

Teaching Creative Writing

An article in a recent issue of *The New Yorker* posed the question: “Should creative writing be taught?”

Critics of Creative Writing programs make multiple claims: that these programs isolate writers from real life; that they homogenize writing style; that they turn literature into an academic exercise.

Yet as the article’s author, Louis Menand, explains, many of the nation’s most eminent writers received training in creative writing programs. These include Michael Chabon, Ernest Gaines, Tama Janowitz, Larry McMurtry, N. Scott Momaday, Tillie Olson, and Wallace Stegner.

Creative writing courses are not new. The phrase “creative writing” entered the language during the 1920s, but creative writing courses predated that. The first was taught at the University of Iowa in 1897. Iowa introduced the first creative writing program in 1936.

The article’s author, Louis Menand, maintains that the typical course in creative writing—the writing workshop—is unlike other academic courses, in which a body of knowledge is transmitted. And to a certain extent that is true. A basic technique in a writers’ workshop is the critique of a students’ writing by other students.

But Creative Writing classes do more than this. These courses offer techniques to help students overcome writers block; hone skills of observation, description, and analysis; and cultivate a critical awareness of literary technique and craftsmanship.

Can Creative Writing Be Taught?

The University of Iowa’s Writers’ Workshop says that the answer is no. “Writing cannot be taught,” the program’s website declares, “but...writers can be encouraged.”

Whether or not literary creativity can be taught, certain skills can certainly be enhanced. Students can gain insight into what constitute effective or realistic description or style or narrative or characterization or use of language. They can also learn about voice, diction, plotting, setting, and figures of speech as well as how to craft dialogue that gives clues to a character’s personality, social position, values, and character;

What does a Creative Writing class do?

A course in Creative Writing can do many things. It can give students opportunities for self-expression and catharsis. It can allow them to record emotions in words and explore human interactions



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and the workings of the human psyche. It can also provide nuanced ways of sending messages.

But the approach adopted in such a course can vary widely. Some courses focus on creative expression. Others, on skills and mechanics. Still others on aesthetics or upon ideas.

Principles of Creative Writing

1. Expert writers must first become expert readers
Students in Creative Writing classes must become aware of the basic techniques of literary expression, including narrative strategies, genres, and aesthetics.
2. Creative writers must become more self-aware, craft conscious, and self-critical.
The students must learn to revise. As important as learning how to write is the ability to evaluate and re-write.
3. Students must recognize that creative writing is never simply descriptive or imaginative.
Creative writing also involves ideas, themes, questions, and arguments.

Classroom Tested Teaching Techniques

1. Imitation or parody
2. Dialogue with a published passage
3. Developing a character
4. A daisy chain in which succeeding students build on preceding students words
5. Small groups
6. Close reading in order to develop a keen sensitivity to a writer's ideas, themes, language, and approach, as well as the multiple lines of argument within a single text.