STORY CRAFT

HOW TO TEACH NARRATIVE WRITING

MARTIN GRIFFIN AND JON MAYHEW

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PREFACE

We've managed to clock up over twenty years each in the classroom as English teachers at Key Stages 3, 4 and 5. In some ways our teaching careers have been very different. Martin began his career in sixth form colleges teaching GCSE English retake courses and English A levels; later he moved to the 11–18 sector. He has been a head of English and deputy head teacher. Jon has taught English in a wide variety of secondary schools – some in leafy suburbs, others in neglected and forgotten housing estates, heading English in special settings and working with some of the most challenging children in the education system.

Despite these differences we've been united in our passion for creative writing. Writing professionally while holding down a teaching career hasn't been easy. We've both had to eke out an hour here and there – mostly late at night – and finish our respective books one painstaking scene at a time. Martin's nine books are split between award-winning fiction (three novels for teenage readers: *The Poison Boy*, *Lifers* and *Payback*) and non-fiction (educational texts on developing metacognition and study skills co-authored with Steve Oakes: *The A Level Mindset*, *The GCSE Mindset* and *The Student Mindset*). Martin's output is dwarfed, however, by Jon's twenty-six novels for children and adults, which include the award-winning *Mortlock* and Monster Odyssey series. Jon's work includes retellings of *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*; high age interest/low reading age books for teens; and articles for various writing and educational publications. He's also been a contributor to the *Children's Writers' and Artists' Yearbook* since 2014.

When we first met and began discussing our respective experiences we were struck by how our regular contact with publishing house editors, with their forensic understanding of story and exacting standards, had begun to inform our teaching. We felt better equipped to teach creative writing because we had been lucky enough to receive very practical tutoring from some of the best editors and publishers in the country.

Since then, our insights have informed our writing workshops and changed the way we intervene, support and give feedback. In his role as Writing Fellow for the Royal Literary Fund at the Universities of Chester and Aberystwyth, Jon even found that the fundamentals of creative writing could be brought to undergraduate academic assignments.

Storycraft is our attempt to share as many of these principles and strategies as we can. This book is by no means a complete curriculum: pick and choose the activities you think will best benefit your students and discard the others.

Stay in touch at www.storycraftbook.com or @Storycraft6 on Twitter.

And whatever your approach, enjoy the process!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The ideas in this book are the result of years of road testing in high schools all over the country. It takes a lot of faith and trust to hand over an exam class, or even a whole year group, to a wild-eyed author with a suitcase full of half-baked ideas.

Martin would like to thank:

Darren Tyldsley, assistant head teacher at Ellesmere Park, for his support and feedback, and Elaine Perry at The Blue Coat School, who is partly responsible for starting this whole process by finding space in the timetable for an experimental Year 9 creative writing class all those years ago.

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John Anderson and the English department at Chase Terrace Technology College; Helen Foster, head of English, drama and media studies at Pensby High School; Bev Ivins and Andy Moorcroft at Beamont Collegiate Academy; Paul Pearson, head of English, and Sarah Kirwan, second in department, at Neston High School; and the BOLD cluster of primary schools, Warrington. Also, Steve Cook and David Swinburne at the Royal Literary Fund for giving him the space to breathe, step back and look at what worked and what didn't in his school workshops.

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INTRODUCTION

This book is not about style. It won't give you activities that encourage students to use fronted adverbials, vary their premodification or employ the passive voice. We think there's plenty of that about.

Instead, *Storycraft* focuses on getting students writing – putting words and ideas on paper as regularly and confidently as possible.

Too often we found that our creative writing classes went like this: we'd read and discuss a great piece of writing; we'd stay where we, as teachers, felt most comfortable (analysing the writer's linguistic tricks and enthusing about them); we'd line up a writing task; and then we'd watch as thirty kids seemed unable to summon sufficient energy to put anything on paper. There would be awkward silence. Then the questions would come: 'How do I start?' 'What should happen?' 'What do I write next?' 'Am I allowed to [insert whatever]?' 'Can you give me another word meaning "scared"?' and, inevitably, 'Can I swear?'

And once the work was in, our feedback would be all about style. We'd read thirty stories and make observations like, 'Can you use an inventive simile here?' or scribble, 'Is there a better adjective?' in the margin of the student's piece. But questions of style come much later. Adjustments in wording are the final stage of a much longer process.

This may be the first book we've written together, but we've known each other a long time, and over the years we've had hundreds of hours of telephone conversations with agents and editors as we discussed manuscripts in development. Almost none of that time has been spent on questions of style.

Instead, we've found that editors and publishers want the architecture of the piece to be sorted out first. Under discussion were things like: how can we get the protagonist right? What is driving this character? What do they want? Tell me about motivation in this scene. Why isn't the pace right here? Who do you consider to be the foreground characters? How is this character changing? How does the structure of the novel work? Describe the shape of this story. What is at its heart and how will it end? Only after months and months of writing might we get a read-through with style as a focus.

This book will be about getting students to a point where they've written well enough that we legitimately have the luxury of debating matters of style, rather than beginning there.

Storycraft is about the craft of getting character, setting and structure coherent and strong. There are fifty-one activities that will get your students crafting narratives regularly, more quickly and with gradually greater confidence. The book is about exploring the creative process so that we can normalise the struggles associated with crafting something from nothing.

It might be purchased with a Year 11 class in mind, but this is a set of tools, tricks and strategies that can be used at any level. Try it at Key Stage 3 or with A level students. We still use many of these tricks regularly ourselves.

We've divided the book into seven main sections:

1. In **Manifesto for a Creative Classroom** we explore the creative process. *Process* is a key concept here. Great writing doesn't arrive out of nowhere, no matter what the eureka moment myths and legends might suggest. What goes on in a writer's head as they develop a story? Where do all their good ideas come from? What habits and routines do writers use so they always have good ideas ready to go? What happens before the real writing starts?

   We've tried to codify the process in this chapter of the book. Our FORGE acronym suggests that good creative thinking requires *feeding* (providing the imagination with fuel), followed by *observing* and *researching* (paying active attention to the world with a curiosity that allows us to better represent what we see). *Gestation* is important: the creative process is a long game. The ideas we generate on the morning of a writing exam may be nascent, weak and derivative. Those we have considered critically for longer will have an inherent strength. Finally, *experimentation* will play a role. New and interesting ideas are often nothing more than familiar concepts combined in new ways. We also tackle ten misconceptions about creative writing in this chapter.

2. In **FORGE-ing Strategies** we provide ten activities that help students to generate micro-ideas – the valuable little nuggets that work as seeds for great stories. The activities are written for students and address them directly. You can direct students to them and (hopefully) they will be able to follow the instructions and begin work.

   There are no writing tasks at the end of these activities. FORGE largely describes the pre-production process and results in notes, scribbles, discussion and lists

of possibilities. The outcomes of these activities should be captured, shared and discussed; the crafting process comes next.

3. Character is the heart of any good narrative. In **Crafting Characters** we share ten strategies for making characters better. The activities are written for students and address them directly. As before, you can direct students to them and they should be able to follow the instructions and begin work. Unlike the previous chapter, however, these activities require students to be 'ready to write' and to actually get something down on paper. Typically they require students to produce 300–400 words (Why this amount? We've found it works best for us. Five- and six-year-old pupils in Years 2 and 3, writing at length for the first time, can often manage 100 words. We think that seven or eight years later, 300 words is the least we might expect. But we recognise, of course, that this might not be easy, and might not suit your context. Adjust as you see fit!). There are a few helpful bullet points to get them up and running. As their teacher you'll be able to use or ignore these.

4. Narratives don't take place in colourless spaces. Location adds mood, atmosphere and momentum. In **Crafting Settings** we offer ten activities that take us away from the ubiquitous spooky cottage or school canteen. As with the previous chapter, each of the activities are written directly for students. By the end of the resource they should be ready to write, so each activity ends with a writing task of 300–400 words, and, as above, you'll be able to make any adjustments you want.

5. In **Crafting Shape and Structure** we offer ten activities to help students shape their stories. We've tried to go beyond beginning/middle/end, but not to confuse the issue by introducing narratology or structural analysis. We think that a story composed of two or three coherent and well-chosen scenes will be streets ahead of those made up on the fly. As before, the students should work through the activities themselves, at the end of which they should be ready to write around 300–400 words.

6. In **Editing** we offer some solutions to common story problems. We've spoken to English teachers who have been open enough to share student narratives with us. One of the themes that regularly emerges from these discussions is the ease with which we can spot misfiring narratives, but the difficulty we all have in pinpointing the exact problem with them. 'I know these are weak,' one teacher said to us as we read through student pieces. 'But *why* are they weak?' The activities in this chapter are designed to diagnose and improve already existing pieces. As such, there are no writing activities at the end of these resources. They only work if the student brings an already completed piece of writing to them.

7. Finally, in **The Exam** we offer five tips for exam preparation written directly for students and with an impending creative writing exam in mind.

We end with Activity 51: there are thirty-nine writing prompts to round off the book, one for each week of the academic year. We hope you find them useful!

CHAPTER 1

MANIFESTO FOR A CREATIVE CLASSROOM

If you search the internet for 'the scientific method' you get, at the time of writing, over 17 million hits, including Wikipedia pages, articles, definitions, images, beginner's guides and introductions for various key stages.

If you search the internet for 'the creative method' you get fewer than 300,000 hits; that's 1.76% of the pages dedicated to the scientific method. (The Creative Method, we discovered, is also the name of a Sydney-based design agency.)

Why the disparity? The characteristics of the scientific method have been established for nearly 500 years. You have a hypothesis which generates logical predictions. You then test these and gather evidence. The experiment must be replicable and peer approved. You arrive at a greater understanding having deconstructed something.

Scientific classrooms have the equipment and tools necessary to make these analyses. They have a lab assistant who wheels in trolleys of jars and test tubes from a stock-room full of materials. They have posters illustrating cross-section cutaways of hearts and eyes, drawings of light bouncing off surfaces, lists of parts and components.

But the creative method is about construction, not deconstruction. Moving from having nothing to having something you have crafted and built.

There is much discussion about how this process works, and every creative seems to be doing something very different. The picture is complicated by the fact that some writers and artists aren't sure where their ideas come from and ascribe spiritual significance to them. Others claim to 'hear voices' or explain that all we have to do is 'unearth the story'. Others speak of sudden flashes of inspiration.

All of this makes it harder to conceive of a 'creative writing classroom'. Although it's tempting to conjure up ideas of bright colours, informal seating, fun activities and eureka moments, these notions do nothing to encourage creative output. We've been

teaching and writing for a combined forty years and when we sit at home to create we're typing at a desk, alone. We're responding to a brief having signed a contract for a book which specifies the length, audience, probable title and content. We're on a deadline and we've got daily word count targets to reach.

Our manifesto for a creative classroom is an attempt to organise and formalise everything we've learned about the creative process. There are no weird or wacky suggestions here – nothing about sitting on a beanbag listening to free-form jazz and 'writing what you feel'. Instead, creativity is about the same diligent and persistent hard work that brings success in every other subject and discipline. At its core is the concept of professionalism. As Steven Pressfield puts it in *Turning Pro*, 'to defeat the self-sabotaging habits of procrastination, self-doubt, susceptibility to distraction, perfectionism and shallowness, we enlist the self-strengthening habits of order, regularity, discipline and a constant striving after excellence'.[1]

ADDRESSING MISCONCEPTIONS

Establishing ground rules will be important, particularly if students have some partially formed sense of what creativity is. They will need clear messages about the culture, expectations and parameters when they're approaching a project in a new and unexpected way. Building a manifesto – a set of principles and ground rules – also requires us to spend some time surfacing and addressing some misconceptions about 'learning to be creative', all of which help to build a positive and purposeful working environment.

Here are ten principles we've found to be indispensable. We explore these ideas all the time, expressing them repeatedly in different ways. We've found that each one is good for busting a myth or misconception.

> **Principle 1**: Writing successful narrative fiction is the result of a creative process that goes on for many weeks and months before the exam. This process can be taught, learned and engaged with over a long period of time.
>
> *Good for tackling*: 'The exam is random. There's no reliable way to prepare. I'm going to go in there and wing it on the day, so these lessons are a waste of time.'

1 Steven Pressfield, *Turning Pro: Tap Your Inner Power and Create Your Life's Work* (New York: Black Irish Entertainment, 2010), p. 103.

Principle 2: Becoming a good writer of narrative fiction means being professional: not waiting for inspiration to strike but working hard to hunt it down.

Good for tackling: 'This will be easy. It'll be a chance to kick back, relax, mess about and wait for an idea to come.'

Principle 3: Good stories are the result of stockpiling a huge number of ideas and sorting through the ordinary to find the unusual or interesting. Ideas arrive in pieces (micro-ideas) and stories have to be built from these pieces. Original is overrated. All story components have been used somewhere before, but that doesn't stop you building something new with them.

Good for tackling: 'I don't have any ideas. I'll never get any. All my ideas are rubbish. They're not original.'

Principle 4: Good writers of narrative fiction read a lot of narrative fiction.

Good for tackling: 'I can write well without reading. I've watched a ton of movies. I'm the exception to the rule.'

Principle 5: There are a thousand different ways to tell a good story. Creativity is an act of courage – of beginning your version of a story without knowing if it will be successful or if other people will like it.

Good for tackling: 'How will I know when I'm "right"? I don't want to be "wrong" and look stupid.'

Principle 6: There's no such thing as writer's block.

Good for tackling: 'I'm blocked. I can't do anything today.'

Principle 7: Quantity beats quality. We arrive at good writing on the other side of bad writing. You can't edit a blank page.

Good for tackling: 'I admit I've only done a paragraph, but it's perfect. You're going to love it. Quality beats quantity.'

Principle 8: Very few stories turn out as the writer hoped. The story in our head is always better than the one we produce on the page. These failures are a normal part of the creative process.

Good for tackling: 'I'll have an idea for a story, I'll write it and the story will come out exactly as I'd hoped.'

Principle 9: Improvement comes from finding and making as many mistakes as possible, then learning from them. The more errors you make now, the fewer there are left to make in the exam.

Good for tackling: 'Once I get the hang of this it'll be easy. I'll get gradually better each time I write. Progress will be smooth and inevitable.'

Principle 10: Creativity is not a gift given to some and not others. We all have the capacity.

Good for tackling: 'You're born creative. It can't be taught. Sadly I'm not creative.'

We'll cover each of these in a little more detail in the following pages. As you'll no doubt be aware, attitude change is a long game – a slow and steady process of regular contact with new and unfamiliar ideas. Objections like the ones above will be repeated lesson after lesson. Our role is to quietly and patiently disagree, and offer stories, examples and research which continue to further an alternative version of the world.

A manifesto for a creative classroom gives us a new story to tell students about narrative writing.

PRINCIPLE 1:

WRITING SUCCESSFUL NARRATIVE FICTION IS THE RESULT OF A CREATIVE PROCESS THAT GOES ON FOR MANY WEEKS AND MONTHS BEFORE THE EXAM. THIS PROCESS CAN BE TAUGHT, LEARNED AND ENGAGED WITH OVER A LONG PERIOD OF TIME.

The creative production of any artefact – a short story, a poem or a song – is the end result of a period of preparation, thinking and planning (often subconscious) on the part of the creator. They may not know what the exam will ask, but confident students walk in with a healthy and well-fed imagination: a headful of ideas, starting points, characters, situations and possibilities. They've been engaged in a creative process in the weeks and months before the exam, often for longer. As a result, it's not unusual for these students to describe the exam experience as 'fun' or 'easy'.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Professor Giovanni Corazza, founder of the Marconi Institute of Creativity at the University of Bologna, speaks of the need 'to value long thinking' when exploring the creative process.[2] That is (in contrast to brilliant thinking, quick solutions or aha moments), thinking we stay with, that travels with us for a period of time and that takes us a long distance in a series of steps. Artist, entrepreneur and professor Raphael DiLuzio has a similar idea. He emphasises the importance of gestation, of holding an idea or problem in your head for a long period, often while doing other things.[3] This gestation, or long thinking, seems to be an important component in any creative endeavour.

It cannot, therefore, be done the night before the exam.

The best creative work done on the day of the creative writing paper will be the result of preparation, gestation and long thinking. There are many different ways of labelling the phases through which we pass during this long thinking. Here, we've synthesised a number of them. Our model is simple, clear and, we hope, easy to communicate.

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2 Giovanni Corazza, 'Creative Thinking: How To Get Out of the Box and Generate Ideas' [video], *TEDxRoma* (11 March 2014). Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bEusrD8g-dM.

3 Raphael DiLuzio, '7 Steps of Creative Thinking' [video], *TEDxDirigo* (28 June 2012). Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MRD-4Tz60KE.

It's called FORGE, and it assumes that a problem or challenge has been set or generated – you can't create without one.

F – FEEDING

Our preparation (or long thinking if you prefer that term) needs fuel. Without this fuel, we operate with a weak imagination starved of stimuli. Our diet needs to be rich and varied and we must feed the imagination with a range of alternative inputs. As writer Haruki Murakami has commented, 'If you only read the books that everyone else is reading, you can only think what everyone else is thinking.'[4] The same goes for TV shows, narrative computer games and graphic novels.

Feeding gives the imagination a set of tropes, characters, situations, ideas and possibilities with which to experiment. It gives us more to imitate, emulate or steal (more about this in Principle 3). Of course, even with a lot to steal, we need to know how to adjust and adapt it so that it suits the vehicle of narrative prose.

A limited diet produces a number of issues:

- **The computer-game-only diet**: Students whose main inputs are computer games often try to reproduce the action of the game on the page, describing in a single sentence how a handily positioned bazooka allows their protagonist to clear the ground for a helicopter coming in to land. This scene, recently submitted in one of our sessions, patently didn't work on the page. The thrill of gaming is in the agency of the player-character and the immersion in a carefully built world. Turning it into prose without adjustment doesn't work.
- **The movies-only diet**: Here you may find the tendency to overwrite chase or action sequences so they become tedious blow-by-blow accounts devoid of drama, or to outline a long plot in an emotionless list of actions. They may have been good to watch but they're terrible to read.
- **The sport-only diet**: The reason there isn't a bestselling novel which gives us a real-time prose description of a tennis match is because prose often renders sporting drama inert. The dramatic power of a sporting occasion lies in its visceral immediacy. Therefore, if a sporting event is to be included in a story, we'd recommend that it is only as a backdrop to a more immediate and dramatic

4 Haruki Murakami [Tweet] (4 April 2013). Available at: https://twitter.com/harukimurakami_/status/319968161669730305?lang=en.

episode better suited to narrative prose. It's tempting to try to engage sports fans by encouraging a piece describing a contest or sporting occasion, but we've never yet read a powerful and engaging account of, say, a football match. Often, the pieces simply amount to hero worship. The same goes for students writing about live music or celebrity meetings, both of which rarely work well in fiction.

- **The books-from-childhood-only diet**: There's nothing wrong with occasionally returning to favourite books, unless it is the sole fare. We needn't direct criticism at the Year 8 students still reading Wimpy Kid books, unless they're the only books being read. Kinney's books work tremendously well on a number of levels, but they're in diary form, obviously, so only showcase a first-person informal narrative. The same goes for other hugely popular diary-based writing: they are loosely structured and episodic, as a diary inevitably is, so they don't help to illustrate the plotting of short narratives. Kinney is first and foremost a cartoonist, so the humour works through the juxtaposition of prose and illustration – a technique the students won't be able to emulate later in the exam.
- **The graphic-novels-only diet**: Graphic novels and interactive fiction are great at encouraging reading, as long as the young reader-writer can see beyond the self-imposed limitations of these genres as they gear up to write narrative prose. When we try to reproduce visual media in words, the results can be disappointing. In interactive fiction, characters other than the protagonist exist only to interact with the player-reader – they have no wishes or desires of their own. Readers need to be aware of this when they immerse themselves in interactive worlds.[5]

Feeding must include reading narrative prose. This process is so important that it gets a section of the manifesto to itself (see Principle 4). As to what should be read, the key is variety: short stories, middle grade (MG) or young adult (YA) novels, police procedurals and murder mysteries, thrillers, romances, family dramas, humorous diaries, superhero comics, graphic novels and childhood favourites.

It should go without saying, but for the sake of clarity, there are a vanishingly small number of circumstances in which we should be discouraging reading. If you're working with a member of staff or know of someone who is disparaging students' reading choices on the basis of quality, tackle them! We are not the gatekeepers or arbiters of taste.

5 For a superb exploration of many other things that don't work on the page – slapstick comedy, for example – see Howard Mittelmark and Sandra Newman's *How NOT to Write a Novel: 200 Mistakes to Avoid at All Costs if You Ever Want to Get Published* (London: Penguin, 2009), which contains some terrific takedowns of badly written narrative prose, many of which we've been guilty of ourselves.

THIS BOOK IS NOT A STYLE MANUAL.

AUTHORS MARTIN GRIFFIN AND JON MAYHEW THINK THERE ARE PLENTY OF THOSE ABOUT.

INSTEAD, IT PICKS APART THE CRAFT OF NARRATIVE WRITING AND EQUIPS TEACHERS WITH ACTIVITIES DESIGNED TO HELP THEIR STUDENTS OVERCOME THE DIFFICULTIES THEY EXPERIENCE WHEN TASKED WITH CREATING SOMETHING FROM NOTHING.

Written by two fiction writers and English teachers with over forty years' combined experience in education, *Storycraft* packs in expert guidance relating to idea generation and the nature of story and provides off-the-peg writing prompts that teachers can immediately adopt and adapt in the classroom.

The book breaks down the simple components that must be in place for a narrative to work – the crafting of character, setting, shape and structure – and shares fifty-one stimulating activities that will get students writing narratives regularly, more creatively and with greater confidence.

AN INSPIRING AND PRACTICAL RESOURCE TO SUPPORT SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS IN DEVELOPING THEIR STUDENTS' CREATIVE WRITING.

I love this book and the potential rewards and benefits it offers to adults working with children and young people. It launches itself from the positive standpoint that we are all writers and then, rather than simply offering loads of activities, provides the road maps that will enable teachers to support their students with the navigation and development of their own creative and imaginative agency. I can't recommend it highly enough!

Hywel Roberts, storyteller, speaker and travelling teacher

Martin Griffin and Jon Mayhew's *Storycraft* is an excellent addition to the texts on teaching creative and narrative writing. Martin and Jon have evidently combined their extensive knowledge and many years of classroom experience with their expertise as hugely successful authors themselves, and the result is a book that is accessible, considered and, most importantly, interesting.

Dr Vanessa Harbour, Senior Lecturer – Creative Writing, University of Winchester, and author of *Flight*

Martin Griffin has over two decades' experience teaching students aged eleven to eighteen, and has been a head of faculty, an assistant head teacher and a deputy head teacher. He is also an award-winning writer of children's fiction, whose books include *The Poison Boy* – written under the pseudonym Fletcher Moss – and young adult thrillers *Lifers* and *Payback*.

Having worked as an English and special educational needs teacher for twenty-five years, **Jon Mayhew** is now in demand on the school event circuit – delivering writing workshops to students from Key Stage 2 to sixth form. He is also a Royal Literary Fund Writing Fellow, helping students to improve their academic writing at Chester University. Jon is the author of the Monster Odyssey series and the multi-award-winning *Mortlock*.

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