Intro to Creative Writing – Syllabus

Course Description: At the heart of every great story, we find a set of core elements—character, dialogue, plot, setting, and more. In this course, we'll walk through these elements, as well as the basic skills needed for them. Students will also learn how to write in the first and third person, the most commonly written voices, and will compose a script, short story, or novel chapter.

Course Outline:

> **Week One:** Characters (Who?)
> **Week Two:** Plot (What If?)
> **Week Three:** Setting (Where?)
> **Week Four:** Dialogue (How Do We Talk?)
> **Week Five:** Action (How Do We Act?)
> **Week Six:** Voice (How Do We Narrate?)
> **Week Seven:** Structure (Outlining & Freewriting)
> **Week Eight:** Forms (Scripts, Stories, & Novels)

Grading Information: All assignments will be graded using *The Creative Writer Rubric* and averaged to receive a final course grade.

The Lantern English Co.
The Creative Writer

Intro to Creative Writing
Lesson One: Characters (Who?)
SAMPLE LESSON

At the heart of every story, there is a person—someone who brings you along on the journey, who lets you take part in the adventure. That core person is surrounded by a cast of friends and foes, "good" and "bad," rivals and classmates and next-door-neighbors and swordsmen from the west. It is those brilliant, realistic, jump-off-the-page kinds of fictional people who bring a written world to life.

Think about your favorite story. Most likely, the characters are a big part of what makes it stick in your mind. Even if it has been years since you have read your favorite chapter book, you probably still remember all of the main characters' names as if they are old friends. You and I, when we read, we see these characters through highs and lows, laugh with them, cry with them, and become invested in their adventures. These are the experiences we want to share with our own readers.

In this lesson, we are going to learn the basics of a good character, as well as the types of characters that your story will (likely) possess. At the end, you will get a chance to create a character of your very own, ready to lead a new adventure. Have trouble creating characters from thin air? No problem! We will also learn about an easy formula for character creation.

THE BASICS –

Think over the books you have read. Are there any characters that really stand out to you? Ones that you related to or just loved to read about?

Thought of one? Wonderful! Now, why did you feel that way about this character?

Your experiences may be different, but we find that many of our favorite characters have traits that we admire, like courage or empathy. Others share a hobby or a goal with the reader. Still other characters are memorable simply because they felt *real,* even if we couldn't be less similar.

All of these traits are important in writing your own characters, too! As we think about what makes a character, we will consider these three ideas and what they mean.

1. Traits that you admire (A.K.A. Personality) –

Just like any of us, a character has a personality. Is she shy, outspoken, brave, friendly, courageous, uptight? Does he love to argue or prefer to stay quiet?

When working on creating a character, personality is often the first thing to think about. Sometimes, exploring different personality types and matching one to a character can be helpful! While you do not need to go that far if you do not want to, think about what sort of person you would like to write.

Having trouble deciding? That is okay! Start off with a single word. That's right, just one. For our example, we will use "friendly."

Once you have that word, think about people you know who exemplify that trait.

Do you have a friendly pal or a family member? What does that look like? Maybe that person loves parties, or talks really quickly, or always makes people feel welcome. Is there a downside to the person's friendliness? For example, maybe that person talks *too* much, tells really long stories, or is always worrying that people aren't having a good time. (Remember, this is an exercise! Don't get too critical with your loved ones—we all have strengths and weaknesses in our personalities.)

Using little details like those, expand your character's personality into a few more traits. Then, try putting it into the following formula:

- **"[Character name] is [personality trait], and you can tell because [a reason]. The only problem is that [a problem]."**

- For example, "Felicity is friendly, and you can tell because she is always welcoming to new people. The only problem is that she tells way too many jokes." There! We just created a character.

Just one caveat: **Don't copy exactly the traits of people you know.** Feel free to be inspired by them, but don't make your character a clone! Use your imagination to explore new traits, features, and hobbies for your character. If that is hard, practice by blending traits you recognize from multiple people. (For example – perhaps your cousin and aunt are both introverts, but your cousin likes to host big gatherings while your

aunt prefers small groups; on the other hand, your aunt aces phone calls, whereas your cousin *always* gets nervous. Using these traits, write an introverted character who hosts the perfect three-person dinner party and stammers on phone calls.)

2. Something we share (AKA hobbies & goals) –

A character should have likes and wants, whether it is apple pie, football, French architecture, South African literature, you name it. These little things will make your character more relatable to your reader. After all, we all have our interests and goals, and we all enjoy supporting our loved ones in theirs.

While you are picking hobbies and goals for your character, don't forget to ask "Why?" What makes this particular thing important to this particular person?

Remember to think about *how* important that thing is to the character, too. For example, how *much* does Felicity want that slice of pie? Is there something stopping her from getting it? What would make her give it up? (We will discuss this more when we talk about plot.)

Let's add another formula for hobbies and goals:

- **"[Character name] loves [thing] so much that s/he'd [do something]."**

- For example, "Felicity loves apple pie so much that she would drive three hours just to get a slice."

3. They felt real (AKA strengths & weaknesses) –

There are so many aspects to creating a character that feels "real." Unfortunately, we just don't have enough time to discuss them all in one week! (If you are interested in the future, we have another course called *Creating Living Characters* that covers character development in more detail.) However, two of the most important aspects are strengths and weaknesses.

While it might be tempting to write a character who is good at everything, think about it—none of us have every single strength. Maybe Ethel *seems* like she has every talent on the earth, from singing to fencing, but look closer, and you will see that she struggles with math or making new friends.

Actually, strengths and weaknesses have some similarities to personality. Friendliness was a strength of Felicity's, and telling too many jokes was a weakness. Strengths and weaknesses can be physical, too, like someone's remarkable lack of hand-eye coordination.

In general, we recommend thinking of both (1) some personal or *internal* strengths/weaknesses, which exist in your head or your personality (like friendliness, fear of heights, and confidence) and (2) some physical or *external* strengths/weaknesses, which exist in how you interact with the world (like hand-eye coordination or a broken arm).

If you pick a strength or weakness, internal or external, that you do not personally experience, be sure that you are respectful to those who do! For example, if I write about a character with a particular disease that I haven't faced, I want to do my research so I can be respectful to someone battling that disease.

Getting the idea? Let's try it out with a formula.

- **"[Character name] is superb at [strength], but has trouble because of [weakness]."**

- For example, "Felicity is superb at acting, but has trouble because of her stage fright."

Putting all of the formulas together, we have:

- **[Character name] is [personality trait], and you can tell because [a reason]. The only problem is that [a problem]. [Character name] loves [thing] so much that s/he'd [do something]. [Character name] is superb at [strength], but has trouble because of [weakness].**

Now that we have a basis for our new character, let's explore the different kinds of people who might populate our story.

TYPES OF CHARACTERS –

As you may know, the three basic types of characters are heroes (or protagonists), villains (or antagonists), and supporting characters. You can create any of those three using the formula we just invented.

- **THE HERO/PROTAGONIST** is the star of the story. The reader will spend the most time with her, and most of the events of the plot will happen to her. Whether she is saving the world or going to get that slice of apple pie, the story will follow her—potentially with detours to check in on another character.

- **THE VILLAIN/ANTAGONIST** is the one working against the hero. When creating an antagonist, ask yourself, "Why is he working against my hero? What makes him the 'bad guy' in this story?" Maybe he wants to take over the world . . . or maybe he just wants to eat that last slice of pie.

- **THE SUPPORTING CHARACTERS** are, well, everybody else. They are the hero's friends, the villain's minions, the mothers, fathers, grocery store owners, and hairdressers of your fictional world. You will not hear as much about them as you will the protagonist and the antagonist, but they make the story come to life. Nobody exists in complete isolation! We all interact with parents, schoolmates, delivery drivers, etc.

A story may have multiple heroes/protagonists, multiple villains/antagonists, or multiple supporting characters. If you are new to writing stories, I recommend keeping it simple with one protagonist and one antagonist, but feel free to add a handful more supporting characters.

Assignment 1: Creating a Character

Now that we have thought about how to make a character and what kinds of characters there are, it is time for you to develop one of your own.

For this assignment, **describe a character of your own creation in at least 2 full paragraphs (4+ sentences each).** Feel free to include whatever details interest you, but try to share something about personality, hobbies and/or goals, and strengths and weaknesses. If you would like, you can use the example below as a jumping-off point, but it is *not* mandatory.

Use the basic rules of writing (proper punctuation, capitalization, grammar, paragraphs, etc), and remember to **include your name and the date.** You may wish to review the document attached with this week's lesson in which we review three common writing mistakes.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS –

- **Having trouble?** If you have trouble creating a character, begin with the formula we created and go from there.
- **How should I write the assignment?** However you like, although we do prefer standard paragraph format. The character can do the describing (first-person; we will talk about that later) or you can do the describing (third-person).
- **What may I include?** Have fun with it! Tell me what she is good at, what he likes, what she looks like, et cetera. You may add little details, too, like this: "She once rode an elephant and ever since has been afraid of heights."
- **Do I have to use this character for the entire class?** You may choose to continue using your character throughout the course, or you may invent a new one in the future as needed.
- **Still have questions?** Feel free to email me!

ASSIGNMENT #1 EXAMPLE

Lydia Huth
September 4, 2013
301 words

No matter what, Felicity is always friendly. Sometimes people say to her that she tells too many jokes, but she always forgets and tells them anyway. Her favorite jokes are knock-knock jokes, since they're "retro." People have been telling knock-knock jokes forever, after all. "And they never get old," Felicity always says, although not many people agree with her. Her grandmother used to tell jokes, too, but not nearly as much as Felicity. There are various knock-knock jokes interspersed in Granny Smith's cookbook, which Felicity was given for her birthday.

When she was five years old, her grandma made her an apple pie, and ever since that has been her favorite sort of pie. She'd do anything for pie, even drive three hours—but she's only fourteen years old, so she can't drive yet. Her hair is even as golden as a well-baked crust! Her eyes are brown, though, which is more the color of a burnt crust—that isn't so pleasant to think about.

Felicity also loves the color green, because it reminds her of a crisp Granny Smith apple. (As it happens, her grandmother was called Granny Smith, although her last name was 'Jones.' That's one of Felicity's favorite stories about her grandmother, and she will tell it to anyone who is willing to listen. Sometimes she will tell it to people who aren't willing to listen, too . . .)

There aren't many things that Felicity dislikes. At the top of the list is over-baked pie crusts or

anything that is burnt. Felicity almost cries when she smells smoke coming out of any oven—especially one entrusted with a delicious apple pie. After that, there is the smell of crayons, which Felicity hasn't been able to stand since kindergarten. She always used to use them for writing in her journal, and smelled them so much that it got nauseating.