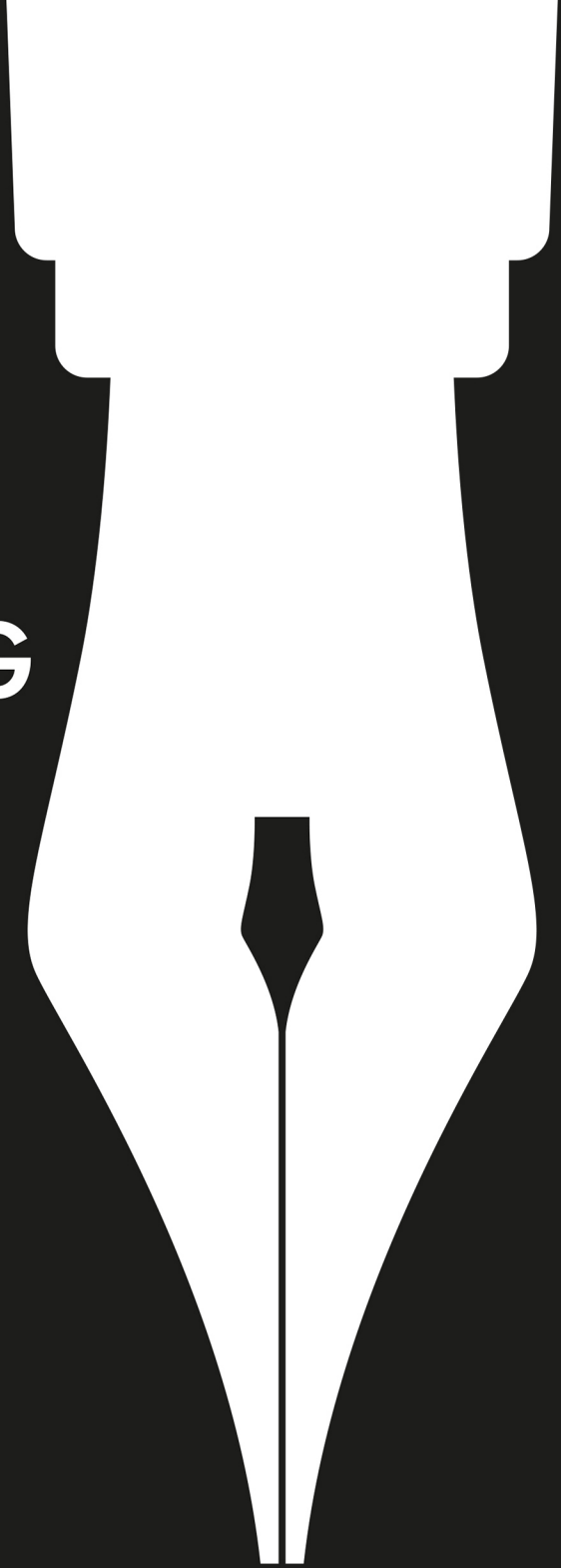


ANDREW COWAN

**THE ART
OF WRITING
FICTION**

Second Edition



The Art of Writing Fiction

An elegant and intimate insight into the personal and practical processes of writing, Andrew Cowan's *The Art of Writing Fiction* draws on his experience as a prize-winning novelist and his work with emerging writers at the University of East Anglia.

As illuminating for the recreational writer as for students of Creative Writing, the twelve chapters of this book correspond to the twelve weeks of a typical university syllabus, and provide guidance on mastering key aspects of fiction such as structure, character, voice, point of view, and setting, as well as describing techniques for stimulating creativity and getting the most out of feedback.

This new edition offers extended consideration to structure, point of view, and the organisation of time in the novel, as well as the conduct of the Creative Writing workshop in the light of the decolonising the curriculum movement. It features additional writing exercises, as well as an afterword with invaluable advice on approaching agents and publishers. The range of writers surveyed is greatly expanded, finding inspiration and practical guidance in the work of Margaret Atwood, Ayanna Lloyd Banwo, Richard Beard, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Richard Ford, Ashley Hickson-Lovence, Anjali Joseph, James Joyce, James Kelman, Ian McEwan, Arundhati Roy, Sam Selvon, Vikram Seth, and Ali Smith, among many others.

With over 80 writing exercises and examples taken from dozens of novels and short stories, the new edition of *The Art of Writing Fiction* is enriched by the author's own experience as a novelist and lecturer, making it an essential guide for readers interested in the theory, teaching, and practice of Creative Writing.

Andrew Cowan is Emeritus Professor of Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia. He is the author of six novels, including *Pig* (Sceptre, 2002) and, most recently, *Your Fault* (Salt, 2019), and the winner of numerous literary awards. He is also the author of the monograph *Against Creative Writing* (Routledge, 2023), a defence of the art of writing.



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Second Edition

Andrew Cowan

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Introduction

Introductions are the first thing a reader will read, but often the last thing a writer will write. This introduction is no different. The book you're about to read has, as I type these words, already been written. In fact, it's been written twice. The first edition was published a dozen or so years ago. More recently I've completed this revised, updated edition. So, I've done all the work – I've done it twice – and now I can account for my intentions and the ways in which I may have deviated from them, and perhaps offer some guidance on how to approach the exercises, and explain certain usages and conventions, and describe how this version differs from the original. I might attempt to reassure you about my competence to write a book about writing. Certainly I ought to be clear about my anticipated audience; I should be clear about 'you'.

As originally conceived, then, this book was designed to appeal as a university-level coursebook, and that remains the case. The twelve chapters correspond to the twelve weeks of a university semester, and are structured more or less in line with my undergraduate syllabus at the University of East Anglia (UEA), where I've taught since 2002. The chapters resemble my lessons. They come in much the same order, and contain much the same material, and the exercises appear pretty much where they would appear in those lessons. In the earlier chapters I'm more concerned with generating material, in the middle chapters with shaping that material, and in the later chapters with reviewing the material – not quite 'first thoughts, second thoughts, afterthoughts', but something like that.

However, with so much more space on the page than I'm ever allowed in the classroom, the discussion has become longer, the examples more detailed, the exercises more numerous – and this new edition is a little longer still. In places, my book has begun to resemble a memoir, and while I shouldn't be surprised by this, the pleasure I took in writing it (and then re-writing it) may reflect something of my relief at finding I wasn't after all compiling a textbook.

I hope it's less generic, more personal than that, not least because I came to teaching through the residential courses offered by the Arvon Foundation in the UK, and my approach in the university classroom – anecdotal, practical, relatively informal – derives from that more 'recreational' experience. Arvon

2 Introduction

courses happen throughout the year, in remote rural locations, and typically involve sixteen students and two tutors who eat, sleep, and drink writing for five days more or less without distraction. Several of the exercises in this book were devised for such courses; several others were filched from my co-tutors while teaching them. This book is therefore intended to appeal to that kind of non-academic audience, too.

That said, a good deal of the more extended commentary between the exercises derives from conversations I've had with my Masters and PhD students at UEA – both in workshops and in individual tutorials – and is informed by an awareness of literary theory and the ever-evolving literary canon, while certain other passages have their origin in conversations with fellow academics, and so I hope this book will be of interest to them, too. Like most of us, I've read a great many Creative Writing guidebooks – sometimes willingly – and usually I look to them for two things: new exercises to try out in the classroom and new ways of presenting key concepts. So this book is also intended for the likes of me; it's intended for other writers and teachers of writing.

But if this is beginning to sound like my anticipated audience is 'everyone' – or that 'you' are pretty much 'anyone' – I ought to offer at least one qualification: I don't believe you can be a writer unless you are also a reader. If writing is the out-breath, the exhalation, then reading should be the in-breath, the inspiration. And if you aren't already an enthusiastic and habitual reader of short stories and novels, I doubt you'll have much use for this book.

Of course, your writing will derive from personal experience (what you know), as well as from research and what you are able to invent or imagine (what you don't know, yet). But it will also spring from your awareness of language, and especially of literary language. This is your medium – the stuff from which you will fashion your fictions – and the more you're aware of the fictions that have preceded you and which surround you, the more conscious you'll become of the possibilities of the form and what you can do with it.

For most of us, that awareness will be acquired by a kind of osmosis, almost unconsciously, since we read in the main for entertainment, for delight. Our lifelong immersion in the fictions of others will help us acquire a degree of technical understanding that may come to feel instinctive or commonsensical. But as writers we will often also want to read analytically and for instruction – to learn about method and style – and this so-called 'reading as a writer' will tend to be deliberate, a fully conscious activity involving marks in the margin, memos to self, scribbles in notebooks.

Whether these two modes of reading can happen simultaneously is something I doubt. It may be possible to oscillate between them, but I suspect that most of us will read initially for pleasure, then return with a more enquiring or critical eye in order to understand something of the nuts and bolts of what we have already read. And this is a practice I would encourage. For as long as seems useful at least, I would suggest you keep a record of your reading, making notes on the mechanics – as you observe them – of constructing

successful short stories and novels. Chapters 4 to 9 in this book should provide a guide to what to look for, the kinds of questions you might be asking of the writing of others. But this needn't be arduous; it shouldn't be a chore. If your inclination is simply to jot down arresting images, neat turns of phrase, unusual details, then that should be enough. My own notebook, for instance, has come to resemble a swag-bag, a collection of thievings from other writers – all their shiniest sentences – including this line from one of Samuel Beckett's later short fictions, *Worstward Ho*, which has become for me a kind of mantra, a consolation whenever my achievements on the page fall short of my ambitions:

No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.

It is an underlying premise of this book that writing is an on-going process, perfection impossible, completion elusive, and while this line from *Worstward Ho* encapsulates that thought, I know I'm not the first to have discovered it. It appears to have become something of a slogan in the teaching of Creative Writing, in fact. And just as mine is not the first guidebook to quote it, nor will I be the last to draw on the words of Dorothea Brande, Flannery O'Connor, or John Gardner, whom I mention in several of the chapters that follow. There is one good reason for this: they are often (though not always) among the wisest of writers on writing. But I have sought to compensate for their ubiquity by incorporating into my commentary several other, less orthodox names: for example, the seventeenth century French courtier and soldier the Duc de La Rochefoucauld, or the Russian Formalist critics Viktor Shklovsky and Boris Tomashevsky (both of whom are key figures in the history of literary theory, but maybe less key to the teaching of Creative Writing).

Some of my literary exemplars are likewise already well-known. Ernest Hemingway's 'Hills Like White Elephants', for instance, must be the most frequently quoted of all short stories in the Creative Writing classroom. Tim O'Brien's 'The Things They Carried' and Tobias Wolff's 'Bullet in the Brain' cannot be far behind. But many of my other choices will reflect the idiosyncrasies of my own reading. In this revised edition, many will also reflect the impact on my reading of the 'decolonising the curriculum' movement, which has lately, and belatedly, brought about a reconsideration in every subject area of what we teach and how and why we teach it. In Creative Writing, this inevitably requires a rethink of our reading lists, though it entails a good deal more than that, including a greater sensitivity to the question of 'voice', both in the classroom and on the page: who speaks, and to whom; who is invited into the conversation, and who may become silenced?

Despite its occasional bad press, decolonisation certainly isn't about 'cancellation'. It isn't a matter of toppling the literary canon, as if the canon were as fixed in stone as a municipal statue. Rather, it seeks to understand what we might call 'canonicity'; that is, the question of which authors and which books get favoured, and which get overlooked, and why? In Creative

4 *Introduction*

Writing, this often extends to the question of craft and technique and why we might value certain conventions over others, since what appears to be universal might well turn out to be local – particular to a certain time in history, or a certain cultural tradition, or even sector of society.

With this in mind, I haven't retained or replaced any of my exemplars without first considering its continuing relevance. More often than not, I've added a new example rather than removing an old one; that is, I've diversified rather than deleted. And despite my best intentions, I've continued to use my own novels to illustrate or support my argument, though not necessarily because I believe them to be particularly fine examples of how to write well. Some, I'm sure, are actually quite good; some are less so. But every example is merely an example – they're always provisional – and often the easiest way to explain myself is to point to a passage from my own work. Besides which, as I know from the classroom, the process of learning to write is an intensely personal process that may best be encouraged through the example of personal experience.

As with the exemplars, a mix of the familiar and less familiar may be found in the exercises I use, many of which are my own invention, some of which are not. A few were devised in good faith – as if they were my own – only to surprise me in similar guise elsewhere, evidently not my idea at all. But the provenance of Creative Writing exercises is notoriously difficult to establish, and while those that appear in a guidebook can take on the authority of being the official or original version, often they are adaptations of exercises that are already in general circulation, and with this in mind I have taken care to acknowledge my sources where I am aware of them, while of course offering my own (or rather, those I believe to be my own) to the Creative Writing commons. You are welcome to lay claim to them; you certainly wouldn't be the first.

In writing this updated edition I have made any number of quite minor amendments, many hardly worth mentioning, though I would like to highlight one small change in emphasis. In the earlier edition, I tended to use the word 'discipline' when discussing writerly habits, whereas now my preference is 'practice'.¹ The connotations of these two terms should suggest why. 'Discipline' invites the ogre into the room – it sounds punitive, oppressive, regulatory – whereas 'practice' is kinder, more forgiving. Practice suggests provisionality: one isn't there yet, and that is okay; mistakes are allowed. And while practice, like discipline, relies on routines, it suggests a happier state of self-absorption and a bit more room for playfulness. For all that writing can be hard work, the process of learning need not be laborious; improvement need not rule out enjoyment.

1 I am grateful to Rosalind Brown for this, as I began to think differently after reading her PhD thesis.

Finally, three other, minor points of explanation. If this book was always intended to appeal as a university-level coursebook, it was also, initially, designed to look like one, with all the apparatus of an academic textbook, including footnoted citations. However, these quickly became so much clutter on the page, and so I've limited myself to a bibliography at the end of the book, listing all the works I mention without giving page numbers for each and every quotation. The footnotes that remain are there to allow me to contradict or further explain myself. There's another one at the foot of this page.

English pronouns are always problematical and while it's rightly no longer acceptable to say 'he' when we mean 'he or she', or 'his' when we mean 'his or her', none of the alternatives strikes me as particularly elegant: 'he or she' and 'his or her' can quickly become unwieldy; 's/he' is hard on the eye; and the use of the plural forms 'they' and 'their' when we mean the singular forms 'he', 'she', 'his' or 'her' can often sound ungrammatical, while sometimes also causing confusion, suggesting the presence of more than one person when there is just one. Of course, grammar is mutable, usage especially so.² Language changes over time, and not only have 'they' and 'their' been used for centuries as singular pronouns – usually when the gender of the grammatical subject is unknown or unspecified – in recent years it has also come to be accepted as the standard pronoun for people who identify as non-binary. Even so – and with the exception of that usage – the singular 'they' continues to ring oddly on my ear, and my solution for the most part is to use 'she' on some occasions and 'he' on others, more or less randomly, while looking forward to the day when we can adopt the neater solution suggested by the gender-fluid, anarchist utopia of Marge Piercy's feminist classic *Woman on the Edge of Time*, in which 'per' is the standard singular pronoun, covering 'he', 'his', 'him', 'she', 'hers' and 'her'.

Finally, you may notice that the phrase 'Creative Writing' is capitalised throughout, while the word 'writing' is not. This may be splitting hairs, but I wish to preserve the sense that writing is what writers do – and is an art – whereas Creative Writing is a subject of study – a regulated set of educational activities that occurs in an institution and results, usually, in a qualification. This isn't to suggest that the two can't coincide, or that Creative Writing cannot be an enjoyable, instructive, or personally improving set of activities. But it is to suggest that writing need not occur in an institution, or in response to a syllabus. The hope of the Creative Writing tutor, anyway, is that the student will surpass the syllabus. And that, ultimately, is the hope of this Creative Writing guidebook, that it will enable you to surpass the instructions, and your own expectations, and become a book about the art (and the craft, and the graft) of writing.

² My own understanding of grammar is mutable, too. Since I wrote the first edition of this book, in which I stated categorically that the singular 'they' is ungrammatical, I have come to appreciate the long history of its use in both formal and informal contexts to mean 'he' or 'she', and its contemporary acceptance by all the major dictionaries.

1 Writers' routines

I imagine most decorators will be interested in the brushes and solvents that other decorators use, and where they get them, and on what terms, and I expect they'll be just as interested in each other's methods and how they get the best use out of those solvents and brushes. They may even be curious about each other's lives, how they organise their weekends, and if they pay into a pension plan, and whether they know a good osteopath. And no doubt the same will go for plumbers, photographers, ceramicists, chefs, architects, accountants....

I'm always interested in how other writers write, when and where they do it, and what implements they use. I'm especially interested in how they organise their lives. And being a writer, if I come across some information I will squirrel it away – I'll jot it down – though being a fiction writer I won't always remember it accurately. I might well embellish it, or believe what I want to believe, and so the list I've compiled of writers' working routines might not be quite accurate, however much it suits me to think it is.

Here is some of that list:

Ayòbámi Adébéyò writes on a laptop. On a bad day, she won't log off till early evening, though she may spend more time online than meeting her word-count. On a good day, she'll forget the internet, lose all sense of time, and continue on through the night.

Chinua Achebe preferred pen on paper, and preferred not to have too strict a routine, though he liked to write every day. Once he got going, he too could continue on through the night.

Martin Amis used to rent a flat as an office and work there in the morning, then play tennis, then read all afternoon. Later he worked in a 'garden studio'.

Maya Angelou kept a sparsely furnished hotel room, where she wrote from early morning till mid-afternoon. She slept at home, which is also where she did her revisions.

Jeffrey Archer likes to line up a row of freshly sharpened pencils and a team of editors.

Paul Auster writes with a fountain pen into notebooks of squared paper, and endlessly revises. If he manages a page in a day, he's happy. After which

he types up his 'scratchings' so he can read them properly, and makes further corrections in pencil.

Paul Bowles, author of *The Sheltering Sky* and husband of the novelist Jane Bowles, wrote longhand and claimed that 95% of his writing was done in bed. Jane, he said, took a week to write a page and the effort 'cost her blood'.

Barbara Cartland dictated her novels from a *chaise longue* to a secretary.

Roald Dahl lived on a farm and worked in a shed in his garden. He sat in an armchair with a board on his lap and wrote from ten until midday, then from four until six. In between times he tended his animals.

Charles Dickens wrote, standing up, from nine till two every day. After lunch he walked for three hours around London.

Louise Erdrich writes first drafts by hand, often working from notebooks, and begins her revisions as she types up the drafts. Further edits are made by hand on the printouts, 'so they feel repossessed'.

Ernest Hemingway wrote standing at a lectern, and often wrote naked. He used a pencil, and only sat down to type when writing dialogue. He began as soon after first light as his hangover allowed.

Kazuo Ishiguro plans his books in his head, then sets aside a month or so to write a rough draft, often working all day. He has two desks. On one is a writing slope on which he produces an almost illegible first draft. The other has a computer on which he makes painstaking revisions. The computer isn't connected to the internet.

In common with Barbara Cartland, Henry James dictated his later novels to a secretary.

James Joyce sometimes lounged on a sofa with his feet up and wrote surrounded by domestic chaos.

Jamaica Kincaid professes to having no routine. She composes initially in her head, and works mostly in bed. Once her thoughts are written down she doesn't return to revise them.

Stephen King keeps to a 'clear cut' routine. Mornings are his prime writing time, accompanied by very loud music. In the afternoon he writes letters and takes naps.

David Mitchell writes in a hut in his garden, and structures his day around childcare. He writes initially on paper, then moves to a laptop.

Haruki Murakami also works to an unvarying routine, the repetition inducing 'a form of mesmerism'. He begins very early and writes till midday, then runs or swims very long distances.

Vladimir Nabokov also wrote from early in the morning, initially in pencil onto filing cards, which he would then revise and rearrange to produce his novels. He insisted on pencils tipped with erasers. He didn't go for long runs.

Joyce Carol Oates writes mainly in the morning, and mainly before breakfast. If the work is going well she'll delay breakfast until two or three in the afternoon.

Edna O'Brien writes with a fountain pen into exercise books from first thing in the morning until early afternoon, 'in a kind of trance' as she describes it.

George Orwell wrote much of *1984* sitting up in bed with TB, a pad in his lap.

Jyoti Patel can't write in the mornings. She spends the day gathering energy and ideas, and usually knows exactly what she wants to write when she sits down in the evening. She describes her whole day as 'a warm-up act'.

The poet and novelist Michele Roberts writes novels directly onto her computer, but sits in bed to write poems, in longhand, her earlier drafts spread around her.

Philip Roth (like Dickens and Hemingway) wrote standing at a lectern. His lectern was in a twelfth storey apartment with a view of Manhattan, and his only other item of furniture was a small bed, for catnapping.

Nikesh Shukla wrote much of his first novel on an iPad on his knees as he commuted between Bristol and London, taking the 5.45 am bus in one direction, the 6 pm bus in the other.

Ali Smith, a prolific and prolifically inventive novelist, purports to be 'lazy'. The mornings are for admin. Her writing day begins in mid-afternoon and continues into the evening and involves a lot of staring into space.

Muriel Spark, who lived most of her writing life in Tuscany, would only write in a particular brand of exercise book, which she had sent to her from the Edinburgh stationers, James Thin.

John Steinbeck wrote his novels mainly in pencil, a page a day, and didn't correct or rewrite them until he had a complete draft.

Elizabeth Strout has breakfast, then clears the table to begin writing. She writes in longhand, and when she has enough scenes she pushes them around the table to find the right order.

Brandon Taylor writes when he writes, and doesn't when he doesn't, and tries as best he can to live with the uncertainty.

William Trevor began writing at 7.20 each morning, and took coffee at nine, then attempted one more hour before he stopped for the day.

Edith Warton wrote in bed, tossing the pages to the floor for her secretary to collect and type up.

Eudora Welty woke early and typed. Her structural revisions were made using scissors and pins.

John Edgar Wideman did the 'brute work' of early drafts in the summer, using a pen or a pencil, and mostly wrote in the mornings. He did his rewrites in the winter.

Virginia Woolf (like Dickens, Hemingway and Roth) sometimes wrote standing at a lectern. More often (like Roald Dahl) she wrote in an arm-chair with a board on her lap.

Here's a ten-minute exercise:

1. When where what...

Consider your own writing routines and describe them under these headings:

Where do you write?

When do you start?

Which days of the week?

How long do you write for?

What implements do you use?

What rules do you set yourself?

What excuses do you make?

If there's no discernible pattern, that's fine, for now. We'll come back to this later.

Of course there are exceptions – there will *always* be exceptions – but what strikes me about my list is the number of writers for whom writing happens best in the morning, often very early in the morning (and sometimes without their even getting out of bed). Only a few continue writing into the afternoon, and fewer still into the evening. And then there are those, quite a few of them, for whom writing begins when they are closest to the condition of sleep, or half-sleep: those who write in a semi-slumber, or a semi-trance (or just while reclining).

They seem to be suggesting that the ideal state for a writer – the dream state, so to speak – is somewhere close to the state of dreaming. And this is a theme that emerges in most of the books on Creative Writing that I'm aware of, beginning with one of the classics of the genre, Dorothea Brande's *Becoming A Writer*, first published in 1934. Inevitably it will crop up in this book too, in Chapter 3, when I consider the role of the unconscious in relation to the technique of automatic writing.

But besides the purely psychological argument for writing as soon as you wake, it may be that there's a sound practical reason for starting early. The sooner you get going, the less likely you are to be distracted by *stuff*, the intrusions and interruptions that other people cause: the knocks on the door, the emails, the phonecalls, the demands on your time and attention (and possibly your conscience) that steadily accumulate throughout the day and can so fracture your concentration and calm, and so drain you of energy, that there can be no chance of writing later on.

Though perhaps it isn't the intrusions and interruptions that other people cause that are the issue. Possibly it's your own tendency to niggle away at yourself, forever remembering other things you ought to be

doing (and very often doing them). It could be that you are your own worst enemy.

Many writers are.

One of the books on Creative Writing that I've turned to most often is called *Taking Reality by Surprise*, edited by Susan Sellers and published by The Women's Press, and one of the exercises I've most often used in my teaching is adapted from this book. The original was devised by Nicky Edwards and is called 'A Ten-Minute Exercise on Time-Wasting' and is designed to 'speed the writer from bed to computer, eliminating all forms of procrastination'. Over the years my own version has evolved so that the wording is now very different from hers, though the concept and structure remain the same. (And this perhaps is an example of how we develop as writers, and teachers: first imitating, even copying, then adapting, and eventually – hopefully – originating.) You'll need a pen and paper. Here is my version of Nicky Edwards's exercise:

2. Time-wasting

Imagine you are sitting at your desk and are ready to write. Let's *assume* there are no family or work demands, no other distractions. Now list all the things you do to avoid starting. Tally up your marks in the style of a magazine questionnaire.

Fiddling: 1 point each

Stacking and squaring your papers. Cleaning the gunk from your keyboard. Cleaning the gunk from your fingernails. Combing your hair. Combing your beard. Adjusting the height of your chair. Adjusting the tilt of your chair...

Almost work-related distractions: 2 points each

Reading a page or two of a book to 'get in the mood'. Rearranging the order of the notes in a ring-binder. Counting (or re-counting) the words you've written so far. Tidying, deleting and renaming the files and folders on your computer...

Stalling: 3 points each

Tidying your work-space. Re-reading your emails. Making lists of things to do later. Re-drawing the schedule of work on your pinboard. Making more coffee. Quickly checking your Twitter, Facebook, Instagram...

Dreaming: 3 points each

Re-reading yesterday's work and not taking in a single word. More than ten minutes staring at a window or a wall. More than five minutes with your eyes closed or your head on the desk...

Skiving: 5 points each

Posting to Twitter, Facebook, Instagram. Replying to emails. Making phonecalls. Doing the housework. Tackling minor repairs around the house. Walking the dog to the postbox. Doing questionnaires like this one...

Absconding: 10 points each

Gardening. Decorating. Shopping. Sleeping. Visiting...

Score:

0–10 points: Completely abnormal. Try to relax.

11–20 points: A necessary amount of nest-circling. But beware of lapsing once the writing has begun.

21–30 points: Perhaps you sat down too soon? Surely you're doing things now that were best done earlier?

31+ points: Completely abnormal. Start worrying.

Initially and for some years I presented this exercise by way of introduction to some stern, admonitory words on the dangers of procrastination and the importance of self-discipline. The fact that the majority of my students owned up to being in the '31+: Completely abnormal' category seemed only to confirm the need for the exercise. The fact that I was also in the '31+: Completely abnormal' category, and that every single one of these displacement activities applied equally to me, seemed only to confirm the need for us all to be more vigilant, less dreamy, more focused, less dilatory.

I've since begun to realise that procrastination is not only *not* 'completely abnormal' but is an essential part of the process of writing. I've begun to believe that we might benefit as much by gazing at nothing as by staring at the screen, and that we need to distract ourselves from our writing every bit as much as we need to knuckle down to it.

John Keats famously characterised the writer (he actually said 'Man of Achievement especially in literature') as someone who is 'capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason', and while it may be stretching it somewhat, here perhaps is another realm of uncertainty in which a writer must dwell: whether or not to trust

the impulse to delay or to interrupt ourselves, whether to allow ourselves the licence to waste time (always assuming it is, in fact, a 'waste').

There are limits of course – I once put my first novel *Pig* aside for a couple of days and failed to return to it for nine months, and I still allow whole days to disappear in a frenzy of file rearranging and paper stacking (and emailing; especially emailing) – but often I think we need certain periods of not-writing, or slow writing, so that things can percolate up from the back of our minds and surprise us. Sometimes I think we may even need to defer and delay for so long that we reach such a pitch of anxiety that all our excuses metabolise into nervous energy and eventually, finally, we have the impetus we need to press on.

And energy is important. If you have a fit of the fidgets, or a sudden urge to paint a ceiling or plant some seedlings, that may be because you need to get some distance on the work so that you can see it more clearly – or it may simply be that you need the exercise (and the ceiling needs painting, the seedlings need planting). Writing, unlike the other arts, involves little physical activity. Often it requires tremendous physical restraint. Dancers, actors, painters, potters, printmakers, photographers, sculptors and musicians all get to move about a bit – and sometimes to suspend conscious thought, relying instead on the body's intelligence – but with writing the energy is contained, held in; very often the body is clenched. Which is tiring. Writing can be exhausting precisely because it requires so much sitting still. And tired writers produce tired writing. Or none at all.

Tired *people* produce tired writing, or none at all, and one obvious reason why so many of the writers in my list do their writing in the morning is because they have nothing better to do, being writers (by which I mean successful, famous writers), whereas most other people (including most other writers, including me) have to organise their writing time around the need to earn a living, or bring up a family, or care for their elderly parents, or complete a college course, or even all four.

Clearly there are some writers who prefer to write in the evening. The poet Philip Larkin wrote, if he wrote at all, only after he'd completed a full day at work in the library at the University of Hull, and then only after he'd cooked and eaten dinner and washed and dried the dishes (he wrote with a fountain pen onto lined paper, incidentally). For others, too, the best defence against the distracting demands of real life and other people is to attend to those demands first, to do the dishes or whatever else it may be, and *then* start the writing. Possibly the option of rising at dawn in order to write before work or family life begins is just too heroic or too daunting a prospect: it's the evening (however little remains of it) or nothing.

Curiously, though, too much time may be even more of a problem than too little.

This is especially true for beginning writers (of whatever age), who won't have the pressure of contractual deadlines, or the lure of a readership curious to read what they've written (let alone the fear of that readership browsing

in a bookshop and choosing the latest title by a rival writer instead). With certain familiar (and exaggerated) exceptions – the Beats for instance; William Burroughs and Jack Kerouac, let's say¹ – the lives of writers are generally quite dull, often exceedingly dull. The writing requires it; that's how the writing gets done. And this can be a problem for the beginning writer with too many options: almost anything can seem more interesting and more enticing than writing.

Conversely, sometimes nothing can seem quite so *important* as writing, to the extent that the actual, practical sitting down and doing it becomes fraught with anxiety. Unless the circumstances appear in some way auspicious, or we feel in some way *inspired* – and the writing in some way guaranteed to succeed – then we dare not begin.

A little of both of these attitudes afflicted me in the writing of *Pig*. I know from an old diary that the first twelve pages took me seven months to complete, and that it then took me a further four years to get as far as page 124, just past half-way. I was a young man drifting along, periodically unemployed, only ever in low-paid, part-time, often menial work, and with no particular ambitions. I rarely made time in my day for writing, and had next-to-no belief in myself as a writer or in my book as a publishable novel. Yet despite this, I was also profoundly attached to the idea of writing and of 'being' a writer and of the importance of writing well. The tension between these contradictory attitudes meant that I continually delayed and deferred sitting down with my book until my stars were aligned, my yin-yang in harmony, my in-tray empty, the dishes all done.

The second half of *Pig* was written in just over a year, and two things helped me to accelerate. The first was accepting that I did in fact have a plausibly publishable book, or at least half of one, which encouraged me to believe I could write the other half. The second was acquiring both a proper, full-time job (my first) and a baby daughter (ditto). My working days began and ended with an almost two-hour commute across Glasgow by bus, tube and overground train; my weekends were organised around Rose. Suddenly I seemed to have no time whatsoever to write, and this, contrarily, made the urge and determination to write all the more pressing.

Somewhat belatedly I realised I needed to designate a time – however limited, or hemmed about with other concerns – that was my writing time, and that this needed to be consistent and protected (not least from my own tendency towards self-sabotage). And so I began to write most evenings between half-nine and midnight, after Rose was asleep and – interestingly (to

1 Burroughs and Kerouac – heroes of the 'writing while wasted' idea – used to be very popular with my undergraduate students, the boys in particular. But Burroughs himself dismissed the usefulness of stimulants, sedatives and, ultimately, hallucinogens to his writing. They were, he said in an interview with *The Paris Review*, 'absolutely contraindicated for creative work'. The example of burnt-out, alcoholic Kerouac perhaps proves his point. Burroughs' own output perhaps doesn't.

me at least) – after I'd had a short sleep myself, which had an effect similar to that of a wiper on a rain-spattered windscreen: my catnap cleared away the clutter of the day, erased the accumulated aggravations, and allowed me to begin a little closer, perhaps, to the state of dreaming.

It helped for me that my partner was (and is) also a writer. As far as we could, we shared the chores and childcare equally, took turns on our only computer, and worked as each other's editor and principal reader.² But not everyone is so fortunate; in fact, quite often the opposite. Those nearest to us can be the biggest obstacle to our writing, since our writing requires so much of our attention, our energy and time, and this will frequently provoke hostility or jealousy, whether openly expressed, or disguised in the form of indifference or a consistent lack of encouragement.

Alternatively, those nearest to us might be our parents, who can cherish quite different ambitions for us than our own, seeing in writing a particularly hazardous, insecure and uncertain career choice, perhaps even viewing it as a prolongation of adolescence, a wilful or dreamy refusal to accept adult responsibility (both of which views may be quite accurate).

Or the obstacle can be our children. Cyril Connolly famously wrote in *Enemies of Promise* that 'there is no more sombre enemy of good art than the pram in the hall', and while some will find in the birth of a child a spur to their writing (as I did), and some will claim (or cheerfully complain) that each of their children represents a book that will never be written, others may struggle even to get going, since the pram is already there, the soft toys strewn about the floor, the nappies dripping in the kitchen.³

All of us are hindered in some way, but what seems a hindrance to one writer may well be a help to another. I know of one novelist, for instance, who claims to work best in the evenings and only after her second glass of wine; yet for most of us even one glass may be too many. On one Arvon Foundation course I taught, there was a student who could only write to music and had brought along a pair of plate-sized earphones to plug into his phone. His room-mate, meanwhile, had packed a pair of industrial ear-muffs, since even birdsong would derange him.

Whatever they may be, it can be useful to itemise those things we find a hindrance to our writing, as well as those things we find helpful. The

2 Lynne would give a differently slanted account of this time, emphasising post-natal exhaustion and the burden of breastfeeding. As I became more productive, she became less so.

3 J.G. Ballard, a brilliant and prolific writer, brought up three children after the early death of his wife, and wrote this in his autobiography *Miracles of Life*:

I kept up a steady output of novels and short story collections, largely because I spent most of my time at home. A short story, or a chapter of a novel, would be written in the time between ironing a school tie, serving up the sausage and mash, and watching *Blue Peter*. I am certain that my fiction is all the better for that. My greatest ally was the pram in the hall.

following exercise is called 'Friends and Foes' and is my version of an exercise I first encountered on that same Arvon course. It appears in what might be its original form in Louise Doughty's cheerful guidebook *A Novel in a Year* (where it's called 'Allies and Enemies') and in David Morley's *The Cambridge Introduction to Creative Writing* (where it's called 'Enemies and Allies'):

3. Friends and foes

Take two sheets of paper and give one the heading 'Friends' and the other 'Foes'.

Under 'Friends' make a list of all the things that help you in your writing. Some of these may be people (a supportive partner, perhaps) or the memory of people (a grandparent who always made you feel valued, let's say) or maybe even an animal (the cat in your lap). Some might be objects (a particular pen, the ergonomic chair that means you no longer get backache) or surroundings (this view of your garden, the calm you find in the back bedroom). Other 'friends' might include the coffee you drink in the morning, or the wine you drink in the evening, or your twenty roll-ups a day, or your gunk-cleaning routine, or the hour you spend at the gym, or the cut-and-paste facility on your PC, or the favourite novels you turn to for guidance. And then there are the thoughts about yourself and your writing that console or inspire or encourage you, which may well be your best friends of all.

Under 'Foes' make a list of all the things that hinder you in your writing. Some of these may be people (an unsupportive partner, perhaps) or the memory of people (the parent who is always so critical, let's say) or maybe even an animal (the cat that keeps pestering to sit in your lap). Some can be objects (the keyboard that gives you RSI, the uncomfortable chair that causes your backache) or surroundings (this dismal view of the bins in the shared courtyard, the constant noise from upstairs). Other foes might be the wine you drink in the evening, or the hangover you wake to each morning, or your constant trips to the kitchen, or your email addiction, or your migraine affliction, or the prizewinning novels you keep comparing your own to. And of course there are the thoughts about yourself and your writing that defeat or depress or discourage you, which can be absolutely your worst foes of all.

The point here is not to cancel out each of your friends with a foe, or to challenge each foe with a friend, but to try to be clear about what enables or inhibits you, and to think about ways in which you might foster the thoughts and circumstances that assist you, while addressing or simply acknowledging the conditions that hinder you, whether they be practical, personal or psychological.

It could be that you only have an hour a day of writing in you, and that any more time at the desk will simply not be productive, and may even be counter-productive. Alternatively, you may be someone who needs to spend long hours spooling words, any words, until finally you hit the seam and can write your best work. People differ, both in personality and personal circumstances. Some things can't be changed. Others can't be changed easily. But recognition can be a necessary first step towards finding the writing routine that best suits you.

It could be, for instance, that starting early is a bargain you need to strike with yourself: if you can get the writing done by mid-afternoon, or by lunchtime, or by breakfast, the day will still be long, so no other chore need be left undone, niggling away at the back of your mind.

Or it may be that all your other chores and obligations must be dealt with first: if you can finish your essay, or get the children to bed, or complete your shift at work, then whatever time remains need not be overshadowed or interrupted by those other concerns. And while it would not be a good idea to trust the urge to daydream, fidget or paint ceilings to such an extent that no writing gets done at all, it may be useful to accommodate these distractions as a necessary precursor to writing, so that they are acknowledged as a part of the process and serve to create the mental space in which the writing can happen.

And ultimately it is a mental space you need to create, some inner place you can retreat to as way of announcing to yourself 'I am a writer' – or if that seems too grandiose or presumptuous, then 'I am writing'. You need to create this space, and you need to devise a schedule, a regular and consistent routine, that will take you there. This is partly so that you don't come to depend upon the gift of inspiration, which may strike when you're least ready, or may never strike, or may in fact require you to be fully immersed in the practice of writing before it can find you. But mainly it's because the unpredictability of writing – the sense of never knowing for sure what will come out today – may depend on all other distractions being eliminated.

As I'll explore in Chapters 4 and 10, the measure of successful writing is very often the extent to which it is able surprise us – as writers and readers – by reawakening perceptions made dull by habit and familiarity. And this ability to 'make strange' or 'defamiliarise' very often depends, paradoxically, on our writing lives being premised on habit, on the dullness of familiar routines.

Now attempt again our first exercise, but this time describe the routine you intend to work to *from now on*:

4. What where when...

Think about your ideal writing routine. Then modify it so it becomes more realistic. Now describe it under these headings:

Where will you write?
When will you start?
Which days of the week?
How long will you write for?
What implements will you use?
What rules will you set yourself?
What excuses are you most determined not to make?

Whatever routine you set for yourself, it is inevitable that you will at times struggle. You should anticipate that you will occasionally fail. Such is the nature of writing. But you can reduce the chances of failure by being realistic about the many other demands on your time and your energies, and if it seems that you may only have a short period each day for writing – thirty minutes before breakfast, let's say; perhaps an hour before bedtime – then that time is fine. It is better to know what you have, and to adapt to it, than to condemn yourself to the frustration of not being able to meet any more challenging targets. And even thirty minutes may be enough, if you are clear about what can be achieved. Several of the exercises in the next two chapters are designed for generating material in short bursts of activity, before the demons of self-doubt can settle in. Often this will be material that can be developed later into longer works. But the exercises themselves can become an essential, on-going feature of your writing practice, something you do as a matter of routine, which is after all what it means to 'be' a writer. Writers write – regularly, habitually, routinely.