



This Norfolk Life

Writing Toolkit

Whether you are new to writing, or have written for some time, this toolkit is packed with top tips to help you tell your story.



This Norfolk Life has been produced by CSV Media and BBC Voices and made possible by a grant from the Arts Council. CSV Media is part of the national charity CSV and runs the BBC Radio Norfolk Action Desk. BBC Voices is a storytelling and media skills training Centre based at The Forum in Norwich.

What is a story?

We are all storytellers. We tell each other stories quite naturally as part of our daily life. Wherever you are you hear snippets of others' stories and fragments of their lives. We all experience the world and have something to say about it.

What makes a good story?

There are some common things that make a story good.

It holds your attention.

It is coherent.

It makes you think.

You feel you've gained something after reading it.

You want to read more...

In the space below, write down what you think makes a good story. Try to remember this when you are writing your own!

What's in a story?

Stories are made up of the different things listed below.

Structure

A building would fall without firm foundations. It is the same with stories. They need to be organised to make a good read.

Beginnings

The start of a story is a chance to grab the reader's attention. You could start by describing the location or a character, using dialogue or action.

Endings

Once you have taken your readers through your story, you need to end it. You don't have to tie up all the loose ends, but you do need to make the reader feel satisfied. Try and find the natural ending in your piece and ask "What would happen if I ended my story here?" Authors often suggest slicing off the last paragraph as it could leave you with a better place to end.

Plot

It's no good having a story with only a beginning and an ending. This is where plot comes in. To put it simply the plot is 'what happens' in a story and why they happen in the way they do. The plot draws the reader into the lives of the people in the story and helps us understand the choices they make.

Characters

In real life stories we have people. In fiction we have characters. You need to make a choice about what sort of character(s) you want, and what function they perform. Ask yourself:

***Do I want my reader to be sympathetic to this character?
Is my character convincing?
How do I make my character do what I want?***

Characterisation

'Characterisation' is all the things you do to build up the character you want. It is the process that transforms real life people into a 'character.' As the writer you must control your character - ask:

***Why did they do that?
Is that what they would say?
What is the reason for this?***

Dialogue

Dialogue is 'simulated conversation'. It helps bring characters and situations alive. In good dialogue, words you don't need are taken out, yet it still sounds like real conversation. If you use dialogue:

What purpose does this dialogue have in this story?
Does each voice suit each character?
Have I tried to convey too much information?
Is the character only a mouthpiece for my views?
What is the best way to use dialect?
Have I got rid of unnecessary phrases?
Have I supported my dialogue with action or thought?

Atmosphere

The atmosphere is the mood or feeling you want the reader to feel when reading the story. It can be sad, gloomy, cheery, suspenseful, etc. The author creates events and uses language and scenes to make an impression.

*"Write what you want to read.
The person you know best in this world is you.
Listen to yourself. If you are excited by what you are writing,
you have a much better chance
of putting that excitement over to a reader."*

Robin McKinley

Point of View

Stories can be written in the first, second or third person. The author has to decide who tells the story and how it is told. The tone and feel, and even the meaning, can change depending on who is telling the story.

First person means 'I' or 'we'. The narrator of the story will be a character in the story. We read about events from his or her point of view, and will tend to sympathise with and relate to his or her feelings.

Second person means 'you'. It's rare to find a story written in the second person but you will often find parts of adverts or leaflets addressed directly to you. It can be a very persuasive way of writing.

Third person means 'he', 'she', 'it' or 'they'. The narrator will usually be the writer and may give many different characters' viewpoints. Some stories focus mainly on one character, the hero, and we usually sympathise more with them.

First Steps

You want to write, but first you need something to write about.

So where can you get ideas?

Firstly, from your own life. Think about things you have seen, conversations you have overheard, stories you have been told and books that you have read. Pay attention to the world around you, you'll soon find more story ideas than you can possibly use.

Start with taking familiar events and expanding on them. Writers make sense of the world by taking what is normal and altering it until it becomes significant in some way. It doesn't have to be a life-shattering occasion, or a world shaking event. It just needs to be something you think makes a good story...

Write lists and brainstorm ideas. Keep a notebook and get your inspiration from anywhere you can – write down scraps of conversation heard in a queue, cut out newspaper articles that appeal, talk to people and take time out to just mull things over.

“Dreaming, after all, is a form of planning.”
Gloria Steinham

Write about things that intrigue you, things that make you ask questions.

Don't be afraid to make things up. Think of it like cooking. If you haven't got one ingredient, use another, if you are allergic to mushrooms, you can always use carrots – and by using carrots you may have invented a whole new dish!

Getting Started - some ideas to have a go with

Warm up by writing for one minute. Don't let your pen leave the page. If you don't know what to write, write 'I don't know what to write.' You will soon get bored of that, and the words will flow.

Write for 5 minutes starting with the words 'I remember'. If you get stuck, repeat the words and go from there.

Write a letter to yourself, starting 'Dear X, I think you are....' Vary this by writing the letter to yourself at various stages of your life i.e. - a letter to yourself as a six year old, or a letter to yourself on your first day at work.

Write a paragraph using - Where, When, Why and Who. Then use the 5 senses to describe what the character sees, smells, hears, tastes and feels.

Start a collection of postcards. Choose one and describe the setting – the colours, the mood. If there are no people in your postcard, invent a character that goes with the postcard.

Brainstorm an idea by writing it in the middle of a page – then draw lines around it and write down as many things as you can about that word/idea. Don't worry if you go off on a tangent – it may be the start of a different story!

Start up a list of topics and ideas and gather information about the ones that appeal to you most. Research your idea if necessary – using books, the library, the internet or asking friends and relatives.

Select the first line from a book or song and use it to begin your own piece. Try this with a last line – make it the last line for a story you write, or you use it as a first line and see what happens.

Top Tips

Read your work out loud, so you can hear if the story works. Watch out for dialogue that doesn't sound right, or a paragraph that doesn't quite gel.

Revise your work. Read it, leave it, then read it again. Don't be afraid to edit your work –sometimes less is more.

Ask yourself 'Would I want to read this story?'

Avoid clichés.

Try plotting out your story on 'post its' or bits of card. Organise your story by reshuffling the cards, or reorganising the post-its.

"I believe large numbers of people have at least some talent as writers and storytellers, and that those talents can be strengthened and sharpened."

Stephen King

Don't pad out a sentence. Simple and clear is often the best.

Try to avoid too much description – think about ways of showing your reader what you want to get across.

Test your work out on others and learn to take criticism, but in the end you need to be the best editor of your work.

Check each sentence is necessary and adds something to the piece.

Let your reader use their brain. If it's well written, you don't need to be explicit.

"Start from something that has happened to you and then exaggerate, fabricate, invent new outcomes."

Antony Lishak

Choose your title carefully – and don't be afraid to change it.

Enjoy the process as much as the end product.

Remember, stories are only recycled words. If something doesn't work in one piece – it may well fit in another.

Ask yourself is this a story only I can write?

Good luck and get writing!

Now that you have started writing....

...where do you go from here?

Courses:

If you've decided you like writing and want to discover more, you can call Adult Education on 01603 773552 or Creative Arts East's Literature Development Team who can send you an extensive Fact Sheet, 01603 774789, lisa.donofrio@cae.norfolk.gov.uk

Grammar and Spelling:

If you feel your grammar and spelling are holding you back look at **Learn Direct:** www.learndirect-advice.co.uk Free phone 0800 100 900 or contact your local Learning Shop.

Book Groups:

To be a great writer you need to read. Contact your local library about joining a book group, or start one of your own up. For a fact sheet call Creative Arts East's Literature Development Team or join a group online:

<http://www.edinburgh.gov.uk/Libraries/ReadingSphere/OnlineGroups/onlinegroups.html>

Writers Groups:

If you think you'd enjoy meeting other writers, how about joining a writers' group? Again, call Creative Arts East's Literature team for a list, or look at: www.nawg.co.uk Remember, you'll need to be prepared for people to critique your work – and you will need to give constructive criticism on theirs.

Get Reading:

Inspirational books include:

'Room to Write: Daily Invitations to a Writer's Life'
by Bonni Goldberg

'Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within'
by Natalie Goldberg

'The Creative Writing Coursebook: Forty Authors Share Advice and Exercises for Fiction and Poetry'
edited by Julia Bell

'Becoming a Writer'
by Dorothea Brande.

For general inspiration and advice go to:
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/getwriting/>

Resources used in writing this toolkit:
<http://teenwriting.com/>
<http://www.antonylishak.com/>
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english/>
<http://www.bloomington.in.us/~dory/creative/class9.html>

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The BBC Voices logo, which consists of the BBC logo followed by 'Voices' in a stylized font, all contained within a white rectangular box.