

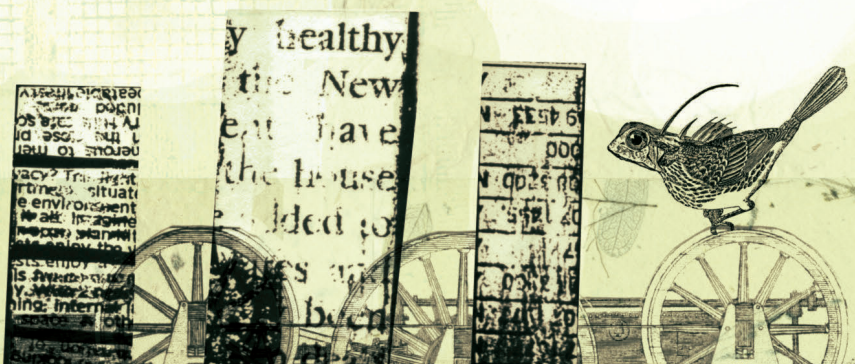
AM

10

HAZEL SMITH

THE writing  
EXPERIMENT

STRATEGIES FOR INNOVATIVE  
CREATIVE WRITING



# THE WRITING EXPERIMENT

Strategies for innovative  
creative writing

Hazel Smith

First published 2005 by Allen & Unwin

Published 2020 by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN  
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

Copyright © Hazel Smith 2005

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Notice:

Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

National Library of Australia  
Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

Smith, Hazel, 1950- .

The Writing Experiment: strategies for innovative creative writing.

Bibliography.

Includes index.

ISBN 978 1 7411 4015 6

1. Creative writing. 2. Creative writing (Higher education).  
3. Creative writing - Handbooks, manuals, etc. 4. English  
language - Writing. I. Title.

808.06

Set in 11/13 pt Minion by Midland Typesetters, Maryborough

ISBN-13: 9781741140156 (pbk)

# Contents

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| Preface   | iv         |
| Introduction  | vii        |
| <b>Part I: Introductory strategies</b>                    | <b>1</b>   |
| Chapter 1: Playing with language, running with referents  | 3          |
| Chapter 2: Genre as a moveable feast                      | 27         |
| Chapter 3: Working out with structures                    | 48         |
| Chapter 4: Writing as recycling                           | 65         |
| Chapter 5: Narrative, narratology, power                  | 84         |
| Chapter 6: Dialoguing                                     | 110        |
| <b>Part II: Advanced strategies</b>                       | <b>131</b> |
| Chapter 7: Postmodern f(r)ictions                         | 133        |
| Chapter 8: Postmodern poetry, avant-garde poetics         | 156        |
| Chapter 9: The invert, the cross-dresser, the fictocritic | 192        |
| Chapter 10: Tongues, talk and technologies                | 212        |
| Chapter 11: New media travels                             | 237        |
| Chapter 12: Mapping worlds, moving cities                 | 254        |
| Conclusion: The ongoing editor                            | 277        |
| Acknowledgments   | 281        |
| Index   | 283        |

# Preface

*The Writing Experiment* is the culmination of my experience of teaching creative writing in the School of English at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels from 1991 to 2001. It is dedicated with admiration and affection to the hundreds of students I taught during that period, and the breathtakingly good work they so often produced.

During my tenure at UNSW, I developed a method for teaching higher education students which combined three objectives: it theorised the process of writing; it was biased towards experimental approaches; and it was systematic and based on step-by-step strategies. As this method evolved, and as I transformed my teaching strategies in response to student and peer feedback, I felt that it would be valuable to document them in a book to make them more generally available. I also became aware that despite the heady and continuing rise of creative writing courses in American, Canadian, Australian and British universities during the last twenty years, there was a dearth of books in the area designed for specific use by higher education students, especially ones which also incorporated experimental and systematic strategies.

The book draws heavily on my own work as a writer, and my own interest in technique, experimental writing and analytical approaches to the creative process. I have engaged with nearly all the exercises in this book at one time or another, and many of them are central to my own creative practice. But the processes of writing and teaching have been symbiotic for me: my writing informed my teaching at every point, but teaching in turn took my writing into new areas. The book is also informed by my hybrid and intermedia approach to writing. My previous career as a professional

musician, my collaborations with artists and musicians, and my love of film, the visual arts and music mean that I have constantly extended my writing beyond the purely literary, and have encouraged my students to do the same.

I would like to thank my previous colleagues in the School of English at the University of New South Wales, many of whom have contributed directly or indirectly to this book. In particular I would like to thank Anne Brewster, with whom I had the privilege to work closely and harmoniously for three years in the creative writing area. Her stimulation, advice and erudition have been immensely important, and she has given invaluable advice on drafts of this book. I am also indebted to Suzanne Eggins with whom for several years I jointly taught the first-year course ‘Factual and Creative Writing’: her precise and penetrating lectures on professional writing encouraged me to think through the importance of systematic approaches to creative writing. My warm thanks also to my current colleagues in the School of Creative Communication, University of Canberra, for providing a friendly, stimulating and innovative environment in which to complete this book, and particularly to Maureen Bettle for reading and commenting painstakingly on a draft of the manuscript.

I would like to thank my publisher Elizabeth Weiss for her excellent advice and enthusiastic support of this project; also my editor Karen Gee and the rest of the team at Allen & Unwin for all their cheerful assistance. I would also like to thank Laura Brown and Lisa McCarthy for helping me to contact ex-students; Kate Fagan for giving information on Lyn Hejinian’s work; Joy Wallace for her advice and encouragement; and Roger Dean for reading the manuscript and making numerous suggestions. I also want to express my gratitude to all those authors and students who generously gave me permission to quote from their work, and to the UNSW student union for allowing me to reproduce work by students published in the magazine *Unsweetened*. But most of all I would like to thank the huge numbers of students—both those who are represented here and those who are not—who have stimulated me, kept me on my toes and given me invaluable feedback. As I put this book together I was increasingly frustrated by the fact that I had not kept a good deal of the wonderful work which students had produced over the years, and also that I would not have enough space to reproduce most of the examples in my possession. But I remembered with the greatest pleasure the lectures and tutorials in which I had laboured with students over the challenges and joys of creative work. I am extremely thankful for this unique experience, and know that it is the main dynamic of this book.

Hazel Smith  
School of Creative Communication  
Sonic Communications Research Group  
University of Canberra



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

# Introduction

Creative writing courses are an integral and indispensable part of university education, because they interconnect intellectual and creative exploration. *The Writing Experiment* is designed for university students enrolled in creative writing courses and for their teachers. Its aims are to suggest systematic strategies for creative writing, and to theorise the process of writing by relating it to the literary and cultural concepts which students encounter on other university courses. The book is based on the premise that creative writing can be systematically and analytically approached, and that successful work does not arise only from talent or inspiration. The following chapters attempt to *demystify* this process, and question many of the popular assumptions about the activity of writing.

A distinctive aspect of this book is that it breaks down complex tasks into easy-to-manage stages. Writers are taken through these steps—which are usually invisible in a finished text—by means of detailed examples and exercises. *The Writing Experiment* is based, therefore, on incremental strategies which recuperate, at a conscious level, the less accessible or unconscious aspects of the writing process.

This book has relevance to any kind of writing—from poetry to detective fiction. However, the strategies are biased towards explorative, innovative methods. The book avoids circumscribed technical advice about preconceived forms and suggests, instead, open-ended strategies with diverse outcomes. By adopting these, writers will learn how to explore alternative modes of working and find their own direction(s). The main take-home message from this volume is that it is possible to *work out* ways to write, and that experimentation is fundamental to creativity.

Although readers are advised to engage with the strategies provided, once they have finished the book they should also be able to devise their own.

As part of its experimental emphasis, this title also relates writing to other media and interweaves the verbal, visual and the sonic. Writing in the contemporary era needs to be redefined as a very broad category, which includes audiovisual projects, performance works, multimedia and hypermedia works, not just written texts. These kinds of creative endeavours are included, and encouraged, in this book.

*The Writing Experiment* is suitable for beginner and advanced writers, and is applicable both to undergraduate and postgraduate students. The opening six chapters (Part I) are particularly important for beginners, but advanced writers are likely to find many of the strategies in them helpful, or distinct from ones they normally use. The following six chapters (Part II) are more advanced and theoretical, and build on the strategies suggested in the first half. The book includes many examples of student work to demonstrate that it is based not only in theories about writing, but in the practice of teaching and learning in the university environment.

Although designed primarily for higher education students, this text can also be used by the more general reader. Such readers may wish to focus mainly on the exercises. They can skip over some of the more theoretical concepts if they wish, or increase their understanding of them with complementary reading.

## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

The process of writing has traditionally been subject to extreme mystification. Secrecy has often been perpetuated by writers themselves, since published authors can be reluctant to reveal how they work—they may see this as giving away ‘trade secrets’—and are often inarticulate about their writing methods. Many writers probably do not really know how they arrive at their texts, and mental events which occur during the creative process may be difficult to remember or describe. In addition, writers have historically had an ideological investment in the mystification of the creative process because it sustained a myth which was appealing to the public: that of the genius who is divinely inspired and individually endowed. However, this myth can be crippling to aspirant writers who feel helpless if they do not seem to have special talent, and cannot immediately match the work of their published peers.

In fact, writing does not arise out of a vacuum: there is always a process involved. Creative writers, at all stages of their careers, need to ask themselves questions about this process and the role of the author.

Some of these questions often initially include:

1. Do I have to have special qualities to be a writer?
2. Are there any rules or regulations which I must abide by when I am writing?
3. Will my writing be better if based on my personal experience?
4. Can I write if I don't have any good ideas, or any ideas at all?

These questions are all highly significant ones which are central to this book, and I will discuss each of them in turn.

### **1. Do I have to have special qualities to be a writer?**

The popular belief is that writers have a special talent that is innate, that good writing is something that 'just happens', and that most aspects of the writing process are inaccessible both to the writer and to outsiders. However, this belief is fundamentally flawed, since talent partly arises out of the learning of particular skills, and awareness about the choices available in the process of writing. The main special qualities writers must have are perseverance, motivation, the willingness to search for methods which suit them, energy to push themselves out of their own comfort zones and avid reading habits. Failure to produce creative work is often due more to lack of stamina or insufficient commitment to the process, than a paucity of talent.

Self-awareness about the writing process is therefore crucial. Writers who develop this awareness will be able to intervene more effectively to develop their work or change direction. It is important to try a wide range of different techniques, since a writer who achieves average results with one technique may obtain excellent results with another.

### **2. Are there any rules I must abide by in writing?**

There are no rules and regulations for creative writing, and no blueprints for a good piece of writing. Anyone who is looking for a formula for exciting work will not find it, and writers who rely on formulae usually produce dull results. However, strategies and techniques can be learnt: these are different from rules in that they set writing in motion rather than delineating correct methods. They are explorative and dynamic, and demonstrate a variety of means for generating and structuring material.

This book promotes experimental strategies rather than rules and regulations. Most broadly, an experimental approach to writing means retaining an open-ended and open-minded attitude, and pursuing new, diverse modes of textual exploration. As a consequence, experimental texts

usually work against and beyond familiar literary codes and conventions. To write experimentally is to adopt a subversive and transgressive stance to the literary, and to break up generic and linguistic norms. This formal transgression is significant because it can be a means to rethink cultural mores: for example, to shake up ideas about sexual identity, class or race. Experimental texts, because they loosen linguistic and formal conventions, also have the advantage of being highly **polysemic**: that is, they suggest many different meanings and encourage conflicting interpretations. Such an approach to writing allows the exploration of political, psychological and philosophical ideas without reducing them to the level of dogma, description or propaganda.

At the same time experimental work can also develop its own codes and conventions over time, and become part of a ‘tradition of the new’—a term famously coined by American art critic Harold Rosenberg (1965). Some forms of experimental poetry and fiction have turned into recognisable ways of working with language and genre which subsequent writers consciously adopt. This paradox—that any mode of experimentation is initially an appeal to the new but can become conventional over time—is one that is negotiated throughout this book.

Many traditionally accepted ideas about writing have also been exploded by literary theory. For example, theory has undermined the idea that literature unproblematically reflects the world. Semiotics, stemming from the linguistic theories of Ferdinand Saussure, asserts that words have an arbitrary rather than a natural relationship with the things to which they refer. Words are signs which stand for objects, events or ideas, but have no necessary connection with them. Consequently language refers to the ‘real’ world, but also constructs, transforms and mediates it. Some types of literary text (particularly those which belong to the genre of realism) may be so powerful and ‘lifelike’ that we forget that they are artificial linguistic constructs, but this is illusory. We can challenge this illusion by exploring experimental forms of writing which do not present language as ‘natural’.

Finally the book suggests strategies which are experimental, but the outcomes can be of any type. It encourages you to be eclectic. It does not suggest sole identification with one type of writing or another, but mediation between them, and openness to all possibilities.

### **3. Will my writing be better if based on my personal experience?**

Many people are motivated to write because they want to speak about their own experiences, and many writers use autobiographical experience as material, either directly or indirectly. But writing does not have to be

based on personal experience, and frequently is not. To write is always to construct something, to create a fiction. There is a considerable difference between ‘real life’ and ‘text life’ though the two may be interconnected. Even where personal experience is used it is always mediated by language and sometimes transformed out of all recognition. Furthermore, it is arguable that success as a creative writer depends more on the ability to explore ideas and feelings through language, than on personal characteristics or experience. In fact, writing only autobiographically can be limiting, because it keeps us within the confines of our own particular world.

Many readers and writers automatically assume that a text is the expression of an author’s personality. However, critical theory has tended to question the idea of the text as direct personal expression. Roland Barthes’s essay, ‘The Death of the Author’ in *Image-Music-Text* (1977, pp. 142–8), asserts that texts are a result of what the authors have read rather than what they have experienced: the author’s subjectivity is always diffused and transformed through language. Important here is the concept of **intertextuality**: the idea that any text is composed of other texts. Language always bears the traces of former uses, other contexts and discourses. In this sense language is never entirely personal and individual, but always has a public, social and political aspect.

Another prevalent belief is that a writer has a particular voice and style, and that learning to write is a matter of finding that voice as if it were pre-existent. In fact a writer does not have one voice but several, and these contrasting voices may emerge in different texts, at different times, or sometimes in the same text. One of the objectives of this book is to help writers extend their range by trying new approaches. Experimentation of this kind is very important because it is easy to write only in the way that seems to come most easily, and which does not require any extension of skill or outlook. However, without new approaches, writers are usually only utilising a very narrow part of their creativity. They will soon reach a limit in their work, a point beyond which it is difficult to develop.

#### **4. Can I start to write if I don’t have any good ideas, or any ideas at all?**

It might seem that the only way to start writing is to have an idea to write about. Many would-be writers feel crippled because they think they do not have any good ideas: numerous aspirant writers have never written the great novel that they would like to write because they do not know how to begin. But in fact this does not have to be the case. Writing can start from an idea, but an equally valid way of approaching the activity is by playing with words on the page: as the words form patterns they suggest ideas.

Techniques of this kind are an important feature of this book. They can be a means of arriving at unusual ideas which might not arise by a more direct thematic approach.

At the same time you can stimulate your creativity by becoming aware of current intellectual debates and social issues, and participating in the world around you. Most interesting creative work is concerned with either psychological, political or philosophical issues, and in most cases the relationship between all three. Reading the newspaper, watching the television, surfing the Internet, and talking to friends—as well familiarising yourself with cultural theory and activity across the arts—can stimulate creative writing. In other words an active engagement with all aspects of the world around you should lead to a plethora of ideas for creative work.

## CREATIVE WRITING, EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

Creative writing used to be treated like the poor relation to literary studies within higher education. Literary texts were the prime object of attention, and students were given no opportunity to write such texts themselves. Even for the study of literature this was unfortunate, because it is possible to learn a great deal about literary texts by creating them. To understand the activity of writing is to appreciate more the way writers work, the choices they make and their use of language. Writing is often a means to becoming a more informed reader.

At the root of all the preceding questions are quite fundamental issues about writing, the role of the author, the way the writer engages with language, and the interface between real life and text life. These issues are explored in depth in literary theory in the work of such authors as Ferdinand Saussure, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Roman Jakobson and Julia Kristeva. This book makes a connection between the analytical ideas of some major literary theorists and the process of creative writing, and puts theory into practice. In this way it connects creative practice with a **poetics of writing**: that is, ways of analysing and theorising literature. The book also connects with many of the ideological and political issues at stake in the work of cultural theorists, such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan or Michel de Certeau, and behind them the towering figures of Marx and Freud who have influenced so much intellectual thinking in the twentieth and 21st centuries. It is these thinkers who will help you to explore the psychological (through psychoanalytic theory) and the political (through cultural theory). *The Writing Experiment* sometimes engages with the work of these theorists implicitly rather than explicitly.

The aim of the book is not to expound the work of particular theorists, or to elucidate theoretical concepts in depth. Rather it is to show ways in which theoretical understanding might be adapted to the process of writing, and to help you develop a poetics of writing which you can apply to your own work.

*The Writing Experiment* also relates creative writing to the study of literature in higher education. It draws examples from contemporary Australian, British, American, New Zealand and Canadian writing, and non-English speaking and indigenous cultures. Writing and reading cannot be separated, and your own creative endeavours will help you understand the work of published writers you are studying on other courses, while extensive reading will help you to improve your creative work. In addition, *The Writing Experiment* connects with performance and hypermedia studies, since it emphasises off-the-page, as much as on-the-page, writing, and includes a chapter on the way writing is changing in response to new technologies. Again, because this is a book about *doing* writing, it does not give detailed accounts of literary movements, or individual writers, which can be found elsewhere.

More generally, the ability to think creatively is a very important part of academic work, and can complement analytical thinking. Some of the strategies in this book can also be used in academic work to generate ideas and forge connections between them. In expository, as well as creative, writing, analytical and creative thinking are intertwined and have a symbiotic relationship.

## HOW TO USE THE WRITING EXPERIMENT

The book is divided into two sections. Part I, **Introductory strategies** consists of six chapters and explores basic approaches and techniques for writing. Readers are given the most help in this section, and the writing process is broken down into easy-to-manage and entertaining stages. Although these are introductory strategies, they can be used in the creation of sophisticated texts, and some challenging exercises are included which may be of equal interest and value to more advanced writers. Part II, **Advanced strategies**, also comprised of six chapters, explores more complex methods (or combinations of strategies learnt in the first section). It also includes background and historical information—particularly about the postmodern and experimental movements to which many of the exercises in the book relate. The book is written in a progressive and accumulative manner: an idea mentioned in passing in the first half is sometimes developed in much more detail, and theorised more extensively, in the

second half. The book will probably be most effective if read and used in order as each chapter builds on strategies and approaches of the previous chapter(s). However, some readers might want to scan the book and read sections that appeal to them, or seem particularly relevant, and some strategies in Part II can be introduced at an earlier stage if desired.

In Part I, Chapter 1 **Playing with language, running with referents** introduces two approaches which are fundamental to the book. They are language-based strategies which use words as a form of text generation, and referent-based strategies which enable writers to build texts on a particular subject, idea or theme. Chapter 2 **Genre as a moveable feast** stresses the flexibility and malleability of genre and its importance as a tool of representation. It shifts between the modes of realism, surrealism and satire, and also demonstrates how prose can be transformed into poetry. Chapter 3 **Working out with structures** focuses on the importance of structure and the notion of structuring principles, both formally and ideologically. It also contains a section on adapting cultural (non-literary) forms to literary texts. Chapter 4 **Writing as recycling** uses the concept of intertextuality to move through collage, found texts and the rewriting of classic texts. Chapter 5 **Narrative, narratology, power** experiments with narrative technique and theory. Through this process it suggests ways in which narration affects the ideological status and import of the narrative. Chapter 6 **Dialoguing** explores dialogue in prose, performance texts and poems. It includes realistic and non-realistic dialogue, dialogue as a form of communication and power struggle, polylogues and contemporary forms of dialogue. It also promotes collaboration as dialoguing.

In Part II, Chapter 7 **Postmodern f(r)ictions** focuses on aspects of the postmodern novel. It explores the subversion of plot and character, the rewriting of history, and the construction of new worlds. Chapter 8 **Postmodern poetry, avant-garde poetics** is in two parts: the first shows how the 'postmodern lyric' questions many of the premises of the traditional lyric; the second emphasises the importance of linguistic innovation in avant-garde poetry, and discusses its political and poetic objectives. It encourages readers to play with language in ways which overturn conventions of grammar, syntax, vocabulary and structure. Chapter 9 **The invert, the cross-dresser, the fictocritic** engages with postmodern reinventions and subversions of genre, including the synoptic novel, discontinuous prose, mixed-genre writing and fictocriticism. It also suggests the cultural consequences of such subversion. Chapter 10 **Tongues, talk and technologies** centres mainly on oral performance in a contemporary context. It includes strategies for speech-based and sonic poetry, and basic improvisatory techniques in performance. It also mobilises intermedia work, which combines text with image and sound.

Chapter 11 **New media travels** is dedicated to writing and new technologies. Readers become 'cyberwriters' who are initiated into the creative possibilities of hypertext, hypermedia, animation and codework. Chapter 12 **Mapping worlds, moving cities** introduces the concept of postmodern geography, and projects place as dynamic, multiplicitous and socially produced. It enters the city as a site of difference, and includes the walk poem and an exercise in time-space compression. The book ends with **The ongoing editor**, which questions the notion of editing as a necessarily discrete stage in the writing process, while suggesting that many of the approaches in the book can be applied as strategies to critique and polish work.

The exercises, which are the major focus of the book, are outlined in each chapter following the introduction. These exercises are quite broad, but detailed advice about how to approach them is given throughout the chapter where they are referenced again. Any new theoretical or technical terms which they contain are explicated as the chapter proceeds. In most cases the reader is taken through a number of stages in the creative process, and examples are given of published and student writing. Chapters 10 and 11 are supported by examples of performance and new media work which can be accessed from *The Writing Experiment* website at [www.routledge.com/9781741140156](http://www.routledge.com/9781741140156). The website should be used in conjunction with reading the relevant chapters and working on the exercises. In other places website addresses are sometimes given for the work of interesting performers or web artists. Such addresses are, of course, subject to change, but if they move they can usually be found again at their new location through a Google search in an Internet browser.

*The Writing Experiment* does not aim to cover all forms of writing or the creative process. It does not dwell a great deal on strategies which are thoroughly and effectively documented elsewhere, and can be used in conjunction with other stimulating books about writing, such as Lance Olsen's *Rebel Yell* (1999), John Singleton and Mary Luckhurst's edited volume *The Creative Writing Handbook* (1996) and Brenda Walker's edited volume *The Writer's Reader* (2002). However, *The Writing Experiment* does aim to inculcate a special way of thinking about writing which can be widely, even comprehensively, applied.

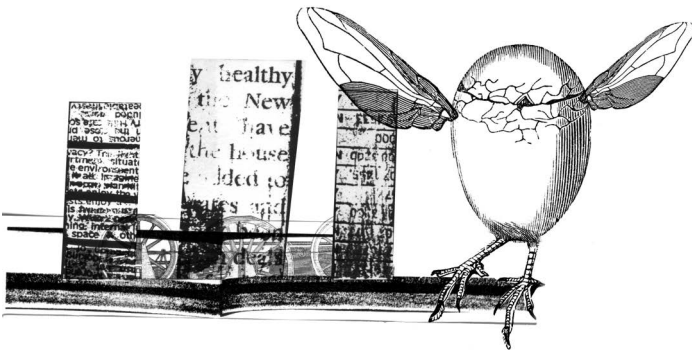
## REFERENCES

- Barthes, R. 1977, *Image-Music-Text*, Fontana, London.
- Olsen, L. 1999, *Rebel Yell: A Short Guide to Writing Fiction*, 2nd edn, Cambrian Publications, San Jose, California.

Rosenberg, H. 1965, *The Tradition of the New*, McGraw-Hill, New York.

Singleton, J. and Luckhurst, M. (eds.) 1996, *The Creative Writing Handbook: Techniques for New Writers*, Macmillan, London.

Walker, B. (ed.), 2002, *The Writer's Reader: A Guide to Writing Fiction and Poetry*, Halstead Press, Sydney.



# PART I

Introductory strategies



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>



## CHAPTER ONE

### Playing with language, running with referents

In the Introduction I emphasised that you do not have to have an idea to start writing, but can generate ideas by manipulating words. So this chapter initially encourages you to play with language, without necessarily having any particular idea or theme firmly in mind. When you play with language you are engaging with **language-based strategies**. The fundamental premise on which such strategies are based is that words suggest other words. Start with one word—any word—and it will lead you to many others, until you have formed a whole text. These methods invite you to explore the sounds and meanings of words as a way of finding ideas, rather than starting to write from a preconceived idea. If you soak up these approaches, you need never suffer from writer's block, because words will serve as automatic triggers for writing.

A very important idea in literary theory, on which language-based strategies are constructed, is that language creates the world rather than the other way round. Reality is not simply 'out there' independent of words and unchanged by them. Rather, the way we use language makes the world how it is. Playing with language allows us to construct our own world, and question some of the ways in which reality is normally perceived.

In talking about language-based strategies, I am distinguishing them from **referent-based strategies**. Referent-based strategies help you to 'run' with a particular subject, theme or idea you have in mind, and to build a text upon it. In the second half of this chapter we will take the mirror as a referent, and see how far we can run with it.

**Language-based** and **referent-based strategies** are the two most fundamental approaches to writing. All writing engages with one of them, and

most writing includes a combination. Here we explore them separately to show how each can be a powerful tool in your writing.

## exercises

1. Play with language and build up three short texts using the following techniques in turn:
  - a) word association
  - b) phrase manipulation
  - c) combining words from a word pool. You can add words such as 'is' or 'of' to combine the words into short phrases. Try to make your combinations unusual and striking.
2. Write a short creative text using one of the following referents: the mirror, the map or the machine.

## PLAYING WITH LANGUAGE

Language-based strategies encourage you to think in ways which are non-linear, and to make unconscious connections. They coax the associative modes of thinking which are pivotal to creative endeavour. These exercises are fun to do, they play games with language, but they can also produce challenging and unusual texts.

It is essential to have some language-based strategies at your disposal, and all good writers do. Language-based strategies tend to be very fundamental; if you start with language you are immediately concentrating on the medium in which you have to express yourself. As you play with words, new lines of thought may begin to reveal themselves. If you start with an idea it still has to be converted into language, and that is the difficult part—because you can have the most amazing idea in the world, but it is not always easy to find the right words to express it or fully convey its complexity.

Language-based strategies sharpen your sensitivity to language and help you to be discriminating, imaginative and unconventional in the way you use it. Inexperienced writers sometimes fall back on clichés like 'his heart throbbed' or 'her eyes were full of tears': these exercises will help you avoid them. So even if you end up writing in a way which is very different from the style induced by these exercises, you will find them a useful technical resource.

Language-based strategies exploit the relation between the **signifier** and the **signified**. According to the linguist, Ferdinand Saussure, the signifier is the material form of the word—its visual and aural dimension, the way

it looks and sounds—and the signified is the concept, the meaning. In normal conversation we tend to concentrate on the signified rather than the signifier, but your writing, particularly poetry, can be enhanced if you stress the signifier as much as the signified. (For more explanation and detail about Saussure's ideas see *Structuralism and Semiotics* (Hawkes 1977), *Saussure* (Culler 1976), *Critical Practice* (Belsey 2002) and *The Theory Toolbox* (Nealon & Giroux 2003).

These exercises encourage you to take account of the sounds of the words. In them sound is used as a generative process (a way of making one word suggest another). The objective of the exercises, however, is not to encourage you to write traditional rhymed verse. This type of writing now seems somewhat anachronistic because it was mainly predominant in pre-twentieth century poetry, though it is retained in some popular forms such as rap. Rather, playing with language helps you to explore other ways of using sound. And since rhyming verse is a technique with which you are probably already familiar, I suggest that you avoid it completely for the moment, in order to widen your scope and steer your creativity in other directions.

## WORD ASSOCIATION

The word association exercise (Exercise 1a) is a commonly used strategy, but my version of the exercise is different from others in the emphasis it puts on sound as well as sense. This exercise has many functions. First, it sensitises you to language, making you aware of its plasticity: the way language is like clay in your hands. Second, it can be used to develop strings of ideas. Writers often use word association to trigger thoughts on a particular topic, and it is a good way to dredge up unconscious connections through language. Third, it can result, with some care and manoeuvring, in an experimental text which is stimulating to read in itself. Such texts are often powerful because they are **polysemic**: that is, they have many different meanings and these fly out in several directions at once. In the following examples I break down the process of word association into several stages.

So let's take a word and see how we can spawn others from it by association. Our purpose here is to eventually produce a large block of words—half a page or more—combining different types of association. Examples of this kind of writing can be seen in Examples 1.6 to 1.10, but we will start with a breakdown of the process into preliminary strategies. You may want to try all these strategies in turn, either starting with the same word I have used or thinking up one of your own.

First, we will see what happens when we take one word and forge others from it which are similar to it in sound. In doing this I am playing with the signifier. In order to make it clear how all the words relate to that first word, I will repeat it each time.

**Example 1.1: Association by sound (playing with the signifier)**

|                 |                |
|-----------------|----------------|
| green ghost     | truth token    |
| green grate     | truth ruthless |
| green grist     | truth truck    |
| green guard     | truth rucksack |
| green grain     | truth roof     |
| green real      | truth suit     |
| green read      | truth soup     |
| green needle    | truth ute      |
| green scene     | truth time     |
| green knee      | truth tool     |
| green agreeable | truth tower    |
| green aggravate | truth uterus   |
| green oversee   |                |
| green industry  |                |

Here I have improvised pairs of words in which the second word always bears a sonic relationship to the first. To do so, I have employed strategies such as alliteration, assonance or half rhymes. The second word may be quite distant initially in meaning, but the meanings of the two words become related through sound. In this way connections between words can be produced by sound that would never occur by a primarily semantic route. As you can see, some of these combinations suggest unusual images, for example that truth is token or a soup.

Now let's see how I can produce word association by meaning:

**Example 1.2: Association by meaning (playing with the signified)**

|                     |                 |
|---------------------|-----------------|
| green blue          | truth falsehood |
| green sick          | truth real      |
| green grow          | truth fiction   |
| green inexperienced | truth language  |

Here I have generated each second word in the pair by meaning (even though a combination like 'truth falsehood' works by antithesis). And you

will notice how I am exploiting the different senses of the word 'green': the way we associate it with colour, or with naivety, or environmentalism.

Let's look now at two other strategies, dissociation and leapfrogging:

### **Example 1.3: Dissociation**

|                 |             |
|-----------------|-------------|
| green falsehood | truth nest  |
| green milk      | truth lamp  |
| green impulse   | truth petal |
| green puddle    | truth bird  |

In this example I have generated words largely by dissociation, by writing down a second word which seemed to have no immediate connection with the first. But it is surprising how once you place unrelated words side by side a connection between them can suddenly be forged. You can see that there is some mileage in the notion of 'a nest of truths', or 'a bird of truth', or a 'green impulse'.

### **Example 1.4: Leapfrogging**

greenpeace  
 peace talk  
 talkback  
 backdrop

In this group I am doing what I call leapfrogging: that is, making the end of one word the beginning of the next, and through this process building up new words.

So in all the above examples I am playing with the relationship between sound and sense, sometimes homing in more on the sound, sometimes more on the sense. I am also, in these examples, trying to divide the sound from the sense but, of course, the two often go hand in hand. If you say 'green grow' you arrive at a combination of words which is linked by sound, but also intimately connected by sense.

In the next example I have used a multisyllabic word. This gives more scope than a word of just one syllable. I have also employed a mixture of strategies here for generating the second word. Decide for yourself what strategies are at work here:

### **Example 1.5: Mixed strategies**

energy synergy  
 energy generate  
 energy genesis  
 energy emphasis  
 energy gene

energy dynamism  
 energy exercise  
 energy electricity  
 energy aerobics  
 energy pen  
 energy light

Let's go further now: instead of confining ourselves to the first word we will keep breeding new words all the time by different forms of association or dissociation. For example, if we start with the word 'truth,' instead of retreating back to it each time we can strike out with a whole stream of other words:

**Example 1.6: Moving away from the first word**

truth ruthless mucus mindplay playback falsehood hoodwink  
 wisecrack crackdown whitewash cycle circle syntax tax free  
 freedom phantom furtive fistful fightback backdown

You can see here how I have used a mixture of association, dissociation and leapfrogging to produce this passage. When you create such a text, you can keep referring back to the first word and use that as the basis for association. Or you can take each new word as the basis for association. Or you can go back to any previous word. One of the effects of the passage is to make truth, which we tend to think about as an absolute, a contested concept, since it is juxtaposed with such ideas as falsehood, hoodwink and whitewash. Moving away from the base word in this way is the mark of a fully-fledged word association.

You are now ready to try a word association of your own, combining these strategies. However, before you do so, it may be helpful to look at some examples of this approach in action by both students and published writers. The following example of word association, by student Elisabeth Crawford, is very effective because it draws on a wide range of different tactics to keep the surface of the language fresh, and doesn't overdo any particular approach. Here the author extends the technique by allowing some of the words to gather into phrases and familiar sayings, and then dissolve again into word association. The piece is also striking because playing with language allows Elisabeth to move through a range of disparate ideas which are nevertheless connected by their political relevance (including environmental concerns and queer politics). Her text therefore engages (but in a very flexible way) with current **ideology**—that is, beliefs about our society and the manipulation of those beliefs within the prevailing power structures and institutions:

**Example 1.7**

greengage plum apple eve mother earth ground zero green to  
 smithereens Granny Smith baby smith Adam Smith USA AID LDC  
 rainforest green revolution foreign debt IMF greenbacks green  
 fronts greenpeace greenhouse green room All the world's a stage a  
 part alone a mortgage green belt green lawn true blue lily white no  
 yellowbellied reds blacks greenies blue for boys pink for girls girlies  
 poofsters faggots burn 'em at the stake barby tinny junky HIV AIDS  
 AZT reprieve hope faith love God good evil right left forsaken my  
 god my god why? there is a green hill valley shadow of death life limb  
 bobby telly soapy sudsy squeaky clean lean mean machine sewing  
 reaping crop harvest paddock damn just give me a home among the  
 gum trees with lots of plum trees

'word association' (Crawford 1992)

In the next example, by student Michele Sweeney, word association conveys a short narrative, but one in which sensory impressions and feelings are more loosely connected, condensed and rapidly transforming than in a conventional narrative. Notice here how the impression of verbal speed created by the word strings (without the usual grammatical connectives) mimics the movement of travel, and the quick shifts of daydreaming and desire:

**Example 1.8**

Travel air bus cab plane to see sight see eyes sore feet walk climb  
 rock mountain view sunset night lights dance move around the  
 world bag port of call yell your name out and about what why am  
 I here? There you get souvenirs tacky shopping duty free ride  
 hitchhike and die in truck full of baggage empty inside hotel bed  
 sleep awake to coffee Paris romance fall in love again on a Greek isle  
 church roam around Spanish steps inside your mind wandering  
 where to go to nearest embassy rules out Tokyo sukiyaki eat not in  
 Bombay weave through crowds in London lost in a pickle yummy  
 cakes patisserie puff like a balloon hot air plane glide through my  
 dreams

'word association' (Sweeney 1993b)

It is important, however, to realise that this technique (or other closely related techniques) is also to be found in the work of published authors. The following extract is from a piece by Australian writer Ania Walwicz,

who was born in Poland and whose work shows considerable European influence. The text is not entirely driven by word association, but we can see that generating words through their connection in sound is an important element in the text—for example in the verbal string ‘person parson ardent emperor wilhelm potsdam jesa jesus’. Look at the way word association also keeps the piece open: the meaning does not close itself off. The prose poem continuously extends itself, weaving together childhood memories and fantasies, fairytale utopias and (seemingly more adult) erotic desires:

### Example 1.9

tips waves up big dipper fires wings  
 lift me up roll out entry for prince of shiny press into me furbelows  
 bows on tip toes cartwheels in lovely head lamp glower put on her  
 dots dot in dot dotter dot dottie lain in finer blades naps cherubs  
 i'm all wreathed in tulle tulle skirts fly up thighs tight wrap in tunnel  
 of love need a belt please a chord bang in big peaks up top plaits  
 comes along so fast to me on my lay press with holds but not against  
 me at all let flow engaged embraced in carriage of gold to weddings  
 of mine in ornate halls i'm bride bridely a merry mary she shouts in  
 van makes me happy prince aloise la belle cadix i'm on my way to  
 become somebody else relay to longest i'm fiancée of person  
 parson ardent emperor wilhelm potsdam jesa jesus in yearn  
 honeymoons caress one doesn't know who one has touch glory  
 goddess of shining gold i can change places with any move through  
 all orchid pearls arias top speed epic lushy lush ermines bares my  
 breasts swell forth in my stream of pours from her in heady  
 welcomen adored faithful prays and pardons my empress of roses  
 mayerling pulses gives me so much to walk on flames at top powers

From ‘wonderful’ (Walwicz 1989, p. 249)

The second example employs word association much less consistently and only as one element amongst many others. But it is intriguing to see how, in Example 1.10, Christine Brooke-Rose, one of Britain’s leading experimental novelists, incorporates word association into her idiosyncratic prose style. Interspersed with more formal sentence structure, it creates a highly evocative impression of an academic meditating on how she might lose her job because her expertise is considered redundant:

### Example 1.10

I shall soon be quite redundant at last despite of all, as redundant as you after queue and as totally predictable, information-content zero.

The programme-cuts will one by one proceed apace, which will entail laying off paying off with luck all the teachers of dead languages like literature philosophy history, for who will want to know about ancient passions divine royal middle class or working in words and phrases and structures that will continue to spark out inside the techne that will soon be silenced by the high technology?

From *Amalgamemnon* (Brooke-Rose 1994, p. 5)

## PHRASE MANIPULATION

Just as we can start to build a text from a word, we can also forge a piece of writing from a phrase. In Exercise 1b you are asked to generate a text through phrase manipulation. To do this you take a phrase as a starting point, and then make lots of other phrases from it. The initial phrase may have a verb in it, but it doesn't have to. The important point is that it is short and only has a few words in it.

A phrase contains more possibilities than a single word to grow and mutate. We can change the word order, substitute one word for another, subtract and add words. Let's have a look at these various strategies in turn.

### Phrase permutation

Here the position of the words in relation to each other is changed within the phrase or short sentence, usually radically transforming the sense. For example:

#### Example 1.11

The death of the author  
the author of death

Or:

#### Example 1.12

a rolling landscape  
the landscape rolls away

You can see how effective this technique is in the following poem by Australian poet Myron Lysenko. Particularly important is the twist in the last stanza:

**Example 1.13**

They stood  
under the big tree  
and talked slowly

Under the tree  
they stood  
and slowly talked big

The big tree  
stood slowly  
and under they talked

They stood big  
and slowly talked  
the tree under

The big tree talked  
and they slowly  
understood

'Under The Tree' (Lysenko 1998, p. 27)

**Substitution**

Another way of changing the phrase is by substituting one word for another. In the following example either the word 'death' or 'author' is replaced by another word:

**Example 1.14**

the death of the author  
the death of autumn  
the death of the daughter  
the death of the century  
deleting the author  
the author's orbit  
death authorised  
the demise of the orchestra

Most writers work with substitution as a way of improving on words which are linguistically weak. However I am attempting here not simply to find synonyms of the words, but to alter the sense of the phrase, to allow

language to lead the way. It's important when undertaking this kind of exercise not to stick with a preconceived meaning, but to allow the words themselves to offer new directions. Also do not expect the phrases to follow on from each other, or necessarily to make obvious sense. The idea of the exercise is to become absorbed in the process, not to arrive immediately at a finished product.

## Addition and subtraction

Words can also be added or subtracted from the phrase, taking it in a new direction:

### Example 1.15

reversing the death of the author  
 death in the fist of the author

In the next example, which works outwards from the more poetic phrase 'silence is a searchlight', a mixture of strategies is employed. The word searchlight is broken up as part of the linguistic play:

### Example 1.16: Mixed strategies

silence is a searchlight  
 the light searches out the silence  
 the search for silence lights the day  
 daylight certifies our secrets  
 bright light reverses time  
 the silence wilts  
 the silence ignites  
 silence is litmus  
 silence plucks out its own eyes  
 silence is an island  
 lying is an island  
 lying is an enigma  
 lying trumps up a licence

Once you have generated your phrases you can, if you wish, order them into a persuasive succession. You can arrange the text as poetry or prose. Let's again look at two student examples of phrase manipulation which do this. The first is by Michele Sweeney:

**Example 1.17**

Travel is exciting  
 Excitement in travel  
 is there exciting travel?  
 Travel is titillating  
 Travel is tickets  
 To travel is to trek  
 Excitement is over-rated  
 Excitement is a word

To travel is unkind  
 To travel is wicked  
 To travel is a gum nut  
 To travel is a lie  
 To travel is insular  
 Travellers are hair nets  
 Shiny is new  
 Diamonds are forever.

‘phrase manipulation’ (Sweeney 1993a)

Note how in the first stanza Michele works by permutation of the phrase and then substitution. She returns to the idea of excitement at the end of the first section, but drops the idea of travel. Notice also how the assertions become wilder as the poem progresses. They take several new turns, and end with the familiar saying ‘diamonds are forever’, which seems quite far removed from the original travel. However, the last two phrases do relate to the rest of the piece, because they raise the question of whether the excitement of travel brings enduring value, or simply stimulates the need for novelty.

The second piece, written by another student, Canadian Gabrielle Prendergast—now a professional film scriptwriter—uses phrase manipulation to build a poetic meditation on the subject of time. The second section permutes the first by substituting, adding and subtracting words. Sometimes, as in the last line, permutation occurs by simply moving the position of a full stop, thereby changing the way the words are grouped and consequently the sense:

**Example 1.18**

Time  
 bends backward. clocks explode. coiled springs into sets of wings.  
 flying falling to another lover another life. elements burn soak bury