

# Overcoming a fear of the unknown

**Iain Maloney** convinces his students and his colleagues of the value of creative writing.

When I started teaching writing at a university in Japan, the focus for all four years at undergraduate level was on academic writing. The students had never been exposed to creative writing, despite the fact that numerous studies have shown it to be beneficial to L2 acquisition. Initially, my students were resistant to the idea, my colleagues sceptical. In both cases, fear of the unknown was the emotional driver. So I decided to take advantage of a ‘free topic’ assignment in the second semester of a third-year writing class to show my students and colleagues alike that creative writing can be beneficial and needn’t be intimidating. This article will outline my approach.

## Softly, softly

In conversation with students and through end-of-semester feedback forms, it became clear that dropping creative writing on them out of the blue would be counter-productive. The idea of writing stories or poetry either scared or bored them. Instead, I told them we’d take a couple of weeks off from writing, to look at the relationship between writer and reader. This didn’t exactly excite them, but it at least didn’t scare them. Enthusiasm isn’t a constant presence in academic writing classes.

In order to prepare for the first lesson, I instructed both my classes (12 students in each, all third-year English majors) to come to the next class with two anecdotes from their own lives: a funny story and a negative story, related to travel. I gave them examples from my own travel history. They didn’t have to do anything with the anecdotes, not even write them down: just come in ready to tell their stories to their classmates. I then structured the next six lessons as a series of workshops, each dealing with a different aspect of creative writing, and each using the same basic material: the students’ travel anecdotes.

## Getting the desired response

In the first lesson, the students began in pairs, with each partner telling a story in turn. I then gave them a worksheet (Worksheet 1), which asked them to gauge their partner’s responses. For example, if the story was meant to be funny, did their partner laugh and, if so, how heartily? If not, why not? The student was next asked to think about how they could alter their telling of the story to better provoke the desired response. They subsequently switched partners and tried again. The aim of this lesson was to get them thinking about the different ways

in which stories can be told, and the different effects that can be produced in a listener/reader. The students reported that the class was fun and useful, with their anecdotes achieving significantly better responses by the end of the 90 minutes.

## Including details

In the second lesson, we moved on to details. During their anecdote telling, many of the students concentrated entirely on plot, ignoring contextual details. We began by brainstorming as a class the kinds of details that could be included in a story, such as *location, environment, characters* and *motivation*. After that, the students individually made notes about one of their anecdotes (they were free to choose the funny or negative story, as they preferred) under all the relevant headings. Each student then drew a chronological timeline of their anecdote and matched the details with points on the timeline. So, for example, when one student’s story moved from Nagoya to Bangkok, details about location, weather, smells and personal travel history became relevant. In many cases, the details were extraneous or tangential, but that was ideal. The aim of this approach was to short-circuit the ‘fear of the blank page’ that confronts many people when they begin writing. At this point, the students hadn’t been told that we were working towards a piece of writing, yet they already had plot, chronology and more details than they would need.

## Starting to tell a story

In the third lesson, we looked at opening paragraphs. These are something the students were familiar with through their academic writing, and the principles of writing them are the same in both contexts: introduce the themes and prepare the reader for what is to come. To this end, I assembled six opening paragraphs from travel writing, each in a different style and voice, and each on a different subject. (If you would like a copy of these, please email me at the address at the end of this article. The other worksheets mentioned in this article can be downloaded from the *ETp* website at [www.etprofessional.com/media/32067/etp119\\_november2018\\_onlineresource\\_maloney\\_p26.pdf](http://www.etprofessional.com/media/32067/etp119_november2018_onlineresource_maloney_p26.pdf).) In class, the students read the paragraphs and answered questions, such as *Which opening do you like? Why?* Afterwards, they discussed their responses in groups of three, and shared ideas about how they could apply these concepts to their own anecdotes. They were then given the remaining time in the classroom to begin working on the opening paragraph for their story, with the instruction that it had to be finished by

the next class. At this point, the students were still unaware that we had already begun the semester's assignment. They got to work with some enthusiasm, many of them trying different genre styles, such as horror or farce.

During the week, the students emailed me their opening paragraphs and I printed them out for a standard peer-review activity, something they were very familiar with. Usually, they were apathetic when taking part in this process, but the fourth class was lively and boisterous as they debated the introductions and gave advice on how to make them funnier or more dramatic. Discussions also centred on inserting or leaving out details at the beginning, in order to increase suspense or alleviate confusion. Once this was complete, I let them into the secret that their final assessed piece of writing would be creative non-fiction – travel writing based on their anecdote, with a minimum count of 700 words. Being assessed on something they were already enjoying didn't seem as threatening as just being presented with the assignment and told to get on with it. After some clarifying questions about APA (American Psychological Association) referencing and its relevance to travel writing (there is none) and how their writing would be assessed, the students left – more engaged than I had seen them at any point that year.

### Using descriptive language

In the fifth class, we looked at descriptive writing. I guided them through writing exercises emphasising each sense, using a worksheet (Worksheet 2) with examples of my own writing. First, they were given 60 seconds to look around the room in silence and, afterwards, told to begin three minutes of free, non-stop writing to describe the *appearance* of the classroom. This exercise was repeated for sounds, smells and touch (incorporating temperature, hunger pangs, etc). Not being in the cleanest of classrooms, we omitted the sense of taste! After I had once again drawn their attention to an example of my own, the students combined a sentence or two from each exercise to create a descriptive paragraph of the room. This was shared with partners, and the students discussed the different writing they had all produced from exactly the same input. The aim of this lesson was to show that originality is inherent in any creativity, and to prepare them for achieving their word limit, two standard concerns for students.

### Writing dialogue

In the last workshop lesson, we looked at dialogue. I devised a worksheet (Worksheet 3) with two activities for this. In the first, the students had to turn a prose passage with indirect speech into a prose passage with active dialogue. In the second, they had to continue a scripted conversation to whatever conclusion they saw fit. Again, this provided them with tools to help in the drafting and dramatisation of their own story.

### Polishing the work

The remaining classes in the semester were devoted to drafting and redrafting. In total, two full drafts were produced and submitted before a final draft was handed in for grading. Feedback was given at every stage, and focused on aspects such as characterisation, motivation and achieving the desired response in the reader, as well as language.



## The results

The students' writing was of a much higher standard than had been achieved in the rest of the year, and each student moved up at least one grading band. Feedback from the students at the end of the semester was incredibly positive about the creative writing element, with a number of them asking for a similar class in their fourth year. When I shared the finished assignments and feedback with my colleagues (with the students' permission), a number of them expressed surprise at the change in output and motivation, and asked me for advice on incorporating creative writing into their own writing classes. I put together a presentation for them, and this article was developed out of it.



Students and teachers alike are often sceptical about using creative writing in the classroom, but the above approach goes some way to showing how students with no creative writing experience can produce impressive results, and teachers new to creative writing methodology can easily bring it into the classroom. Creative writing is both fun and helpful with L2 acquisition, and a lot less intimidating than it can seem at first. ■



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