

Writing What Nobody Else Has Written

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Creative writing. Sounds so exciting, so daring. . . so frivolous. Does it really fit with no-frills, give-'em-the-facts crusty news reporting? Is there such a thing as noncreative writing?

The best definition of creativity I've come across wasn't even defining creativity. Physician Albert Szent-Gyorgyi wrote, "Discovery consists of seeing what everybody has seen and thinking what nobody has thought." Responding creatively is simply coming up with a new idea.

That's one definition. Members of the Writing Special Interest Group were surveyed to find out what they thought about creative writing and how it fits with their work. They had their own definitions of creativity.

Here's a sampling:

- Creative writing is taking that extra effort to write something other than a straight news story or straight how-to story to get the reader involved. You entertain the reader.
- It's stylistic flashiness . . . puffery used to add color or attractiveness to less serious subjects.
- It's putting sparkle into your presentation of facts; isolating intriguing angles.
- Creative writing is the art of writing that makes the interest of a story or report equal to the importance of the information being reported.
- It's the ability to make your writing come to life . . . of relating to the audience so that the story has meaning in their lives.
- It's new ways of presenting the same old stuff.
- Creative writing is close to fiction. It's not fact. It's not reporting. It means presenting human emotions through words to the reader.
- All writing is creative.

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Interpretations

These are just a few of the many interpretations of creative writing. Some sound more positive than others. Some sound downright hostile to the idea while others yearn to capture a little of its essence. No matter how they feel, the respondents all have an opinion.

The next question asks, what function or purpose does creative writing have in your work? Here's what some said:

- It's absolutely mandatory for my kind of work. It gets our stuff used. It affects people's lives and makes them change their ways.
- The more creative the approach, the more acceptable it is to the reader.
- When teaching writing, the creative aspect helps students think beyond the usual, the mundane, what's always been done before.
- Creative writing really communicates ideas to people in a way they remember.
- Creative writing inspires one to break away from the dull monotonous writing formula we are so used to in extension and experiment station work and to think as individuals rather than as drones.
- "A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down."
- Creative writing, and creative story tips, can help give our institutions favorable exposure to our publics.
- It allows for new interest in traditional extension programs by showing how they are relevant to modern lives.
- Creative writing makes us proud of our work.
- Creative writing gets my releases read and used by magazine editors, generating publicity and, more importantly, sales. It captures readers and it makes me strive to be a better writer.
- What does creative writing do in my work? Not much, except brighten my own prose. There had better be little creative writing in my stories, as I define it. The only place I may use it is in examples, and then it is identified as fictional.

Using Creative Writing

Some obviously feel more comfortable using creative writing in their work than others do. Certainly if we see creative writing as fiction, it has little place in news writing. But if we

see it as a bright, fresh approach to interest readers or listeners, we couldn't write without it.

I asked the writers what they would like to learn about creative writing. Fifty-eight percent want to learn how it can stimulate their own writing, 28 percent want to find out how to teach creative writing and 12 percent just want to know what it is.

Others added their own choices. One wrote, "I'd like to learn to write short stories and novels, but what has that got to do with what I do on the taxpayer's time?"

Here's what others would like to learn about creative writing: how to convince stodgy administrators of its value; how to enhance the forms we write, such as newsletters and brochures; and how to make a mandated dull story a bit more spicy. Someone simply wrote, "Can creative writing be taught?"

Freshen Up Copy

Question four asks about outlets the writers use to freshen up their writings. I was curious to find out if ACE writers handle stagnant stories or writer's block by ignoring it and plowing on to meet the deadline, or if they match a creative block with just as creative a response.

I expected to hear about jogging, cigarettes, and coffee and I did. However, several people pointedly excluded cigarettes from their list of helpful outlets. By far the most popular outlet was reading other good writers. And I do mean good writers.

People listed award-winning stories recognized by Pulitzer and Penney-Missouri, books like "On Writing Well" and "Freelance," and authors like Edward Abbey, Norman Mailer, James Kilpatrick, Andy Rooney, Lynn Ashby of the Houston Post, and Texas historian Jack McGuire.

One sent in her favorite reading list and wrote, "I'm an information junky and, consequently, a catholic reader. I read the science essayists: Stephen Jay Gould, Lewis Thomas, David Quammen, Freeman Dyson, Lorraine Larison Cudmore, Carl Sagan, Howard Ensign Evans, etc. I read my favorite authors over and over: Ardyth Kennelly, Paul deKruif, Ray Bradbury, Eudora Welty, E. B. White, Byrd Baylor. I write sonnets, limericks, letters. I eavesdrop. I observe life. I discuss topics with my friends, who have interesting opinions always."

The second most popular outlet behind reading was writing. We have some definite writerholics out there. In spite of con-

tinuous unrelenting deadlines day in and day out in the office, many go home and write some more. They write poetry, columns, letters, magazine articles, novels, correspondence courses, children's books, anecdotes, short stories, church and organizational newsletters, and limericks.

The third vote getter for writers who want to freshen their writing is the classroom, both as teacher and pupil. Some take poetry classes, some teach them. Some study under creative writing instructors, and some teach basic news writing and newsletter training.

And then they listed the ideas that work for them. They visit regularly with media people, do stand-up comedy, discuss a story with people totally unfamiliar with the subject, plagiarize, brainstorm with other creative people, join organizations, listen to the news, take assignments out of the regular beat, play with the computer, interview exciting and self-confident people, read an article out loud to the staff and ask for comments, free associate, think relaxing thoughts, draw pictures, do quilting, and take assignments in other countries.

One wrote her inspiration for creative writing was plain and simple: "I carefully consider the hazards of unemployment if I don't freshen it up."

Reviving Your Interest

The fifth question asks, if you had both the money and time to do anything to revive your interest in writing, what would you do? And if wishes came true, there would not be enough islands to go around. Many writers dream of a South Sea island with nothing but palm trees, soft beaches, gentle breezes . . . and a computer. Oh, and one writer wanted to bring along his editor.

Another popular choice was to work at a newspaper with an obnoxious editorial staff, as one writer put it. Many would sign up for workshops and seminars with the best instructors and toughest classmates. Some would just like to take a break, whether for a year, six months or go to a four-day work week. And what would they do with that break? Write, of course.

By far, the most popular choice would be travel. One yearned for a job exchange in another part of the country or a two-year assignment in England "to get reacquainted with our real native language." One wanted to take leisurely trips, journal in hand, and spend luxurious hours writing and think-

ing. A world tour or a cruise came up about as often as that far-away deserted island.

What else? Spend more time daydreaming, watch more sunsets, read the great novels, take courses in grammar and novel writing, learn more details about computers, learn to speak Spanish fluently, get to work on that book, do an internship at an ad agency, hire a writing coach, learn to fly, buy good graphics support and, always, read more.

Most thought about getting away from the office in some form or another, but their interpretations varied widely. One wrote, "I'd go to camp. Any camp, preferably in Palm Springs for massage, diet, and total pampering." Another wrote, "Move to a South Seas island and write full-time. I would also need a ruthless editor on the island. Hemingway said a good writer needs a good crap filter to filter out all the garbage we all write at times and my filter needs a finer mesh."

The creative writing survey was sent with two purposes: to find out what writers are thinking and to give them a chance to be creative with their answers. They didn't disappoint me.
