



Creative Writing

Creative writing can have a freer structure than an analytical essay or lab report. A story does not have a thesis—that is, it does not state an argument straight out—but it still has themes: central ideas or questions. It has structure and elements that the writer puts together to keep the reader involved and to get a point across. Here are a few places to start and points to keep in mind.

Characters

- **Who are the people you create?**

Often, they begin hazy, and you get to know them as you write. As you get to know them, let the reader know them too. Be specific. Maybe you begin with a tall, dark-haired woman. How many people do you know who are tall and dark? How are they different from one another?

- **Let us see the character.**

How do they move? How do they enter a room? What do they see first? Do first?

- **Character isn't how people look; it's how people think.**

People show you who they are by what they do. Ideally, you should be able to give a clear picture of a character without ever revealing what the character looks like. Kevin McIlvoy begins *Hyslop*:

“It’s one lucky eighty-seven year-old jackass who’s jailer is his confessor.”

The man speaking is a devout Catholic and a life-long thief. As the book begins, he’s teaching his jailer to waltz. Aside from his age, we know nothing about his appearance—but from this one line, we know quite a bit about the kind of character he is.

Point of View

- **Is one character telling the story directly? Or is the narrator telling a story about someone else?**

- **There are six main points of view:**

1. **First person:** The narrator tells their own story

“I was born twice.” – Jeffery Eugenides, *Middlesex*

2. **Second person:** The narrator speaks directly to the reader, describing the events as if they are happening to them.

“With your feet in the stirrups, you should feel quite comfortable for reading; having your feet up is the first condition for enjoying a read.” – Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*

3. **Second person imperative:** The speaker is giving instructions/orders to the reader. “Meet in expensive beige raincoats, on a pea-soupy night. Like a detective movie.” – Lorrie Moore, *How to be an Other Woman*
 4. **Third person close:** the narrator tells the story with only the knowledge/perspective of one character. “...as if that were the price he had paid for the privilege of looking out—eyes that allowed him to be seen.” –Russel Banks, *Affliction*
 5. **Third person omniscient:** The narrator knows everything. “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.” – Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*
 6. **Multiple narrators:** The narration is passed between characters, either in first person (e.g., *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf) or third person (*The Sweet Hereafter* by Russell Banks)
-

Conflict & Plot

- **What end is the character(s) trying to reach and what is stopping them from doing so?**
What tension and discord do the character’s actions in service of this goal with other characters? With themselves?
 - **How does the conflict move the narrative forward?**
How does it motivate the characters to act? What conversations/arguments between them does it inspire? And what events do those actions/interactions then precipitate? Introduce the conflict early on and let it build throughout. It should drive the forward momentum of your narrative toward its eventual climax, at which point a resolution (or beginning of a resolution) of the conflict should occur.
-

Time

- **A narrator can tell a story immediately as it happens, or soon afterward while the motions it raised are still fizzing in the air, or retrospectively long afterward.**

You can write in the **present tense**: “I am walking home from work, and I see an ambulance to pull up in front of my building.”

Or in the **past tense**: “She left me two years ago, on a Monday morning, as though she wanted to prove I was just another job she got tired of.”

You can also use **flashbacks**, glances to a time farther back than the time of the story: “He remembered the first time he had tried absinthe at a gritty cast-iron table in the square while his roommate kicked a way through the pigeons.”



If you switch from one time to another in a story, make the switch back into the new time clear—*the first time they had...*, *when she last...*, *the year before...*—and signal the switch back into the original time—*but now...*, *this time...*, *here in Atlanta...*

It can help to have a sight or sound or smell or even taste that triggers the memory that takes the narrator to the new time or recalls him to the first one.

- **A narrative doesn't have to be told in chronological order.**

Many authors make the choice to play around with time order in their narrative. Taking a non-chronological approach can serve many purposes—to more effectively build tension, to keep the reader in the dark about a certain piece of plot/information, etc. You can do this in a number of ways, including (but not limited to):

- **Shifting back and forth between parallel timelines**, one that occurs before or after the events of the other (e.g., real time and flashbacks, two characters' perspectives from different time periods, etc.)
- **Shifting back and forth between converging timelines**, one that moves forward from the beginning and one that moves backward from the chronological end to meet at a central moment/event that acts as the narrative's climax.
- **Telling the story in reverse**, starting the narrative at its chronological end and relaying the events of the story backwards.

If you choose to play with time, be sure that you are doing so intentionally and in a way that adds more to your story than it takes away

You should not make use of these approaches only for the sake of making your narrative more stylistic or shocking. A non-chronological narrative structure will undoubtedly cause some initial confusion/disorientation for your reader. Therefore, you have to make sure that you execute it in a way that creates a worthwhile pay-off.

Setting

- **Where does this story happen?**

It's important to give the reader a firm sense of where the characters are. This can mean indoors, in a room, a house, or an office building; or it can mean outdoors, on Commonwealth Ave. at a stop on the Green Line, just after a two-foot snowstorm. Are your characters in the country, the city, the suburbs? Where are they from? People can help to give a sense of the place, and so can sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures.

Specific Detail

- **The more the better. What characters see and feel tells us about the world they live in, and it tells us who they are.**



What might you think about a man who is wearing:

- An army jacket and a paint-stained baseball cap?
- A string tie and snakeskin boots?
- Black jeans, a black sweater and a watch on a chain?

Remember that what your characters feel affects what they see. A mother who has lost her son might focus on his picture or his school notebook, for instance, and notice nothing else in the room. What your characters feel can also affect how they see; how would a violently angry man see a sunset?

