Choose words that fit your character's age, background or political views.

However, be aware that as well as keeping your dialogue natural, there needs to be a bit of craft to it too. You're not spilling everything onto the page just as if you or I were having a conversation. You're keeping it real, so to speak, but honing it so that it moves the story along, it reveals things about your characters and it is interesting to read. To quote Raymond Carver:

'It's sometimes said that I have a good ear for dialogue, and so forth. I certainly don't think people talk the way I write. It's like Hemingway. It's also said that he had a good ear, but he invented it all. People don't talk that way at all. It's a question of rhythm.'

Exercise

Try writing a conversation about two people making a shopping list. The characters need to include the following items on their list: pasta, milk, bread, cheese, post-it notes and washing up liquid.

First of all, write the conversation in full. It could start something like this:

'I know we need milk so you could put that on the list.'

'Yes, what else do we need?'

'I don't know.'

'Bread. We need bread. What else?'

'Um...'

'What else?'

'I'm trying to think.'

'I know. Post-it notes.'

Carry on writing the dialogue until you've got all your items down and add a couple more things for luck. Now, ask yourself some questions about your characters. Who are they? What is the relationship between them? Do they like each other? How do they speak to each other? Are they polite or casual or cheeky? Why do they need post-it notes? Why are they even going shopping? (I say 'characters' but these questions apply to when you're writing dialogue in your personal writing too.)

Now re-write your dialogue and try to reveal a little about the characters. Cut out the lines of dialogue that aren't necessary. For example:

'I know we need milk.'

'I'll remember milk. I don't need to write it down.'

'You'll forget it.'

'No I won't.'

'Yes you will. It's a thing. You always forget the one thing you really need when you go shopping.'

'OK then. Milk. M.I.L.K. What else do we need?'

Which character gives in? One of them is bossier than the other. How does the other feel about being bossed about? Will this change as the story goes on?

Have fun with your dialogue. You might find that your dialogue becomes only about milk and none of the other things on your list – that's fine! The main thing is to reveal your characters' personalities and move the story on.

Raymond Carver also talked about rhythm. What happens when someone gets angry? Are there interruptions? Does a person's speech build and build – and another thing, and another thing – until they reach bursting point? Do sentences trail off when someone is unsure how to say something? Do people repeat certain phrases? I had a neighbour who used to start many of his sentences with 'Anyhow...'

Dialogue is interesting when things are unsaid. What are they saying and what are they actually meaning? Or what do they really want to say? You could have two characters talking about the sunset but what they're actually thinking about and wanting to talk about is the end of their relationship. How does this come across in their speech and their pauses between speech?

'I get so sad watching the sun dip under the horizon,' he said.

'Don't watch it then.'

'I can't help it. Something compels me to.'

'You've always tended towards the melancholy.'

'But don't you think the sun's at its prettiest as its dying out, with the sky all ablaze?'

'No. I think when it's going under like that, when the sun's setting, you just have to steel yourself for twelve hours of night and then you get up in the morning and make damn sure that it blazes high in the sky the next day.'

Or something like that but less overblown - try it yourself!

You can intersperse dialogue with narration. You can break up lines of dialogue with descriptions of characters' actions. A character could say, 'Glad to see you finally made it,' then pass them a plate of cold food. Or 'I need to pay the electricity bill today,' she said and switched off the light in the living room.

Also, dialogue often works well when characters are doing something. For example, a parent and child arguing over an untidy bedroom while pumping a bike tyre, or two people washing and drying the dishes while discussing the sudden disappearance of their upstairs neighbour.

It is important not to put too much of a narrative burden on to dialogue: not to rely on it to do the job of 'telling'. For example you don't need to say something like, 'Hello Maxine, my friend of five years. I'm so glad we moved up to the same High School together and although we fall out sometimes, we'll always be best mates.'

Don't worry about writing how someone says something. 'Said' is perfectly fine instead of 'he exclaimed' or 'she declared.' The way a character says something should be clear through their words rather than any speech tag you might use. The reader often skims over 'said'. Sometimes if you set it out clearly, you don't even need 'said'.

There are some more exercises to try coming up. Before you do, here is a summary of things to remember when you're writing dialogue:

Naturalistic dialogue has:

- Unanswered questions
- Questions answered that aren't asked
- Interruptions
- Unfinished sentences
- Dialogue reveals how characters relate to each other.
- Dialogue can be interesting when things are unsaid. Think about what is 'behind' what the characters are saying.
- Listen to the conversations you hear around you and write them down for inspiration ...but...
- ...Remember that you don't need to faithfully record every word you or I might say in a conversation. Good dialogue isn't verbatim speech.
- Think about the rhythm in your dialogue
- You can intersperse dialogue with narration
- He said / she said is fine
- Dialogue shouldn't take the place of narration

More Exercises on Dialogue

The best way to practise writing dialogue is to write it. Here are some scenarios you could have a go at writing. Remember you can use narration as well as dialogue.

- Imagine two characters are stuck in a lift. How do they react to being stuck and how do they attempt to get out? What do they talk about when they realise that help is on its way and they need to be patient and wait?
- A father and son are pegging out washing. The father has to tell the son that they are moving to another country.
- Two lovers plan to run away together but on the day they are to leave, one of them changes their mind.
- A child has lost their mobile phone for the second time this year and has to tell their parent.
- Write a short scene in dialogue where one of the characters is lying.

- Write a short scene of dialogue where one person has betrayed their friend but their friend doesn't know it was them.

Other things to try

If you're stuck for ideas there are many ways to get inspiration for your writing. Here is a selection of exercises you could try.

Pictures and postcards:

Take a postcard or a picture that is mainly of scenery. Write down what you can see. Remember to use all the senses in your writing. Now add a character to this landscape – or add yourself. Why are you there? What are you doing? Where are you going? What do you want? See if a story comes out of putting yourself or a character into the landscape you've studied.

Letter Writing

Write a letter to your younger self. What advice would you give to your younger self now that you are older and wiser? What words of encouragement would you give to help you get through tough times? Think about all the positive character traits you have now and how they have helped you get to where you are now.

How about writing a letter to your older self? What do you hope to be doing in ten, twenty years time? How will you overcome tough times? Is there anything you absolutely should never give up or stop doing? Why?

Remember, detail is the key to making your letter interesting. No one else has had your life so call on your memories and all the small details that make your life unique.

Magical Metaphors (thanks to Scottish Poetry Library)

While we're back on the subject of characters and people in your lives, try out this great exercise called Magical Metaphors, borrowed and adapted, again, from the Scottish Poetry Library.

A metaphor is a sort of poetic lie. It allows you to say that something actually is something else – and when you stop to think about it, the 'something else' is usually connected, makes sense, or is a good idea; it gives a new way of seeing the object.

Think of somebody you really admire – a public figure or a person in your life.

Then answer these questions:

- If, by magic, they were actually a time of day, what would it be?
- If they were a type of food, what would they turn into that would truly suit their personality?
- What season?
- Colour?
- Animal? What would that animal be doing?
- What piece of furniture would they be? Where would that piece of furniture be found?

You should choose your answers to suit their personality, their character, not their physical appearance, and you should say nothing that is unkind. You can generate lots of useful questions – think about musical instruments, forms of transport, types of book, clothing, countries, trees, flowers, weather...The list is endless!

No such thing as writer's block!

That's quite a big pronouncement but start your writing with the idea that all your ideas are good ideas – just get them on the page in whatever order they come out. Once you've got the words on the page you can edit and shape them. Often this redrafting stage is the longest but that's where you can really work on a piece of writing and shape it and cut it so that it's doing exactly what you want it to. On the first draft, however, turn your critical brain off and just write!

Before writing, you could try free-writing or mindful writing. That's where you write for five or ten minutes non-stop on whatever comes into your head. The only rule is that your pen has to keep moving so if you're thinking 'I don't know what to write' or 'what shall I have for lunch?' you need to write that down. It's a way of freeing up some space in your head for your creative writing.

You could try using words as prompts: e.g one minute on each colour – red, yellow, green, blue, purple. Or one minute on sea, sky, moon, stars, sun. You might find that you've started off writing about the sea and you've gone on a tangent and are writing about mermaids or pirates – that's fine, just keep writing!

Finally

Please do remember that writing is a real pleasure and that we all have stories to tell that are unique and interesting. All of us.

If we try to put our personalities on the page – by writing in a voice that reflects us and our mood, by teasing out the wee details from our memories – we will create interesting, rich and dynamic writing. Enjoy.