

Chapter 1

You and Your Writing

In This Chapter

- Finding out why you want to write
 - Discovering what sort of writing is for you
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-

Creative writing starts with you – with your imagination, personality and interests. Only you know what you want to write about and how you like to work. Only you can choose to spend time working at your poetry or prose to help your words communicate to others.

Listen to yourself, not to others, and be prepared for surprises. This chapter encourages you to get started on a journey of discovery and to develop the attitude you need to carry your chosen task through to the end.

People often ask, can everyone write? Well, (almost) everyone can write, in the sense of creating a sentence and then stringing another after it, and so on. However, in contrast with other artistic skills, such as playing the violin or painting in oils, or crafts like pottery and carpentry, people sometimes fail to realise that writing for an audience – writing to communicate to others – also requires study, hard work and practice.

We all spend our lives telling stories, and in that sense everyone does indeed have a book in them – or, if not a whole book, then at least a tale or two – but that doesn't mean to say everyone is prepared to work at it in such a way that, as a piece of art, it communicates itself to other people. This book gives you all the tools you need to take yourself seriously as a writer and develop your craft as best you can.

Writing as Well as You Can

A world of difference exists between writing for yourself and writing for others. Both are perfectly valid, and can be approached in much the same way. Whether you're aiming to record your experiences for your children, to write for therapy or personal development, or to get a novel published, you want to write as well as you can. Doing so doesn't mean you need to think of yourself as a genius, but it does involve stretching yourself and learning as much about writing as you can.

When you start writing, don't think too much about whether your work will get published. After all, on passing your Grade Three violin exam, you may congratulate yourself on having got so far, but you wouldn't rush off a letter to the Wigmore Hall to ask if you could put on a solo recital. Considering other people's opinions of your writing – whether they like it, or will be interested in it or whether it will suit the current market – is death to true creativity.



J. R. R. Tolkien spent years writing a history of an imaginary country, inventing languages and mythology and timelines and maps, purely for himself. He never thought anyone else would be interested in it. When his publishers asked him for a sequel to *The Hobbit*, he used this material as the basis for *The Lord of the Rings*, a work that went on to become one of the bestselling novels of all time. Completely unexpectedly, something in the deep recesses of Tolkien's imagination connected with a vast number of people, all over the world. Yet at the time his publisher, Stanley Unwin, was so convinced the novel wouldn't sell that he cynically offered Tolkien a profit-sharing deal – because he believed no profits would accrue!



By digging deep into yourself and your imagination you'll find the thing that you really want to write about, that gives you the greatest pleasure and presents you with the greatest challenge – and paradoxically this subject is most likely to be the one that most interests others. So write for yourself and forget about what other people think until much, much later in the process.

Examining Why You Want to Write

Before you begin to write, ask yourself why you want to do so. If the reason is that you think writing's the easiest way for you to become rich and famous, a bit of a reality check is in order. Every year nearly a quarter of a million books are published in the UK alone. Admittedly this total includes everything from

computer manuals and academic tomes, through cookbooks and knitting manuals to celebrity memoirs and mainstream fiction, but it still represents a huge amount of competition.

In addition are all the *backlist titles* that have been in print for years and are still selling. Of these books, very few sell in sufficient numbers to make anyone much money. In the fiction market, about 25 titles make around 65 per cent of the income, leaving a lot of writers making very little money at all.

Of those books in print, very few are by writers who are household names. To achieve that degree of recognition, your book needs to be filmed, short-listed for the Man Booker Prize or become one of those rare runaway best-sellers that everybody dreams about but hardly ever happen.



Most writers earn very modest amounts, and the majority have other sources of income from work or supportive partners. So if money and fame are your main motivation to write, you're likely to be extremely disappointed.

Here, however, are some good reasons to write:

- ✓ Something is nagging away at you that you need to write down, an event from your life, perhaps, that has haunted or puzzled you.
- ✓ You keep hearing a character's voice in your head, and you want to find out who it is.
- ✓ A situation keeps coming to mind – *what if* this were to happen, how would I feel, what would I do? – and you want to explore it.
- ✓ You always loved writing stories at school and realise you'd like to feel that pleasure again.

These are all good reasons to write because the impulse is coming from you. This impulse isn't dependent on anything outside yourself that you can't control, such as the vagaries of editors or the whims of newspaper reviewers or prize judges or the economic situation at the time your book is published. Your desire to write is dependent only on your imagination, commitment and willingness to learn and develop your craft.

Various theories are propounded about why people write – as a wish-fulfilment fantasy, a form of therapy or a way of achieving immortality and living on after death – and any of these might apply to you. But, ultimately, *you want to write because you want to write*. And you have to want to. No one's putting a gun to your head and demanding that you produce your masterpiece. Enough written work already exists in the world, and people can probably do without

your contribution. But then, as the famous choreographer and dancer Martha Graham said:

‘There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is nor how valuable nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open.’

(Agnes de Mille, *Martha: The Life and Work of Martha Graham*)

Identifying the Kind of Writing You Want to Do

If you’re drawn to a particular form of expression, then go with it. Some people like to work in miniature, others love the grand gesture – temperament decides. If you love children and reading aloud to them, or have a story in mind for your own children or grandchildren, then go ahead. Many of the best children’s stories have started that way. Or if you love a grand canvas and big novels with sub-plots, twists and turns, go for that. Don’t let other people talk you out of your natural way of writing.



Thinking, ‘I really want to write poetry, but no market exists for it, so I’ll write a novel instead’, is pointless. You may turn out to be a very fine poet but a hopeless novelist.



If you don’t know what kind of writing you want to do, just try out various forms. Get stuck in and write whatever comes up. If you feel that you’d love to write but don’t have any ideas, then just open yourself up to people and situations around you. For example:

- ✓ **Sit in a café and watch the customers.** Invent a story about who they are, where they come from, why they’re there, who they’re thinking of, what they want.
- ✓ **Look at your daily paper.** Pick a small item from the News in Brief section; use it as the basis for a story.
- ✓ **Go into your garden.** Find a flower, tree or view and describe it. Turn the writing into a poem.
- ✓ **Find an old photograph.** What does it make you think of? What does it remind you of? Where does it take you in your imagination? Write down your thoughts.

As to the form your writing takes, no rule states that you can't write both prose and poetry – many writers do. Don't worry about length when you start; sometimes you start writing a short story and then discover after 20 pages that in fact the tale's so long and complex that it justifies a novel. Or, conversely, you may start what you think will be a novel and discover that it peters out after two or three chapters and doesn't have enough material to amount to more than a short story.

Don't worry too much about your audience either; you may start writing for young children and then find your material is actually adult fantasy. None of these details – length, form or audience – matter. Just write, and let the material take you where it will. You can always go back and change elements later.

Discovering Your Own Specific Talent

Most of us have a particular talent for something – and the same applies to writing. Some writers love plot; they enjoy working out time-lines, organising different strands of their story and weaving it all together. They plot their story on cards or use a computer program to map it out.

Other writers love description; looking at something and finding the best way to capture it in words, and using images to convey its essence to the reader. Some have an ear for dialogue, for how people speak, accents and dialects, and for the silences that lie between the words. Some writers have a wonderful visual sense; others an ear for the rhythm and sound of words.

When you start out writing you really may not know what you're good at. Trying something new is the only way to find out. Don't rely on the same techniques that worked for you when you were at school or when you were working as a copywriter; or that you use in letters or emails to friends. Stretch yourself. Try different ways of writing. You'll never discover that you're brilliant at writing dialogue if you never try it, or that the first-person voice gives you huge freedom, or that your story works much better if you set it in a different time or place. You'll never find out that you're a poet if you never try to write a poem.



As you write, keep these principles in mind:

- ✓ Trust yourself.
- ✓ Write what you want.
- ✓ Try out new ways of writing.
- ✓ Don't expect to write brilliantly straight away.
- ✓ Learn from other writers.

Practising Your Writing

Creative writing's a skill, and if you work at it, you'll improve – becoming a good writer is as simple as that. Writers also use a range of techniques, which you too can learn.

Part of the problem with writing is its solitary nature. When you're working on your own a strong possibility exists that you'll be reinventing the literary wheel. Through long hours and hard work you may stumble on the truths that other writers have discovered long before you. By talking to other writers, reading books and perhaps going to creative writing courses, you can save yourself a lot of time and trouble.

Putting in the hours

No substitute exists for finding time to write. Whether playing the violin, excelling at tennis or developing computer software, all the outstandingly talented people put in a great many more hours than their less successful peers.



You have to really want to write. Writers become writers by writing, not by wanting to write, thinking about writing or planning to write!

Lots of practice makes perfect

Anders Ericsson studied violinists at the Berlin Academy of Music in the early 1990s. His study concluded that a violinist had to practise approximately 10,000 hours to become really good.

Strikingly, Ericsson and his colleagues couldn't find any violinists who were *naturals* – musicians who became outstanding performers without practising for the hours that others did. Nor could they find what are sometimes called *grinds* – people who practised harder and longer than everyone else and yet didn't

succeed. Every student who put in the hours played at a high level.

Now, 10,000 hours of writing is an awful lot – if you wrote for, say, five hours a day, five days a week, 50 weeks a year, it would take you eight to nine years to put in that many hours.

In practice, of course, many successful writers have written less than this – and other writers may have written more without ever getting into print. However, without doubt, the more you write, the better you become at it.

Reading and re-reading

What teaches you most about writing is reading. Reading is so important because it demonstrates what you're trying to do; you unconsciously absorb the rules of narrative when you read, and how the author achieves certain effects. Some writers don't read because they say they're afraid of being influenced by other writers. In practice, you're more likely to find that you've inadvertently done what someone else has if you aren't aware of others' work.

If you're attempting to be a writer, try reading more slowly – reading with more attention. When you come to a passage where you can actually smell the cabbage soup on the stairs, where time seems to have slowed right down and your heart is beating extra fast, stop and look back; try to figure out how the author achieved this feat. You are, after all, just reading words on a page. If a character walks into a room and you can see the whole scene before you like a photograph, or if you feel you know a character inside out, how she thinks and behaves – again, stop and look back. Look at the words the writer used, what he did to convey this sense of reality. Or if you read a poem and find that you're crying or suddenly feel happy, or realise that you're seeing something in a new way – again, re-read the poem to see why this has happened.



Re-read a short story or novel that you've read before; not so long ago that you've forgotten it or so recently that you remember it in great detail. Choose a book that you remember in outline, and in particular how it ends.

When you first read a book you often gulp it straight down just to find out what happens; the second time you don't do that because you already know. Already knowing what's going to happen can help you to see how the writer prepared for it, how she slipped in hints or how he concealed something important to keep you guessing. Re-reading in this way really helps you learn how a narrative works.



Read, read and read! Whether you choose newspaper articles, magazines, advertising slogans on the back of cereal packets, classic novels or contemporary potboilers, fact books or letters and journals, read widely – and think about what you're reading and the effect the words you read have on you.

Overcoming Obstacles

When you sit down to write, you often find that a whole host of things distract you. First, you become aware of all the chattering that goes on in your head, and the long lists of things to do that you feel you should do before

you can justify the time spent on writing. Second, you may become uncomfortably aware of being alone, of having to manage without any help or input from anyone else. Third, you may suddenly discover that when you finally get the chance to write, you don't know what to say or you can't put it into words.

Everyone experiences these obstacles, so in this section I look at them in a bit more depth.

Silencing your inner critic

Many people say that when they first start writing they're convinced that what they write is rubbish. A voice in their heads tells them their work is useless and nobody will read it.

If all the students I've taught in my writing courses had given me just one penny for every time they said their work was rubbish, I'd be a wealthy woman.

Your inner critic torments you with thoughts like:

- ✓ You're not a real writer, you're just playing at it.
- ✓ You haven't got any talent.
- ✓ Why bother starting when you'll never finish?
- ✓ You should be doing something better with your time.
- ✓ Writing is self-indulgent and selfish.
- ✓ This will never get published, so what's the point?

Parents, teachers, friends or colleagues who've told you 'you could've done better' or 'this isn't good enough' over the years are part of the problem. You've probably experienced an education system obsessed with results and tests, where every piece of work was marked and graded. As a result, you now compare everything you write with the work of others and assess it in terms of a range of A* to D-.



One of the flaws of this approach is that grading a creative piece of work is almost impossible. Consider the Impressionist artists who were turned down by the Paris Salon in favour of far more conventional artists of the day. Those artists are now forgotten, while Manet and the rest are recognised as geniuses. Obviously not every piece of rejected writing is a work of genius – far from it. However, judging creative work effectively, especially something innovative and new, isn't easy.

Most writers, no matter how acclaimed, will tell you that the critical voice never goes away. Even prize-winning, many-times-published writers find the same voice nagging at them when they're writing. Being aware of the voice isn't a bad thing, though; if you're aware of it, you can deal with it.



Good methods for silencing your inner critic include:

- ✔ Just tell the voice to shut up and go away – out loud if it helps!
- ✔ Use a meditation technique – when the voice comes into your head, just say to yourself 'that voice', and put the thought aside. The voice will return over and over again, but don't get upset, don't beat yourself up, just gently put it aside and get on with what you're doing.
- ✔ Try to counter negative thoughts with positive ones. Talk to people who are supportive and encouraging. If your friends or family suggest that you're wasting your time or that you'll never get published, just don't talk to them about your writing. Talk to people who know what writing involves and can help you along the way.
- ✔ Give your inner critic a name. Call it something stupid or a name you don't like. Think of it as a boring, tedious figure you might meet at a party. Then get rid of it.
- ✔ Just get on with the writing. Decide that you can deal with the voice later.

Thinking creatively

Being led to believe at school that only one right answer exists for every question can create a creativity-blocking problem for writers. Remember putting your hand up in class and giving an answer that made everyone laugh? The 'right' answer was the one in the teacher's mind or in the textbook. But your answer wasn't necessarily wrong – maybe it was just more original and creative.



No artists or scientists ever came up with something new by doing what was expected of them. They all broke the rules and produced the 'wrong' answers according to the theories and expectations of the time.



Suspend logical thinking. Logic can kill the creative flow of new ideas. Of course, you do need to apply logical thinking in many situations, but writing isn't one of them. Think laterally, backwards and back to front – or don't think at all.

Letting the Ideas Come

Most great ideas don't come when you're sitting at your desk trying to feel inspired. Putting pressure on yourself and hammering away at something isn't conducive to coming up with a solution. You're concentrating so hard on the problem that your mind has no space for an answer to emerge.



Use these tips to help you come up with ideas:

- ✓ **Take time to relax.** Going for a walk, reading a book or relaxing in the bath may inspire a really great idea. Or you may suddenly find a solution to a problem blocking your writing. Alternating periods of working at your writing with relaxing activities is important.
- ✓ **Realise the importance of doing nothing.** Make some empty time in which to think.

Today people are so surrounded by noise and activity that they seldom get time to let their minds free-wheel. Even when on the bus or train, people use mobile phones, listen to music or read the paper. Try doing nothing but staring out of the window, watching the world go by. Or try sitting in the park for half an hour at lunchtime, observing the pigeons, trees and people. Or sit at home on your own with a cup of coffee for just 20 minutes and relax.
- ✓ **Remember to play.** Ideas can also be generated by play. If you can make your writing fun, you'll find dreaming up good ideas much easier. If you think of writing as a game to enjoy, rather than a task to be completed, you'll find yourself becoming more creative.
- ✓ **Ask 'What if?'** Many great innovators were successful because they asked 'What if?' and didn't stop with the first answer that suggested itself. 'What if?' is a great question for a writer. What if a man discovers the secret of extending life? What if someone tries to steal the recipe for the drug from him? What if a rival pharmaceutical company decides to have him killed?
- ✓ **Don't be afraid to make mistakes.** All creative activity involves making mistakes. People who don't make errors never achieve anything. Sometimes mistakes can ultimately be fortunate; you may not only learn from them, but also reinterpret them to write something much more original than what you'd originally planned.

Offering Tips for New Writers

Many new writers fall into common traps that can block their writing or make the process more difficult. Instead of finding out the hard way, through trial and error, take note of the tips in this section to avoid these pitfalls and get your writing life off to a good start.

Don't worry about publication

When you start out, worrying about whether anyone will like or dislike what you're writing is pointless. Don't fret about what genre your work fits into or what kind of sales it may achieve. And thinking about which publisher to send your piece to before you've even completed it really is a waste of time.

The minute you start thinking about sending your work to an editor, agent or publisher, you can feel that person sitting on your shoulder and criticising every word you write. You start altering it to squeeze it into narrow genres, make it the right length or ensure the material's less revealing of yourself.



Writing what you want and enjoying the process is what's important.

Write for yourself

When you start writing, at some point you'll ask yourself 'Who am I writing this for?' You may decide that you're writing a piece for your friends, ex-lover or dead grandfather. Maybe your novel's intended for posterity, for your children's grandchildren. Or you may desire to share your experiences, joys and pains with people your own age or in your current situation. Agents and publishers may be lurking at the back of your mind. Or possibly you're setting your sights on a huge global audience.

No matter who you think you're writing for, the mere fact of thinking of them probably hurts your writing. Thinking about who'll be reading what you've written is the fastest way to completely freeze up.

You are writing for yourself. Always bear in mind this quote from writer and critic Cyril Connolly:

Better to write for yourself and have no public, than to write for the public and have no self.

You always write best about your own private obsessions and things that interest you. Many well-known writers have said that they wrote their books because they were the kind they'd have liked to read themselves but couldn't find in bookshops or libraries. Follow this approach and write the kind of book you'd enjoy.

Draft, don't edit – yet!

Many beginner writers don't realise that writing is actually all about re-writing. When you begin, you're drafting, not producing a final script. *Drafting* is producing initial material that you then work with, refining, editing and polishing as you go. Drafting is a bit like producing clay, which you then shape into your pot or sculpture. Without the clay, you have nothing to work with and can't be creative. So when you begin, simply get some writing done, whatever it is, and no matter how relevant or irrelevant it seems to your final project. At the beginning stage of writing, you really don't want to think too much about what you're doing; you can always go back later. Just keep writing, and see where your drafting takes you. Don't be critical at this stage. (See Chapter 10 for more on rewriting and editing.)

Don't write too fast

Writing too quickly is one of the biggest mistakes many beginning writers make. They rush along, typing away at a rate of knots, with their eye on the end point – aiming to complete a whole novel, memoir or biography in a few weeks. Generally, this approach won't work. A few writers manage to write very quickly, but usually only when an idea has been incubating for a long time and they've been bursting to get it down on paper. For most writers, the process is much slower.

Writing quickly, in long bursts, means that you won't enjoy it. Your shoulders get stiff, your fingers feel like they're falling off, you dislike what you've written and you run out of steam.

You need to *slow down*. Advance in small steps. Relish the process of writing. Try writing longhand, enjoying the feel of the pen on the page. Try writing in a place that you like – perhaps in bed in the morning, in front of a roaring fire or in the garden. Think about the words you use and the way that you use them.

Initially writing brief pieces, short stories, vignettes or poems can be helpful. Polish these efforts and really make them work. Even if you want to embark on a long project, think in terms of breaking it down into short and manageable scenes or chapters. Then get writing.

Pace yourself

At first, writing little and often is important. Just get down some ideas, a few lines or phrases, a paragraph or two. Don't expect too much of yourself to begin with. Even if you aim to write a whole book, going slowly is still the best approach. Consider, even if you only write just one page a day, after 365 days you'll have 365 pages – enough to make a complete first draft. If you launch into a whole chapter or section right at the beginning, you may well find you can't sustain this writing pace and become discouraged or run out of steam.

You may feel that you can complete a short piece in a morning. But even a line or two of poetry, a phrase that works, a beautiful or surprising image, can be a real achievement.



At least to begin with, little and often works best. Aiming to write for ten or fifteen minutes every day and achieving it is better than setting yourself the target of writing for a whole morning or evening and then feeling that you've fallen short. As you get into the writing process, you'll find that you can keep at it for longer.



Set yourself targets, but keep them simple.

Put aside your ego

Forget your ego. If you're writing for fame and fortune, to get your own back on people you feel have slighted you or because you want to show off your skills, you're not likely to produce your best work.

Instead, put aside all thoughts of what will happen to your writing. Try moving forward humbly, taking small steps, advancing bit by bit, working hard and trying to learn as much as you can from the people who've gone before you. Enjoy the journey and do the very best that you can.

Playing with Words

The English language is one of the richest in the world, with a huge vocabulary to draw on. Apparently English contains over half a million words – and yet a normal working vocabulary uses only about 15,000 of them.

Most writers could benefit from expanding their vocabulary. You don't have to use long, obscure words when a more familiar one is appropriate,

though – doing so can just seem pretentious; but, as a writer, having more words at your disposal is useful. Words are your tools, and some you may not know will do the job far better than the ones you do.



If you're reading and come across a word you don't know the meaning of, *stop and look it up*. Too often you may think you sort of vaguely know what the word means and move on. You only realise you don't really when someone else asks you to define it.

As a writer, you should really love words. Collect good ones and store them away for future use.



Try these playing with words exercises. Write down a list of words that you really like and love the sound of. Construct sentences around them.

Get a dictionary and find a word you don't know. Read the definition. Write a couple of sentences using the new word.

Making verbs stronger

Using strong verbs is one of the quickest ways to invigorate your writing. You may be tempted to be lazy and use an obvious word such as 'went'. Think of stronger words, depending on *how* the person went: did she stroll, rush, limp, hobble, leap, ride, glide, shuffle?



Avoid using the passive voice. 'The man stroked the dog' is stronger than 'The dog was stroked by the man'.

Taking out adverbs and adjectives

An *adverb* is a part of speech used to provide more information about a verb (a word describing an action); for example, 'Mary sings *beautifully*' or 'The midwife waited *patiently* through the labour'. Deleting the adverbs is one of the best ways to strengthen the verbs you use because you have to make them work harder.

Taking out all the adjectives also makes your writing more punchy. An *adjective* describes a property of a noun; for example, 'The *hairy* dog stank'. Think about how you can communicate what you want to say without using lots of adjectives.

Writing in different tenses

When you start writing, you can be confused as to whether to write in the present or past tense. Try out both ways of telling a story or writing a poem.

Actually, the choice of tense is arbitrary because, in a narrative, the ‘past’ isn’t really past and the ‘present’ isn’t really present. Only the reader’s time, as she reads your work, is real.

Using the present tense gives an immediacy to a piece of writing; events seem to be happening now. The present tense can also be useful in a story in which you’re switching between two timeframes, for instance a ‘now’ in which the character is remembering and a ‘then’ in which the remembered event happened. The present tense is often ideal for poetry, but it can be hard to handle in a long narrative and may even seem clumsy and contrived.

Avoiding cliché

A *cliché* is a worn-out phrase, a figure of speech whose effectiveness has been lost through overuse and excessive familiarity. If you use clichés too often, your writing will seem dull and uninteresting.

However, don’t let the thought of using clichés get you down. Most writing uses them occasionally. Only when a text is littered with clichés are they problematic.

When you’re drafting, clichés can be a kind of shorthand to help you convey what you mean. You can replace them later with fresher images – if you can’t, try deleting the phrases entirely.

Doing writing exercises

When you’re learning to write, completing some *writing exercises* – short pieces to get you going and help you try out different ideas and techniques – is a great idea. Try the exercises in this book and see how you get on.

Attending a writing class can be helpful. Your tutor can give you lots of exercises to complete and you may have to read your work to the group, thus gaining useful feedback to help you develop your writing skills.

Writing exercises resemble playing scales to a musician. Often people say they hate practising scales, but I loved them when I first learned the violin.

I knew all the notes so all I had to do was try to make the warmest, fullest, loveliest sound I could. Writing exercises are the same. You know what you're meant to do, so you can concentrate on the way you do it without worrying about creating an idea or fitting it in to what you're already writing.

Exercise pieces don't need to be finished or highly polished. They're simply ways for you to explore techniques in your writing and help you develop more confidence in your craft.

Learning from imitation

New writers are often terribly afraid of *plagiarising* – of copying others' work. As a result they refuse to read good fiction because they don't want to be influenced by it.

This situation's a great pity. Many, many writers have been influenced by the rhythm and powerful language of the King James Bible. Many others have been influenced by reading the work of Shakespeare, Jane Austen and other great writers. You can learn a vast amount by imitating the techniques of great writers.

Oddly, people apply this principle to other art forms, but seldom to writing. Art students sit in galleries copying the works of the great artists into their sketchbooks. They do so to find out how to compose great pictures; how to handle perspective, use colour, create particular effects with pen or ink. Artists are encouraged to sketch, create scrapbooks and think about the influences on their work. And yet writers often expect themselves to come up with everything entirely out of their own heads.



Choose a book by a favourite author. Find a passage of description, dialogue or action. Now imitate it and apply it to your own characters and situation. Borrow phrases, use the same sentence structure and copy some of the words. See what writing a really great piece of prose feels like.

Although this exercise can initially seem really strange and difficult, it can really help free you up to imitate the rhythm, sound and feel of really good prose. Imitating someone else's work means you internalise it and make it feel your own. You don't have to use the same words, situations or images, but you can learn how to use vivid imagery in description and to write rhythmically, powerfully, plainly or colourfully.



Much literature is actually dependant on what has come before – so-called *intertextuality*. Some academics think that all writing is created in reference to earlier texts, whether their authors know it or not. Some famous works of literature that refer to others include:

- ✓ James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which, as the very title gives away, is based on Homer's classic work. *Ulysses* is awash with parody, pastiche, quotations from literature and allusions to many different works.
- ✓ John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, which is a retelling of the Genesis story, set in the Salinas Valley of Northern California.
- ✓ Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, which is a subversive retelling of *King Lear*, set in rural Iowa.

Films are also often based on the retelling of works of literature. *The Lion King* is a re-telling of *Hamlet*; the events in *Jesus of Montreal* closely parallel the New Testament passion story. The characters in *The Matrix* have symbolic names: Neo is an anagram of One, and he plays the role of a saviour figure, and the name Trinity has obvious Christian symbolism.

In addition, many books refer to or echo famous fictional incidents. In her highly successful Harry Potter series, J. K. Rowling draws on many different sources, such as Greek and Roman mythology and Christian symbolism.

Developing an ear for good prose

Both poetry and prose need to sound good when read aloud. Writing has a rhythm, which is all-important. Sometimes when you're writing you recognise that you need a two- rather than three-syllable word, or that a sentence should be longer, or that you need to stop just there. Read your work aloud and listen to it. You'll feel when your tongue trips up over words, a sentence is too long or short, a word's missing or it just sounds wrong.

Read poetry, even if you're not writing it. In poetry, the sounds of the words – the rhythm and rhyme – are crucial.

Writing comes in so many different styles that generalising about what makes a piece of good writing is impossible. Read a passage of fancy prose, for example the opening of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. Look at how he uses words and *alliteration* (words starting with the same initial letter or sound), mixes short and long sentences, and asks and answers questions.



Then read a calm and plain piece of writing, say from a child's book, but which still manages to be powerful. Compare how the two authors achieved the rhythm, structure and emotion in their writing.

To write like the great writers, try imitating them – purely as an exercise.

- ✓ Try writing a piece in the style of *Lolita* – something complex, original and rhythmic.
- ✓ Imitate a writer with a clear, unfussy style. Aim for utter simplicity.
- ✓ Take a poem and adapt it, copying the structure, rhythm and rhyme.