

**University of Chester
Faculty of Humanities
Department of English**

Style Guide

**for
English Literature and Creative Writing
Students**

Note for Blog Readers:

This is an abbreviated version of the English Department's Style Guide. New students get given complete copies in the first week of the autumn term. They can also access an electronic copy through each module's Moodle page.

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Introduction

This brief guide to writing technique is meant to help the student of English or Creative Writing, or both, negotiate a way through the different types of writing required on your courses. Whether you are studying literature or writing (and the two subjects are inextricably related) the subject of writing itself is at the centre of your life for the duration of your studies. Writing is not what happens after you have finished thinking: it is a mode of thought in itself, and some would say that it is the most important mode of them all. It does not merely express a pre-existing thought; it works to make that thought possible. If you cannot 'think' a Shakespeare play without writing it, nor can you 'think' an essay about English literature without writing it. In developing your writing technique, you are developing your ability to think through your subject. This is precisely why it is so important. Any serious writer will tell you that it is often the writing which generates the thought, rather than the other way around. And all good writing is re-writing, which is why the first draft should never be the last one.

The Importance of Writing

So why is writing so important, not just for you individually, but culturally too? Why is it worthy of so much study? Its introduction marks the most momentous change in our history; up to that point the human story is described in terms of pre-history, a time before written records existed. Afterwards, everything alters forever. Writing does not simply describe reality; it begins to transform it. We seem to have been doing it for around five thousand years. It is the evidence of writing itself which permits us to say that one of the earliest epics ever created was *Gilgamesh*, dating back to the twenty-sixth century BCE. What is this particular piece of ancient writing about? Living, dying, journeying to hell, confronting mortality, losing what we love best, then trying to come to terms with all this and more. Writing, whatever superficial changes it might have undergone in those intervening centuries, does not appear to have changed all that much, since so much of our contemporary fiction and poetry is still about exactly the same things.

Different Types of Writing

There is an ambiguity built into the word 'writing' ever since Gutenberg and his printing press. It now means a number of quite different things, in formal terms: it can mean that which is written longhand, in the manner of script; that which is printed, either by a computer or a printing press; and that which exists only in electronic form, perhaps in emails that are deleted as soon as they are delivered. We will be dealing here with certain specific forms of writing which are crucial to those academic courses centred on literature and writing. Always remember that writing is what psychologists call a cognitive activity. That is another way of saying that it is a way of negotiating with reality. Through the careful arrangement of words on the page, thought itself starts to come into being, so that it can find its own meaning and coherence.

The Rudiments of Writing

So let us try to look at the fundamentals of writing here, if only briefly, before we proceed to an examination of the specific forms you will be using. What is it that writing is actually made of, at the most rudimentary level? This is what writing is built from:

Vocabulary Syntax Punctuation

First come the words chosen (the vocabulary); then the order into which those words are put (the syntax), and finally the marks that indicate how those words are meant to be read. Punctuation indicates to the reading eye what modulation of speech indicates to the listener. All writing comes down to this on the page, even when that page is electronic. So when Ezra Pound advises us not to write phrases like ‘The misty lands of peace’ because the words appear to have no specific purchase on any reality, and because their vagueness amounts to no more than a form of writerly self-indulgence, the advice still holds good today. In the short chapters that follow, specific forms of writing will be examined: the essay, prose fiction, poetry, drama, and the dissertation. They all have at least one thing in common: ‘the misty lands of peace’ is always a bad line, the sort of writing that should be avoided, whatever genre you are working in. If it was a line in a poem it would be bad; if a line in prose fiction, then ditto; and if you are writing critically, then you have been presented with a perfect opportunity to point out why the line is as bad as it is and should have been avoided in the first place.

Punctuation

Punctuation is logical. It exists to economise on confusion. If it is approached logically, then it is easy to understand.

1. The Comma

The comma is the mildest of separating marks. It is weaker than the semicolon, the colon, or the full stop. It performs a number of functions.

a. To indicate a parenthetical clause. Certain sentences are very simple. If I say ‘The house stands on the hill’ then the statement is rudimentary enough not to require commas. I have a noun, ‘house’, and a main verb, ‘stands’, together with some further information: ‘on the hill’. I have made the house specific by using the definite article ‘the’; if I had used the indefinite article ‘a’, then the house could be one of many. But let us say that we wish to add more information to the sentence. One way of doing this is by inserting parenthetical clauses or phrases:

‘The house, which is red and usually empty, stands on the hill.’

My original sentence is still there: ‘The house stands on the hill.’ But I have now opened it up in the middle to give space for more information to be provided. I mark either side of this new divide with a comma. The commas surround the newly-inserted

clause. The easiest way to check if the usage is correct is to read the sentence without the information contained within the commas. If it is still grammatical, then the commas have been inserted at the right points.

b. To separate the words in a list of adjectives or adverbs:

‘She is quick, clever and beautiful.’

‘He ran speedily, effortlessly, gracefully.’

(Note: adjectives are words that modify a noun; adverbs are words that modify or extend a verb.)

c. To separate the addressee from the address directed to them. Let us imagine that the poet Catullus is writing to his notoriously tricky lover, Lesbia. If he writes, ‘Everything is hurting Lesbia,’ then we must assume that his beloved is suffering all the miseries of the damned. Given the up-and-down nature of their relationship, he might not be feeling too depressed about this. But if he is speaking to her, and trying to point out the amount of misery she is presently inflicting on him, then he needs to insert a comma before his beloved’s name:

‘Everything is hurting, Lesbia.’

2. The Hyphenated Adjective

If two words join together to form one adjective, the two words need to be hyphenated. For example:

‘The egg may be hard and boiled but if I want to describe a hard-boiled egg, then it needs to be hyphenated.’

‘I may be pressed very hard but if I am to be described as hard-pressed, then I need to be hyphenated.’

In both cases, two words have joined together to form one adjectival function – the join is registered with a hyphen.

3. The Apostrophe

Apostrophes are used in cases of omission or possession.

a. To indicate possession:

‘John has a coat. It is John’s coat.’

‘One last straw can break the camel’s back.’

‘The character’s opinions were optimistic.’

If we are writing about more than one camel and more than one character, the apostrophe should appear on the outside of the plural word:

‘The last straws to break the camels’ backs.’

‘The characters’ opinions were optimistic.’

b. To indicate omission: the apostrophe indicates the point at which we remove one or more letters to create a contracted construction. For example, ‘It is’ becomes ‘It’s’, and the apostrophe indicates the place at which the second ‘i’ has been omitted. ‘When is he coming?’ becomes ‘When’s he coming?’ Once again, the apostrophe marks the point at which a letter has been omitted.

4. ‘Its’ and ‘It’s’

This appears to be a source of ceaseless confusion. Applying the law stated above, the matter is simple. If I write ‘it’s’ then I am saying ‘it is’; if I write ‘its’ then I am using a possessive pronoun:

‘What is that dog doing with its lead?’

In formal academic essays, you should avoid contractions.

5. The Semicolon

The semicolon stands mid-way between a comma and a full stop. It has more strength than a comma, so it can be used to separate two independent clauses with main verbs. For example: ‘John ran down to the bus-stop. He jumped on the bus.’ These are two independent clauses with their own main verbs. If I do not want to join them together by means of a conjunction – for example ‘and’ or ‘then’ – I will need either to separate them into two separate sentences, or divide them by a semicolon:

‘John ran down to the bus-stop; he jumped on the bus.’

The other main use of the semicolon is to separate out the items in a long list.

‘Here are the items they packed: tent-pegs; groundsheets; thermos flasks; paraffin- lamps.’

6. The Colon

The colon indicates that what follows it exemplifies, justifies or fulfils the other half of the sentence that precedes it. For example:

‘These are the rewards of the scholar’s life, according to Samuel Johnson: toil, envy, want, the patron and the gaol.’

In this instance, the symmetry between the two halves connected and divided by the colon is so perfect that the units can be reversed:

‘Toil, envy, want, the patron and the gaol: these are the rewards of the scholar’s life, according to Samuel Johnson.’

A colon is the linguistic equivalent of the equals sign =. For example:

‘These are the skills you will need: orienteering, map-reading, tent-repairing.’

‘This is the way he always seemed to me: domineering, tiresome, endlessly irritable.’

Paragraphing

A paragraph represents a unit in a larger text. That unit can be thematic, tonal or sequential. A sensitive writer will normally sense when and where the small shift is required from one paragraph to the next. For example, in fiction, let us say someone has been speaking for seven or eight lines, and then asks the question, ‘But did I ever tell you about Samantha?’ That is probably the cue for a paragraph change, which is indicated by the following line being indented **by one tab stop** (use the ‘Tab’ key with two arrows on it):

‘Did I ever tell you about Samantha?’

‘Samantha was one of the strangest human beings I’ve ever encountered.’

In an essay, a slight thematic shift is normally the signal for a new paragraph:

‘Wordsworth explored this feeling for common language in all his ballads.

In *The Prelude*, however, we tend to find...’

The shift from discussing the ballads to discussing the much longer work, *The Prelude*, prompts a paragraph change.

Paragraphs should normally be neither too long nor too short, unless either length is being exploited for deliberate effect, like the thirty-page block of type which is Molly Bloom’s soliloquy at the end of *Ulysses*, or the short staccato paragraph which drills instantly into the reader’s mind, for example the opening paragraph of Ford Madox Ford’s *The Good Soldier*:

This is the saddest story I have ever heard.

‘This is the saddest story I have ever heard’ is the whole paragraph, and it is a wonderfully arresting opening. But if the book had been written entirely in single-line paragraphs, it would probably have become unreadable.

Paragraph-length should be varied, particularly in fiction, but most paragraphs should probably be of fairly regular size, at least two to a page.

Section Three: Writing and Presenting Prose Fiction

When you write fiction you create a world. It is a world made of words. Remember the three factors we listed earlier as the rudiments of writing in the Introduction: **vocabulary, syntax and punctuation**. We choose words, put them in a certain order, and then we indicate to the reading eye how those words are to be read, by the insertion of punctuation marks. Never forget the rudiments of writing, or your writing will be bad. Imagine a musician who becomes so carried away by the emotion of her piece that she starts playing all the wrong notes. The concert hall would soon be empty. Well, it is the same with writing. Our strengths, our gifts, our flair, must all demonstrate themselves through a fundamental grasp of language and an ability to handle it with conviction and panache. Whatever else we are doing we can never do less than that.

Language and Character

Fiction is the vivid employment of language in order to create character and narrative in prose. Frank Kermode, in speaking of American fiction, once used the phrase ‘the necessary omniscience of the novelist’. What he meant was that the fiction writer can never afford to be ignorant. If you are to convey the reality of certain people then you must know how they speak, how they move, what sort of gestures they make. This requires unceasing and intelligent observation. Good writing is always intelligent.

Let us take a few examples. You are writing about a Roman Catholic priest and you explain how that day he will be ‘taking confessions’. You have already lost credibility in your fiction because RC priests do not ‘take’ confessions; they ‘hear’ them. Similarly if you had a man in a pub talking about a football match and saying of a player that he ‘put himself in an off-side position’, you would have lost the reader’s trust once more, for the phrase employed would surely simply have been: ‘He was off-side.’ Convincing fiction is made up of compelling and credible detail. Such detail is acquired by scrupulous observation. The playwright Ben Jonson used to fill notebook after notebook with the minutiae of London life, the way the Londoners of his time dressed and spoke, the precise intonations of their utterances and curses. This carefully observed detail was then translated into his plays. This is why they still give us such a vivid sense of the reality of London four centuries ago.

The Exact Word

Our task is to use language with such skill and intelligence that the fictional narrative compels attention from beginning to end. This can only be achieved word by word and sentence by sentence. Here is an example. A contemporary novelist, in drafting the first line of one of his chapters, wrote the following sentence:

In the dawn’s shifting light, London constantly changes.

There is nothing technically wrong with this line. It is grammatical and intelligible. But it lacks excitement; the words lie flat on the page. What is missing is the stylistic bite that makes for really good prose. ‘Shifting light’ is a little close to cliché, and ‘London constantly changes’ is soft where it would be better to be hard. Fortunately, our novelist

realised where the problem lay before we ever came to see the words on the page. He changed the line to this one:

Fluked in a dawn light, London re-invents itself.

Why is this so much better? ‘Fluked’ is a strong word, and it conveys the notion of bringing about a happy effect without necessarily intending it. And ‘London re-invents itself’ uses personification to make the capital city an active agent. Whenever we use metaphor, personification, simile, or any other figure of speech, we must always do so consciously. Good writers cannot afford to operate on auto-pilot; such sleepiness is what produces careless prose.

Observational Precision

Close observation combined with skilful transcription into language are the indispensable foundations of good fictional prose. If you want to set a story in London’s square mile, the famous financial centre known as the City, then you must know something about the way stockbrokers and hedge-fund managers actually speak. They talk merrily of ‘pump-and-dump’ and ‘leverage’. You do not have to become one of these characters to write convincingly about them, but you do need to do some reading to find out how they actually speak and act. And the same is true when we write in genres. The best SF writers often have a strong interest in science. This makes them alert to scientific possibilities that can be employed in fiction. You want to write about someone who travels back in time? Then it would be helpful if you had found out about the recent talk of tachyons and superluminality. A tachyon is a theoretical particle (which is to say that no one has ever found one) and its unique quality would be that it could travel faster than the speed of light. Travelling faster than the speed of light is called superluminality, and since Einstein established that the speed of light is a constant throughout the universe, an ultimate limit everywhere, travelling faster than this means you are travelling backwards in time. It is specific detail of this sort that can make genre writing convincing.

The Notebook

So we have attention to the detail of observation marrying attention to the detail of language. Bring them together and you can begin to construct a convincing narrative. Those notebooks of Ben Jonson are a useful resource to employ yourself. Never let any detail pass you by, if it can be used in your writing. Make a note of every powerful or unusual word you might employ. The natural speakers of a language are often enormously inventive when they speak, and we as writers need to be at least as inventive ourselves. Listen to two people talking at a bus-stop:

‘He doesn’t like to have his little bubble pricked, that Philip, does he?’
‘If you were a little prick in a bubble, would you?’

Out of such moments of observation, Samuel Beckett fashioned some of his most successful dialogue.

Characterisation

The best way to characterise is not to tell but to show. We can do this in the opening words of any piece of writing. See how much information is conveyed in the few words that follow:

Jack woke up one morning and thought, ‘It’s time I got someone to write my autobiography.’

We know immediately that Jack is either a very important fellow, or imagines himself to be one. We need to find out which. The narrative will presumably inform us. See how much more effective this is than writing ‘Jack Johnson thought of himself as a very important figure in the community.’ Or take another example:

‘I wonder what happened to that gnome of mine,’ Patrick’s mother said sadly, staring out of the window. He knew precisely what had happened to that gnome of hers, but he wasn’t about to tell her.

We have been introduced to a relationship, by having the relationship act itself out in front of us. We know that there is a conflict here, perhaps of a vicious nature. We do not need to be told this: we are shown it instead.

Punctuating Direct Speech

Here are the normal conventions for punctuating direct speech.

Each new speaker is indicated by the opening of direct speech-marks and an indented paragraph:

‘How are you?’ Jerry asked.

If the speaker continues over more than one paragraph, then each indented paragraph will have an opening direct speech-mark, but there will be no closing speech-marks at the end of the preceding paragraph:

‘I don’t know how I’m going to cope. Honestly I don’t. Now that he’s gone and left me here alone, life is beginning to seem impossible. Did I ever tell you about him? Not sure I can really, but I’ll try anyway.
‘I met him first in 1999...’

If another person starts to speak, then the first person’s speech is closed at the end of the paragraph with a speech-mark; the next line is indented, and an opening speech-mark used to indicate the next speaker:

‘How are you?’ Jerry asked.
‘I don’t know how I’m going to cope.’

If the sentence ends, then the speech-marks go around it, as above. However, if we say ‘he says’, or whatever, in the middle of a sentence, then the sentence is broken with a

comma, and the closing of the speech-marks, before it opens again with the *lower-case* continuation of the speech:

‘I think,’ she said slowly, ‘that you are mistaken.’

There are other possibilities. Philip Roth, perhaps the greatest living prose stylist in English, does not like endless paragraph-breaks and tends to let his various speakers butt up against one another in the same paragraph:

‘Why go there?’ ‘Because I want to, that’s why.’ ‘Can’t you see...’

James Joyce famously disliked inverted commas, finding them distracting and ugly on the page. So he followed the French convention, which introduces speech with a dash:

- Why not use speech-marks?
- Because I don’t choose to.

Disregard of any convention is always the creative writer’s option, as long as a stylistic advantage is thereby gained. What one can never afford to do is to give the impression that one is not disregarding conventions for dramatic effect, but merely demonstrating ignorance of them.

Summary

Prose fiction presents us with believable characterisations placed in vivid settings. Like all good writing, it depends on choosing the right words, putting them in the right order, and punctuating the sentences intelligently. See Section Seven below to check on punctuation for creative writing.

How to Present Your Prose Fiction

This is an example of how your work should look when you have printed it out.

Title of Piece

She puts on a robe, walks to the kitchen, starts the coffee. He follows, buttoning his shirt, adjusting his tie. The familiar aroma surrounds them. She opens the cabinet, gets two cups, sets them on the counter, picks up a cantaloupe, presses its hard-mapped skin.

‘Would you pick up my dry cleaning today?’ he asks.

‘Won’t be ready ’til tomorrow.’ She gets out a knife and wonders why he can’t get his own damn shirts. ‘Don’t forget it’s trash day.’

He’s gone back to the bedroom for his wallet and keys.

She holds the cantaloupe in place, decides where to put the point of the blade. The knife-edge hesitates, punctures, then follows the curve of her hand.

The two halves split and rock on the counter. White seeds suspended in soft orange. She cups one side, walks to the trash, pushes her fingers into the flesh and drags. Seeds and pulp plop onto the side of the black bag. Juice splashes on white tiles. She leaves it for now. No children at home to get spoons for. No guests to be proper for.

Note:

- Font type and size (Times New Roman, 12)
- Line-spacing (double)
- Left and right margins justified
- Title (in bold, with key words capitalised)
- Indentation of new paragraphs (but not the first) and new speech
- Punctuation and capitalisation when presenting speech.

Section Four: Writing and Presenting Poetry

What is Poetry?

Poetry is the most concentrated of all forms of writing. At its best, it is also the most powerful. It is not necessarily easy, either to write or to read. It demands a great deal of intelligence from us, both as writers and readers, and all of that intelligence functions through language. If all good writers are always avid readers of dictionaries, poets have a tendency to be obsessive about them.

Poetry frequently dispenses with narrative and replaces it with structure. Rhythmic regularity and rhyme can provide a pattern in verse, where the story would normally hold the writing together in prose. Poetic language can often be incantatory, as in John Masefield's 'Cargoes':

Quinquereme of Nineveh from distant Ophir,
Rowing home to haven in sunny Palestine,
With a cargo of ivory,
And apes and peacocks,
Sandalwood, cedarwood, and sweet white wine.

Stately Spanish galleon coming from the Isthmus,
Dipping through the Tropics by the palm-green shores,
With a cargo of diamonds,
Emeralds, amethysts,
Topazes, and cinnamon, and gold moidores.

Dirty British coaster with a salt-caked smoke stack,
Butting through the Channel in the mad March days,
With a cargo of Tyne coal,
Road-rails, pig-lead,
Firewood, iron-ware, and cheap tin trays.

This is a very famous poem and justly so. In fifteen lines it carries us through thousands of years, and does so by highly evocative imagery achieved through frequently exotic vocabulary. The rhythm pounds on magnificently, like that dirty British coaster fighting against the waves in the last stanza. But see what is achieved with no narrative structure at all: we are presented with a contrast between the magnificent products of previous cultures and the dreary mass-produced ware of the British Empire.

Rhyme, Metre and Word-Order

Something important needs to be noted about the Masefield poem. Despite its powerful rhythm and potent rhymes, it never inverts the natural word-order of spoken English. Students will sometimes use very artificial phrases and inversions to maintain a rhythm or a rhyme. Try not to do that. Poetry is at its most compelling when it holds fast to the natural mode of speech while still achieving and maintaining whatever structures of rhythm or rhyme it has imposed on itself. This can be seen in the following poem written by Edward Thomas during the Great War.

Rain, midnight rain, nothing but the wild rain
On this bleak hut, and solitude, and me
Remembering again that I shall die
And neither hear the rain nor give it thanks
For washing me cleaner than I have been
Since I was born into this solitude.
Blessed are the dead that the rain rains upon:
But here I pray that none whom once I loved
Is dying tonight or lying still awake
Solitary, listening to the rain,
Either in pain or thus in sympathy
Helpless among the living and the dead,
Like a cold water among broken reeds,
Myriads of broken reeds all still and stiff,
Like me who have no love which this wild rain
Has not dissolved except the love of death,
If love it be towards what is perfect and
Cannot, the tempest tells me, disappoint.

No rhymes have been used here. But see how the repetition of the word 'rain' has the effect of the actual rain thrumming down upon the shed's roof. Its inescapability registers in its own repeated utterance. Such re-iteration feels almost liturgical, like a prayer, and yet the language is entirely natural, which is to say that once again it does not deviate from a naturally spoken grammatical construction, despite the repeated use of 'rain' six times in seven lines. Thomas's language allows for a combination of the intimately natural speaking voice, and the greatest intensity of inwardness and reflection. Nothing feels forced, and yet he discovers and creates a space of profound meditation, which centres the world for an instant. This momentary centering of reality, this encapsulation of the moment of being in a verbal form, is one definition of poetry we might usefully consider. It comes as near as we can to abolishing the distance between talking to oneself, philosophy and prayer. Note also the scrupulous honesty in his use of 'love'. The past tense of 'none whom once I loved' acknowledges that love ends. He even goes on to question his own phrase 'love of death': to love that which is perfect and 'cannot, the tempest tells me, disappoint' is maybe to wish to put oneself beyond all question, and perhaps it is to put oneself beyond 'love' too.

Metaphor, Simile and Other Figures of Speech

We should note the use of metaphor and simile in poetry, since these devices are essential to its composition. Metaphor is a form of radical pattern recognition, which brings two apparently dissimilar things together in one image. Simile simply says that the two things are alike, instead of saying that they are the same. As we have already seen, poetry offers something which prose does not, or not to anything like the same degree: formal arrangements of repeated patterns in rhythm, word arrangement, assonance and rhyme. The words in a line are shaped into a specific metre, lines structure themselves into shapes called stanzas. Words within those units echo one another to varying degrees in assonance, half-rhyme and rhyme. At times in lyric poetry these patterns offer a song-like structuring of the words, permitting a formal foregrounding of language and pattern which can replace narrative.

Metaphor is in fact an economy of language, since it permits the contraction of a large amount of information into the smallest of linguistic spaces. ‘Keels plough the waves’, so the ancient line informs us. What is the old metaphor doing? Translating the activities of men on land to their activities at sea; compressing two worlds into one. At the time the metaphor was made, both ploughs and keels would have been made of wood, and both would have been sunk at an angle beneath the surface on which the men stood (earth or boat); both would have left a trace from the incision (furrow or wake). And yet, above and beyond all this, if always still inside it, is the notion that men who should be at home ploughing their fields have instead set out upon the waves. They have, to use another poetic metaphor from Rudyard Kipling, ‘gone with the old grey widow-maker’.

Metaphor is the most radical form of pattern creation. As such it is peculiarly suited to poetry’s economy of expression, which uses pattern (stanzaic form, rhyme, assonance, iterative imagery) to focus and dramatize specific constellations of existence and perception. The more contracted poetry is, the more dynamic it is. Modern physics has discovered that the greatest energy contained in the smallest dimensions always represents the most potent mass. Something parallel holds with poetry.

Edward Thomas’s contracted image (which takes the form of a simile) is the comparison between all the men now engaged in war in a night of unceasing rain and the notion of countless (myriads) of reeds in cold water. The broken reeds evoke all the deaths, but do so more effectively than spelling the matter out. Once again we have showing rather than telling, this time in a poetic form.

An Important Note

The negative side of the employment of form in verse is this. The form starts to command the language, and holds sway over it to such a degree that the language becomes artificial. Word-orders are subverted to no purpose; rhymes become merely the mechanical fulfilment of a previous requirement; unnecessary words are used as fillers to maintain a metre. At this point we are not employing form for our own purpose so much as engaging in pastiche: we are letting the form employ us. Avoid it.

Remember

1. You are usually writing for intelligent, well-read readers. When you have written a poem, ask: ‘Is it interesting to an intelligent, well-read person?’
2. You must try to be original. Do not simply present predictable emotions in a predictable fashion.
3. You **MUST** avoid clichés and over-used phrases. Do not write: ‘White as snow’; ‘Black as night’; ‘Full of joy’; ‘Brimming with happiness’; ‘Aching with loneliness’; ‘Her heart ached’; ‘From the bottom of my soul’; ‘He was filled with fear’; ‘I’ll love you forever’. As Ezra Pound advised: ‘Make it new.’

4. You are free to write about mundane things or things you might think aren't appropriate for 'proper' poetry (since there is no such thing). One of E. E. Cummings's best poems is about an under-age prostitute; one of Heaney's best is about his father digging turf; one of Duffy's best is about tabloid journalists; one of Fanthorpe's best is about the necessity of WD40, insurance, bricks, etc.; one of Larkin's best opens: 'They fuck you up, your mum and dad.'

5. Don't be archaic or unnecessarily 'poetic'. Avoid: 'Her lashes were a-fluttering'; 'The damozel took his hand'; 'I lingered o'er the letter'; 'With heart and soul, I love you true.' Remember that you live in the twenty-first century. You are not Shakespeare, Wordsworth or Tennyson.

6. Rhyme can, if not done well, undermine seriousness (especially when it falls at the end of lines). Use rhyme inventively, or not at all.

How to Present Your Poetry

You will often be asked to submit drafts along with your completed poems. This is to show that you have worked on and revised your poetry. Drafts may be handwritten and/or typed. All annotations to drafts should always be handwritten. Final versions of poems should be presented thus:

The Dead and the Dying

The mouse had gone for the cheese and sprung the trap.
It was now struggling beneath the wire, back broken,
Its front legs splayed on the wood,
Its rear legs scraping the piss-stained hearth,
Its rump distended,
Its eyes glistening.

If the death had been quick...

But it wasn't.

It was a process. It was a dying.

= 9 lines

Note:

- Font type and size (Times New Roman, 12)
- Title in bold (not underlined or in inverted commas)
- Single-spaced lines
- Left justification (do not centre the text)
- Final line count at the end of the poem.

Do not submit work in a ring binder, cumbersome folder, or numerous plastic pockets.

Section Five: Writing and Presenting Drama

What is Drama?

We inherit the word *drama* from the Greeks. Their word meant doing or acting. All drama presents an action of some sort. It may be a grand one on a stage or a screen, involving many actors; or it may be a psychological one, involving only one person coming to understand the meaning of one life. Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* is the latter. It is a marvellous piece of theatre. Why? Because it dramatises a situation. In this case the situation is a lonely old man looking back on why he rejected love, and found a kind of strength in the rejection. This situation is dramatised through word and gesture. If we can always remind ourselves that this is the essence of the matter, then we might manage to write some decent drama.

So drama is always action of some sort, but therein lies another ambiguity we might ponder for a moment. To act something out is not to 'act' in the normal sense. It is to mime an action, to feign it; to present a mimesis. The distinction is easy enough to grasp. If I were not feigning the action in *Julius Caesar*, then the actor playing Caesar would soon be on his way to the morgue with his body full of knife wounds. But there is a further complication, which is that the word 'action' surely carries a sense of visible motion involving cause and effect. And yet some of the most potent drama, Hamlet's soliloquies for example, are not action in this sense at all, though they are most evidently drama. Once more the work of Samuel Beckett is instructive: *Waiting for Godot*, except for one or two moments of vaudevillian capering, is made up entirely of dialogue, and it is the drama of the language between Vladimir and Estragon which represents the core of the play's achievement.

Let us take a look at the sleepwalking scene in *Macbeth*, in an attempt to see what happens when we dramatises a situation.

This is from Act 5 Scene I:

Enter a Doctor of Physic and a Waiting-Gentlewoman

Doctor: I have two nights watched with you, but can perceive no truth in your report. When was it she last walked?

Gentlewoman: Since his majesty went into the field. I have seen her rise up from her bed, throw her nightgown upon her, unlock her closet, take forth paper, fold it, write upon't, read it, afterwards seal it, and again return to bed; yet all this while in a most fast sleep.

Doctor: A great perturbation in nature, to receive at once the benefit of sleep and do the effects of watching. In this slumbry agitation, besides her walking and other actual performances, what – at any time – have you heard her say?

Gentlewoman: That, sir, which I will not report after her.

Doctor: You may to me, and 'tis most meet you should.

Gentlewoman: Neither to you nor anyone, having no witness to confirm my speech.

Enter Lady Macbeth, with a taper

Lo you, here she comes. This is her very guise, and upon my life, fast asleep. Observe her; stand close.

They stand aside

Doctor: How came she by that light?

Gentlewoman: Why, it stood by her. She has light by her continually: 'tis her command.

Doctor: You see her eyes are open.

Gentlewoman: Ay, but their sense are shut.

Doctor: What is it she does now? Look how she rubs her hands.

Gentlewoman: It is an *accustomed* action with her to seem thus washing her hands: I have known her continue in this a quarter of an hour.

Lady Macbeth: Yet here's a spot.

Doctor: Hark, she speaks. I will set down what comes from her, to satisfy my remembrance the more strongly.

Lady Macbeth: Out, damned spot! Out, I say!- One: two: why then, 'tis time to do't. - Hell is murky. - Fie, my lord, fie, a soldier and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account?- Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?

Doctor: Do you mark that?

Lady Macbeth: The Thane of Fife had a wife: where is she now?-What, will these hands ne'er be clean?- No more o'that, my lord, no more o'that: you mar all with this starting.

Doctor: Go to, go to: you have known what you should not.

Gentlewoman: She has spoke what she should not, I am sure of that: heaven knows what she has known.

Lady Macbeth: Here's the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. O, O, O!

Doctor: What a sigh is there! The heart is sorely charged.

Gentlewoman: I would not have such a heart in my bosom for the dignity of the whole body.

Doctor: Well, well, well.

Gentlewoman: Pray God it be, sir.

Doctor: This disease is beyond my practice. Yet I have known those which have walked in their sleep who have died holily in their beds.

Lady Macbeth: Wash your hands, put on your nightgown, look not so pale. I tell you yet again, Banquo's buried; he cannot come out of his grave.

Doctor: Even so?

Lady Macbeth: To bed, to bed. There's knocking at the gate. Come, come, come, come, give me your hand. What's done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed.

Exit Lady Macbeth

Doctor: Will she go now to bed?

Gentlewoman: Directly.

Doctor: Foul whisp'rings are abroad. Unnatural deeds
Do breed unnatural troubles: infected minds
To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets.
More needs she the divine than the physician.
God. God forgive us all! Look after her:
Remove from her the means of all annoyance.
And still keep eyes upon her. So, goodnight.
My mind she has mated, and amazed my sight.
I think, but dare not speak.

Gentlewoman: Goodnight, good doctor.

Exeunt

This is as good as dramatic writing gets, but we might ask a question: what is actually being dramatised here? One answer might well be: distraction, the distraction of a person from herself, her alienation. It is worth remembering that an early word for the mind-doctor or psychologist was an alienist, which is to say one who tries to account for the way in which our own mind appears to have turned against us. This is what happens with Lady Macbeth. In her sleepwalking she utters that which in her conscious state she would never reveal. And it is in this state too that she admits guilt; something she had expressly told her husband they could be rapidly freed from: 'A little water clears us of this deed.'

The World Becomes a Stage

And yet much more is being dramatised. The impregnation of the present by the past, the hurly-burly that is memory and identity, breaks through in her recollections. But still she is commanding, even now. She was always imperious, remarkably so for a woman portrayed in the drama of the time. See how she commands the spot, which is really a

command to memory: ‘Out damned spot’ she says, as though the blood staining her guilty conscience were a disobedient servant. And she alternates speaking with herself to speaking to Macbeth: ‘you mar all with this starting.’ The word ‘starting’ here recapitulates the line of the play’s horrors all the way back to the first meeting with the weird sisters on the heath. When they acclaim Macbeth as not only Thane of Glamis, which he is, but also Thane of Cawdor and future King, which he is not, Banquo asks ‘Good Sir, why do you start, and seem to fear/ Things that do sound so fair?’ Coleridge remarked that such ‘starting’ is the sign of guilty thoughts. Macbeth may not be King, but he has considered the possibility. Subsequently he will also ‘start’ when he sees the ghost of Banquo, whom he has arranged to have murdered, and whose dreadful apparition is visible to no one else in the room but himself.

Acting Out the Truth

The dramatisation of distraction has to take very concrete forms on the stage to work as theatre. The device of employing the sleepwalking, to permit Lady Macbeth to utter to others what she has been so steely in keeping hidden from them previously, is a token of Shakespeare’s genius. How on the stage do we know that someone is telling us the truth? The usual technique is soliloquy: when all others are gone, we must suppose the solitary actor speaks the truth, for why would he not do so? When everyone else has departed, Hamlet engages in those melancholy self-rebukes which have become so famous. And when in *King Lear* Edmund stands alone on stage he treats us to the genuine essence of his philosophy:

Thou, nature, art my goddess: to thy law
My services are bound. Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines
Lag of a brother? Why bastard? Wherefore base?
When my dimensions are as well compact,
My mind as generous, and my shape as true,
As honest madam’s issue? Why brand they us
With base? With baseness? Bastardy? Base, base?
Who in the lusty stealth of nature take
More composition and fierce quality
Than doth within a dull, stale, tired bed,
Go to th’creating a whole tribe of fops
Got ’tween a sleep and wake? Well then,
Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land:
Our father’s love is to the bastard Edmund
As to th’legitimate – fine word, ‘legitimate’ –
Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed
And my invention thrive, Edmund the base
Shall to th’legitimate. I grow, I prosper:
Now, gods, stand up for bastards!

The absence of others on stage means that Edmund speaks his mind. His linking of the word bastard to base, if etymologically shaky, is surely sound both dynastically and emotionally. One second later, Gloucester enters, and Edmund proceeds to tell his

mighty untruths, as one to the manner born. The soliloquy is never an address to the audience; it is a device whereby the audience is permitted to overhear the real thoughts of a character on stage. So how might this be combined with other characters also overhearing the real thoughts of the character? By the device of sleepwalking, evidently, where the character speaks a truth out of the control of her own conscious mind. She has stepped unwittingly on to the stage of her own self-revelation.

‘The Thane of Fife had a wife: where is she now?’ She is dead of course, this being Macduff’s wife. Macbeth had her killed along with her children. And yet the line surely prompts a further question: ‘The Thane of Cawdor had a wife: where is she now?’, since she is not here either. Her alienation from herself, her distraction, have brought her to this pass of acting out her misery and terror in defiance of her own conscious wish to have done with the deeds of the past, so as to glory merely in the power the present affords. We have a parallel effect when Ophelia comes on stage in her madness: the audience both does and does not see her, since her self has in some way exited her own personality.

How Dramatisation Creates Character, and Vice Versa

Drama then enacts a reality rather than, in any crude sense, presenting ‘an action’. In *Waiting for Godot* Vladimir and Estragon wait for the arrival which has come to shape their life and thought. This arrival does not occur, or if it does – a possibility they briefly consider – then they have missed it. See how different a drama it would be if, keeping the same stage-set of the empty road, and the single tree, we began thus:

Vladimir (taking out a gun): I’m afraid I lied back there when I said we were both fighting on the same side.

Estragon: What are you going to do?

Vladimir: What do you think, my friend?

Immediately we seem to be in the middle of a Cold War drama of espionage and double-dealing. What is being dramatised is an entirely different subject. Or, as an alternative dramatisation of people with the same names, try this:

Vladimir: You remember that night in Petersburg...

Estragon: When I was called away suddenly...

Vladimir: ...leaving me and your wife to finish dinner alone...

Estragon: ...and pass the rest of the night in the hotel, without the distraction of my presence. Yes, I know, you slept together.

Vladimir: She told you?

Estragon: She didn’t have to tell me. That’s how we had planned the evening. The phone-call to our table came not from the office but from the reception desk, just as I had requested.

Vladimir: But why?

Estragon: I needed this job, that's why.

Once again, what is being dramatised is entirely different: personal betrayal, deception for purposes of gain. The question we ask now is: what is going to happen to this relationship? That is what the drama we are about to witness will make clear. This is the true 'action' of drama.

How to Present Your Scripts

Mastering the correct method of formatting and presenting a script is a necessary part of becoming a professional scriptwriter. If you ever hope to sell a script or a screenplay, it is vital that you prepare your document according to proper conventions. Reputable producers will only consider stories that follow the correct format.

Within dramatic writing, there are a range of different conventions, varying between TV, films, and stage. You will come across different methods in different plays. For the sake of consistency and clarity, however, you should carefully follow the guidelines given here.

Basic Rules:

Use A4 paper, single-sided only, with decent margins.

Use Times New Roman font, 12 point.

Title Page

You must include a title page that provides the following information:

- Module number (for example, EN4103)
- Name of assessment task (i.e.: Main assessment)
- The title of your script (in **BOLD CAPITALS**)
- A description that makes clear your script's intended medium (for example: 'a play for stage', or 'a film' or 'a radio play').

Scene Headings and Stage Directions

You must clearly define each new scene with a numbered heading, in **BOLD CAPITALS**.

You may also choose to divide your script into acts, if you want to break up your script even more decisively. Indicate act numbers before the scene number (eg: **ACT 2, SCENE 1**).

What is a new scene? 'A new scene is a change of time or place or both.'

The scene heading is all IN CAPITALS, and must contain the following basic information about time and location:

- Information about the location of the scene, beginning with ‘INT.’ and ‘EXT.’ (short for interior and exterior). If it’s both (i.e. a scene at a front door) this can be indicated by ‘INT/EXT’).
- The name of the location (eg: ‘A CLASSROOM’ or ‘FRED’S OFFICE’), unless you are deliberately aiming for a vague, uncertain location (eg: ‘A ROAD’).
- The time, which may be as simple as ‘DAY’ or ‘NIGHT’, or may be more detailed.
- You then need briefly to establish who is present and what they are doing. All stage directions (excluding the scene headings) should be given in *lower case italics*. If this is the first time you’ve used a particular location, you will also need briefly to describe it. Eg:

SCENE 6. INT. VICARAGE LECTURE THEATRE. DAY.

An old-fashioned, chapel-like lecture theatre. Ten attentive university students are seated on the bench seats, writing vigorously. ALICE, the lecturer, is pacing up and down in front of the whiteboard.

In the stage directions, give (brief) descriptions of characters when they first appear.

Always write stage directions in the present tense (even in a flashback scene the audience is always experiencing what is happening as *in the present*, so always write ‘Phillip is sitting at his desk’, rather than ‘Phillip was sitting at his desk’).

Dialogue

Character names as speech-indicators are in the centre of the page, in CAPITALS. Additional stage directions about how the dialogue is delivered can be given in brackets, beneath the character name (so also centred), in *italics* and using single spacing.

- Stage directions and dialogue begin at the left margin and use the whole width of the page. Remember, stage directions are *italicised*.
- Use double spacing between speeches, and between speeches and stage-directions, but within a speech, use single spacing.
- Character names are capitalised in stage directions and speech indicators, but not in dialogue.
- If a character has two or more speeches interrupted by a chunk of action, when they resume speaking it is useful to insert their name again, to make it clear who’s speaking.
- If a character’s voice is heard but they are not visible, their name should be followed by V.O. (short for ‘voice over’) or O.O.V. (‘out of vision’).

Some General Advice For Dramatic Writing

- Don’t fall into habit of underlining/italicising dialogue. Actors can resent being repeatedly told how to deliver their lines.

- In your stage directions, avoid letting your writing drift into descriptive prose. Only describe what the audience will be able to see and hear. For example, don't write: 'MARY remembers the moment, three years ago, when she and BERT first kissed, on that moonlit night in Atlanta, and she wonders where it all went wrong.' Instead, you can write just: 'MARY looks wistfully at BERT.'
- One uncertain aspect of writing for the screen is to what extent the writer should specify actual camera angles and shots. Try to avoid too much 'back-seat directing'. Give the writer and actors some freedom. If you do wish to specify exactly how to change from one scene to another, particularly if some kind of special effect is involved, indicate this in your stage directions, on a separate line between scenes. For example, you might specify *Cut to*, *Dissolve*, *Fade out* or *Fade to black* (for film or television), or *Sound fades out* (for radio).

Another difficult question is how much detail you should include, particularly in terms of stage directions and character descriptions. Bear in mind that the script is not a finished product, but should leave some room for interpretation by a director.

If your script goes into production, it will be serviced and interpreted by a whole team of people, including the director and designers. You may well feel you know exactly how it should look and sound and, whilst that may have been invaluable in the process of imagining the action, unless you are going to be the producer and/or director of the piece, learn to let go.