



CREATIVE WRITING THROUGH SCIENTIFIC IDEAS: an accessible activity pack for schools, universities, writers.

AIMS

To provide a versatile, innovative pack of creative writing exercises using authentic science. To use these to guide, or at least initiate, writing at virtually any level, encouraging participants to experiment with language and surprise themselves with fresh and arresting connections developed within a scientific frame.

APPARATUS

Mostly, all you'll need is pen and paper. The exercises fit on single- or double-sided A4 sheets and (apart from Activity 4) serve as handouts for tutor-led student work. Of course, any adult writer can use them too.

Activity 1 Watch that Title! *Transform science objects into new writing. Quick, remarkable results.*

Activity 2 Microscopes and Telescopes. *Zoom in, zoom out: the writing benefits of precise observation.*

Activity 3 Filters. *With the aid of a scientific 'filter', put a fresh imaginative slant on everyday objects.*

Activity 4 Five Questions. *Interview an irresistible chunk of science, then let the element of chance make sparks fly.*

Activity 5 Making the most of Randomness. *Grow weird or wonderful 'cut-ups' using random numbers.*

Activity 6 Iteration and Evolution. *Watch a text evolve before your eyes... use this to learn about editing.*

METHOD

- (1) Even simple procedures can get wordy, especially when avoiding ambiguity and providing user-friendly examples. So, some sheets may seem a little full. Do familiarise yourself with the detail before starting.
- (2) These activities target a range of users, from children to mature writers, so are couched in fairly broad terms. Adults can probably access the sheets as they are; but schoolteachers and tutors will need to ensure that the content suits the age-group, group ability and specific teaching purpose at hand. Step-by-step guidance may be required at points of possible confusion or when progressing key outcomes.
- (3) Tutors/ teachers can use these sheets as prompts (instead of handouts) for a 'talk-them-through' delivery.
- (4) Some familiarity with basic scientific ideas (such as evolution) has been assumed, so you might want to begin by establishing what relevant scientific knowledge your group has. Discuss, for instance, what science is, how it relates to their lives, or what aspects of science excite, fascinate or mystify them. In a schools context, it might be fruitful to consult in advance, or even involve, the Science Department.
- (5) The ballpark timings at the head of each activity reflect the elasticity of approach: sheets can be adapted as quick warm-ups *or* more extended workshops. Decide for yourself how much to do, and to what depth. In terms of follow-up: this pack opens the dialogue between science and creative writing, but how the conversation develops subsequent to each exercise is left to you. Canvass participants for ideas.

OBSERVATIONS

I've used these activities in schools, sixth-form colleges, universities, adult workshops. I don't say exercises substitute for the spontaneous, self-guided writing act. Strong work does arise from them, but they're more about opening up *some* of the awareness literature needs – not quite the journey, but a gaining of certain provisions and bearings. That said, science or maths can kick-start writing as much as anything else does. Ideas excite ideas, metaphors spur metaphor. Science lacks neither, and carries a whiff of mystery too.

CONCLUSIONS

I once mentioned the Butterfly Effect at a reading. A woman stormed up. "If those wings cause a tornado in Florida, so what? We've a right to our butterflies and the Yanks will just have to lump it!" Harping on about that butterfly, when a trillion other inputs are as relevant, is bad science *and* bad metaphor. The black holes and time warps invading our screens are fun but likewise steeped in whimsy and misfired science. As a teacher exploring creative writing through *real* science, you'll have to contend with such misconceptions. You may also harbour concerns about how, and at what level, the science can be pitched, particularly if you feel insecure in the subject, or maths is involved. Certainly, straining to plug science into the humanities in a vague or arbitrary way is no better than promoting the stereotype of a lab-coated boffin blowing himself up.

Of course, in creative scenarios, science needn't be deployed rigorously or robotically; but if the connection lacks substance its heat will be short-lived. So, even where this pack uses a simple random process, it's still *genuine* science. Gentle and unthreatening, it keeps the creative outcomes as open as possible, helping all writers (including scientists) to exercise their imaginative, cross-disciplinary muscles. Whether you're a writer-teacher, writer-writer, scientist-writer, or some self-made hybrid like me, I hope you'll rediscover how we're all rooted in one language: the plural, connecting, co-extensive language of consciousness.