

Chapter 1

A Creative Writing, Weaving In

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impression -- trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old . . . Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness (212).

Virginia Woolf

As Woolf said, a writing piece of an individual is as much a product of his/her observation toward the subject of discussion as it is a result of his/her writing skill and writing habit. Nevertheless, it is often not easy for non-native English speakers to make writing in English become their everyday habit; it is even a challenge to survey all information available to them and engage in cultivating curious and creative mind. Indeed, the difficulty to move from a simple writing to a stunning and creative one is not an issue of developing a piece of writing which is grammatically correct, nor does it involve the sentence variety which merely multiplies the subjects, verbs, objects, complements, phrases, or even clauses in the writing.

Hence, teaching creativity in the context of writing is to challenge the student's habits of work so as to prevent the student from repeating a familiar pathway into their writing and motivate them to expend their additional creative effort. This chapter then covers three fundamental approaches to help students begin to visualize their memory, explore it and present their observation with vivid, concrete imagery. In the meantime,

students are usually required to first establish a clear structure of their writing in English before the approaches will lead them to focus on the 'meaning' of the content.

Now, let's run through the three approaches: first, **the snapshot**, then **the thoughtshot**, and lastly, **the back-story**.

1.1 The Snapshot

As a person's life is made up of many small moments woven together, a snapshot in writing is all about capturing a delicate part of life and details of the fleeting moment to come alive in a piece of paper. The following example suggests how the same scene can be presented differently.

Example 1.1.1

- (a) My favorite café *Le Petit Prince* is located in the core of Bangkok. This airy café, adjacent to a gorgeous outdoor garden, offers a casual, friendly terrace to cater to their coffee-lovers and I myself enjoy their outdoor seating and sipping coffee in the charming garden every morning.
- (b) Tucked inside a busy thoroughfare in Bangkok sits a cozy small café *Le Petit Prince* that brews my morning espresso in a garden terrace—the smell of freshly roasted coffee first running into the cup, then filling the warm outside air of greenery lush lawn.

This example takes the readers from simple description of the café and the writer's impression of it in (a) to selective details expressing how the writer has observed the café in (b). Notice that in (a) the readers cannot readily make a picture from adjectives like 'gorgeous,' 'casual,' 'friendly,' or 'charming' whereas in (b) the description draws the readers into the scene, to sit in the café with the writer where the aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafting through the air, beckoning them to sit back and relax amidst the backdrop of the lawn and the smell of the mix.

EXERCISE

Prompt 1: Visualising an ordinary, everyday scene

Instruction: On a white sheet of paper, draw a picture of your favorite place. Then, in one paragraph write a scene that takes place there. Add at least three sensory details.

Limitation: Without explicitly telling why the place is your favorite, the description of the scene should potentially reveal it.

In some cases, a single strong sensation can be built over a few lines, as in a novel "An Unofficial Rose" by an Irish writer Dame Murdoch.

Example 1.1.2

Near to the foot of the hill arose the short spiky spears of a sweet chestnut plantation, and beyond it a little patch of woodland, where the wild cherry was but lately over, half veiled a group of conical oast houses in a blur of green (35).

Here, Murdoch conveys only a strong visual impression. Notice that in this scene she does not need transitional phrases because it's so well organized that each part follows logically from the one before it.

Generally when a snapshot is lengthy it often renders the scene too slowly and can transform the whole snapshot into a patch of long, dozy descriptions. However, when deftly used a longer piece of snapshot can depict a strong sense of scene, as in the opening of a travel writing "Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India" by William Dalrymple, a distinguished historian and a winner of the 2010 Asia House Award for Asian Literature.

Example 1.1.3

Two hills of blackly gleaming granite, smooth as glass, rise from a thickly wooded landscape of banana plantations and jagged palmyra palms. It is dawn. Below lies the ancient pilgrimage town of

Sravanabelagola, where the crumbling walls of monasteries, temples and dharamsalas cluster around a grid of dusty, red earth roads. The roads converge on a great rectangular tank. The tank is dotted with the spreading leaves and still-closed buds of floating lotus flowers. Already, despite the early hour, the first pilgrims are gathering (1).

In this excerpt, Dalrymple not only propels the readers towards a vivid scene of a Buddhist pilgrimage site in India that he himself has experienced but also uses this one-paragraph snapshot as a mood-setter to permeate a tranquil and solemn atmosphere before he begins his story.

REMARK 1: Note that although a snapshot in writing appears to work well in a personal narrative or in a feature story, it can also be used in a functional writing. For example, in "Towns and Buildings," a Danish architect and urban planner Steen Rasmussen also deftly used this approach for his portrayal of a medieval gate in Italy.

Example 1.1.4

Immediately on passing through Porta del Popolo the visitor enters a square, Piazza del Popolo. Today it is an oval but at that time it was a long, narrow trapezoid converging towards the gateway and with long garden walls on either side. Facing the city, one saw the three thoroughfares thrusting deep into the town. The two triangular building sites form an effective front with two symmetrical domed churches strongly emphasizing the solid mass of the houses advancing toward the open space of the piazza (50).

REMARK 2: A snapshot of a scene when putting the description of a person in motion in it can give the readers a sketch of a person or even suggest them the person's character. The example below shows how in a scene a writer can draw a person's portrait.

Example 1.1.5

- (a) My father is in his sixties. Like many Thais in the countryside or small towns, he dresses plainly and spends most of his time at home.
- (b) My father is a man in his sixties always wrapped in black-and-white checkered sarong when at home, in his favorite corner where he sits all day cross-legged on the floor, smoking a long, slender cigar and quietly sipping his Four Roses.

In description (a), the writer provides the appearance of a father, with an approximation of age (in his sixties), his clothing style (he dresses 'plainly' like many Thais in the countryside or small towns) and his habit of 'spending most of his time at home.' After reading this description, however, if the readers are to draw a sketch of this man, they will find that they do not have a strong mental image of him; the adjective 'plainly' gives them no clue of how the man actually dresses, neither does the adverb "mostly," which can only tell them the amount of time he spends at home.

In contrast, the writer of description (b) leads the readers to see his portrait drawn from a summary of his appearance (in his sixties always wrapped in black-and-white checkered sarong) and habits (in his favorite corner where he sits all day cross-legged on the floor, smoking a long, slender cigar and quietly sipping his Four Roses), all in a scene at his home.

EXERCISE

Prompt 2: Sketching a Person

Instruction: Describe a person you admire in two ways, one paragraph each. First, make a summary of what the person is like; then show what makes the person unique.

Limitations: Do not mention your opinion toward the person or use any sentimental vocabulary. Instead, reveal it through your portrayal of the person—how you invite your readers to actually 'meet' the person you are describing. Use also precise detail/s where appropriate (See Example 1.3 description (b): rather than "whisky" notice that the writer uses "Four Roses.")

1.2 The Thoughtshot

When a snapshot covers a personal insight, it is a thoughtshot. With this approach, the writer invites the readers to read his mind so they can make inference about the writer—or if the writer is not writing about him/herself, then about the person or object being described in relation with the writer's observation.

Given the sense of thoughtshot as noted above, the students may now be able to make associations between thoughtshot construction and their background knowledge of stream of consciousness and interior monologue (direct or indirect), as well as of more conventional types as omniscient description and silent soliloquy.

Some classic examples include "Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse" by Virginia Woolf; "Ulysses" by James Joyce; and also, "The Sound and the Fury" by William Faulkner. This approach is sometimes used occasionally, as purposely written in a semi-autobiographical novel "A Farewell to Arms" written by Ernest Hemingway:

Example 1.2.1

Oh, God, please don't let her die. I'll do anything for you if you don't let her die. Please, please, please, dear God, don't let her die [...] you took the baby but don't let her die. That was all right but don't let her die. Please, please, dear God, don't let her die.
(330)

Example 1.2.2

I wished the hell I'd been choked like that. No I didn't. Still there would not be all this dying to go through. Now Catherine would die. That was what you did. You died...They threw you in and told you the rules and the first time they caught you off base they killed you [...] they killed you in the end. You could count on that. Stay around and they would kill you. (327)

In both examples, Hemingway uses this approach to present a scene when the narrator [Henry] proclaiming his negotiation with God and his wish to die (implicitly

expressing how he is unsatisfied with what is happening around him), respectively. By reading the narrator's mind in the scene, the readers are able to flow through his thought, almost feeling the same way he does in that very moment, and understand how the narrator has been developed into a mature man afterwards.

Note that while it is common to study the works of native English speakers, there are non-natives authors who favor this approach, for instance, in a contemporary fiction "The Eyes of the Night" by a Chinese author Wang Meng; or in a semi-autobiographical novel "The Serpent and the Rope" by an Indian writer of English language novels and short stories Raja Rao; or in "The Guide" a novel written in English by the Indian author R.K. Narayan. The example below is a thoughtshot in a fiction "The Eyes of the Night" of a Chinese writer, Wang Meng.

Example 1.2.3

Big vehicles and small cars. Trolleys and bicycles. Honking, chatter, and laughter. Only at night did this large city show off its energy and uniqueness. The scattered but attention-getting neon signs and the revolving poles in front of barber shops began to appear. There was permed hair and long hair. High heel shoes and low heel shoes, sleeveless frocks and dresses. The fragrance of toilet water and face cream. Cities and women were just beginning to pretty themselves up, but already there were people who wouldn't sit still for it. This was interesting. Chen Gao had not been back to this city for more than twenty years... (Gibbs 44)

As presented above, Meng presents here an omniscient description expressing the urban night scene along with the narrator's impression. Other works of this author with the use of Thoughtshot include "The Voice of the Spring," "Kite Streamers" and "Dreams of the Sea".

REMARK 1: In some writings thoughtshot can be found throughout the narration, such as "Killing Mr. Watson" a novel by a two-time National Book Award-winning American novelist and non-fiction writer Peter Matthiessen, which relies almost solely on first-person narratives, long monologues; or "Hunger" an autobiographical novel by a Nobel Prize-winning author Knut Hamsun.

REMARK 2: Note that with regards to the differences between the two most often been considered interchangeable, the stream of consciousness and interior monologue, Gerald Prince a Professor of Romance Languages at University of Pennsylvania contests the term's frequent association with "interior monologue in his Dictionary of Narratology, writing as follows:

Though interior monologue and stream of consciousness have often been considered interchangeable, they have also frequently been contrasted: the former would present a character's thoughts rather than impressions or perceptions, while the latter would present both impressions and thoughts; or else, the former would respect morphology and syntax, whereas the latter would not...and would thus capture thought in its nascent stage, prior to any logical connection" (94).

As a beginner, do not try too hard to evoke a thoughtshot in the narration by mentioning relating a thought to every aspect of the subject being described. This is not necessary. Access the mind only to dramatise a specific scene, or concretise its atmosphere.

Now, let's look at a much simpler example (Example 1.2.4).

Example 1.2.4

I glanced at a photo on my desk. I'd had it taken just before the nose job quite a week ago. My face looked different: I still inherited my father's nose, which I'd always preferred it shorter, the bump was still there and the tip of my nose much bigger. I put the photo down and began putting the mascara on my eyelashes. The brush was very stiff, almost like a comb. Slowly I looked in a mirror and shook my head. Something just didn't match, possibly the oversized bags under my eyes. Next time.

The narrator in the example talked to herself while sharing her thought after her rhinoplasty with the readers. What follows, as suggested by the ending of the scene, can't be anything but her blepharoplasty.

EXERCISE

Prompt 3: Portraying Your Personality Type

Instruction: Look in your mirror. Then, in one paragraph, describe your face. Try recalling at least one story that can make connection with your facial appearance. For example, it can also be a story of the earrings you've bought or when you got your ears pierced; or if you have your children, you may talk about your eyes that resemble those of your child's.

Limitations: Do not forget to engage the reader's senses while describing your facial appearance. Do cast each story by 'showing' the scene, not by telling.

1.3 The Back-Story

It is not uncommon for some writers to avoid inserting factual information or anecdote into their narration. Indeed, facts and anecdotes can cause boredom if they fail to entice the readers into the story.

Example 1.3.1 below illustrates a back-story in a person's sketch from an excerpt of "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks," by an award-winning non-fiction writer Rebecca Skloot, who specializes in science and medicine. Skloot here gives a good portrayal of Ms. Henrietta Lacks before her long battle with the cervical cancer:

Example 1.3.1

There's a photo on my wall of a woman I've never met, its left corner torn and patched together with tape. She looks straight into the camera and smiles, hands on hips, dress suit neatly pressed, lips painted deep red. It's the late 1940s and she hasn't yet reached the age of thirty. Her light brown skin is smooth, her eyes still young and playful, oblivious to the tumor growing inside her—a tumor that would leave her five children motherless and change the future of medicine ... She's usually identified as Helen Lane, but often she has no name at all. She's simply called HeLa, the code name given to the world's first immortal human cells—her cells, cut from her cervix just months before she died (1)

Another good example is "Darwin's Armada: Four Voyages and the Battle for the Theory of Evolution," written by an Australian historian and research professor at the University of Sydney Iain McCalman.

Example 1.3.2

Charles Darwin's funeral took place at Westminster Abbey on Wednesday 26 April 1882. Twenty years earlier, the English press had taunted him as 'The Devil's Disciple', the scientist whose theory of evolution had dethroned the divine creator and turned man into the cousin of the monkey. Now the Pall Mall Gazette spoke for all in comparing him to Copernicus and calling him 'the greatest Englishman since Newton'. The more than two thousand mourners at the Abbey made up a Who's Who of the Victorian establishment (1).

McCalman begins the narration with the description of a morning in Darwin's funeral before the story steps back and recounts Darwin's life, along with his most three supporters—and then their war of ideas over evolution how it advances the scope of Darwin's theory of evolution. Followed by this back-story, McCalman also uses a snapshot to magnify the moment of that morning:

... The body had arrived at eight o'clock the evening before, after a horse-drawn journey from the village of Downe, in Kent, accompanied for the sixteen miles by three of Darwin's sons and an icy drizzle. The white oak coffin, bearing the simple inscription Charles Robert Darwin, Born February 12, 1809 (1).

In the following example, study how the description keeps the readers close to the scene while conveying the information about the incidence.

Example 1.3.3

My grandmother ever recounted a story of a mysterious and powerful Naga living in Mekong river. Every year the Naga will celebrate our Lord Buddha's return to earth by sending the fireballs into the sky—the eerie egg-sized orbs of red, blue or green—soaring above water surface, 20-30 meters straight up to the air around 10 seconds then disappearing without falling back to the earth. No one knows quite why or how this happens so the mystery deepens every year, but whatever the myth is, the Naga Fireballs have become famous and thousands of locals and tourists will gather here to watch it like today. And now, in front me, the first “Naga balls” is coming right out of the Laotian river bank, a smoke-less, smell-less, and sound-less glowing.

EXERCISE

Prompt 4: Fictionalising a Moment

Instruction: In one page, write an autobiographical story. To probe your background, fictionalize the moment and construct scene where appropriate.

Limitations: Cast it in first-person point of view and add also some historical events that will intrigue the readers in your story. It can be taken from your parents, your teacher, hearsay, newspapers, etc.

CREATIVE WRITING SAMPLE

Prompt: Write a paragraph reminiscing about a deceased person you know well.

SAMPLE 1

Yesterday I looked at the pictures of my grandfather, who once lived in a very poor part of the country. In the past few years I have not looked at him the way that I was at that moment. His face and hands seemed worn out from rigid everyday work. That time, he hardly could get enough food for my grandmother and his four children. I remembered when I looked over at his hands, small and weathered, I would see wrinkles stretching and intersecting, like an intricate roadmap of his life. In the evenings, he always sat back in his sofa and closed his eyes so tightly that a crease formed in his forehead. I always wondered what he was thinking—or perhaps he was asking something from God? A better life? Or perhaps he prayed he would be a better father for his children, and a better grandfather for me? Now, he has been gone for three years but I still carry him with me. At the very least, he was always a sweet old man, especially to me.

Chapter 1: Creative Writing, Weaving In

CREATIVE WRITING SAMPLE

Prompt: Write a story describing your daily life. Optionally, you may also try fictionalize it but use first person point of view. First, capture and detail a moment to depict a scene. When finished do it again for the second scene, and so on until you can end the story. Present in it what interests you in a single day. Use snapshot, thoughtshot or backstory where possible. Connect all moments together using either transitional words, or any appropriate punctuations.

SAMPLE 2

I am a temple boy. And here I am—at a small village temple.

...This particular place has whitish walls and a large Buddha image looking out from an ordination hall where monks and novices perform everyday chanting. Actually, those novices are of my age but in many ways similar to the monks—at least they wear almost identical colour robes as those of the monks. The only difference, what I saw, is that they emphasise different sense of religious services, through less numbers of precepts and religious ceremonies.

...Every day, as dawn shows faintly in the east and feather-light clouds take on rose tints, all temple boys, most from peasant backgrounds like me, will get up to prepare the alms bowls.

Temple then turns to be a peaceful abode, which is filled with an atmosphere of spiritual tranquility and serenity, with leaves ruffling with every gust of wind, tiny birds shrieking at a varying pitch as if wishing each other good start of the day, and monks and novices wrapped in saffron robes filling up the temple front. And just after a gong announcing that morning meditation is about to begin, those who grow old and weak will be ready for their morning chant at the main hall.

...Every morning, the senior monk I accompany always sends me a greeting smile before our day sets off.

...Less than 2 or 3 kilometers away from the temple down the crooked streets as we follow a narrow lane of this quiet district, we often find groups of lay people lining up along the path we pass. They will put some food in the alms bowl and my senior monk will do some blessings. They will be quiet for an instant and then, with hands clasped together in front of their chest, they will send us in the direction we leave.

...An hour or so, we venture on the holy trip, the going always get a bit harder. I often sling my bag over one shoulder and slowly, very slowly, as the quantity of food and offerings in the bag multiplies, intensifies, I will keep making frequent stops to recover my breath and strength before I would soon get left behind.

...This morning, on the way back to temple, a slow moving figure in front of me carrying some offerings from morning prayers resembles much like an image of Lord Buddha, with his face smooth and relaxed.

...Four or five years ago, when my mother sent me to be a boarder at the temple, I didn't understand her reasons. But now it's turned out to be the happiest time of my life. Apart from the school fees which are quite modest, many of my life's circumstances to date could tell how much rewarding things here I've learnt—at least, they teach all kids here to be modest in the way we dress and act, and think.

Buddha says all wrong-doing arises because of mind. So, if mind is transformed can wrong-doing remain?

As we walk though the temple gate, then into the hall, curls of incense from somewhere—a smoky scent—drift out into the hallway where everyone is meditating in silence.

I close my eyes, and my breathing now deepens and slows.

The only thing to do now is to keep walking.

And silence follows.

Chapter 1: Creative Writing, Weaving In

Pre-activity: Word Choice

Chapter 2

EXERCISE 1

Instruction: Decide which word in each group is more general, which next. etc.

Example living thing > plant > flower > nasturtium

1. book / publication / Huckleberry Finn / novel

2. clothing / men's wear / jeans / trousers

3. living thing / people / Indian / Sitting Bull

4. mammal / animal / marine mammal / whale

5. music / art / Beethoven's Fifth / piano concerto

6. bongo / drum / musical instrument / tool

7. transportation / Volkswagen / automobile / four-wheeled vehicle

8. parsley / plant / vegetable / herb

9. illness / cancer / leukemia / chronic disease

EXERCISE 2

Instruction: Rewrite each sentence, replacing the underlined word in each line with more vivid or specific word(s).

1. The lunch-set at my favorite restaurant is good, with drumsticks and root vegetables in sweet sauce.

2. Color is one of the good ways to shift the energy with feng shui.

3. My brother's handwriting definitely looks good on paper.

4. The economy only looks good from New York but I guess not so good in Chicago?

5. This year looks good to my company. Investments pour in and there will be growth.

6. Certainly she looks good. The costume she made is incredible.

7. That little facial scar on my face looks extremely bad.

8. I have pimples and personally I think I look bad with them. They are very ugly.

9. My uncle has bad taste for clothes.

10. She has bad manners because she is a bad girl.

EXERCISE 3

Instruction: Replace each of the following verbs with more vivid one(s).

1. talk

2. eat

3. look

4. walk

5. run

7. cry

8. speak

9. smile

10. listen

11. laugh

12. see

13. make

14. move

EXERCISE 4

Instruction: Study the verbs below. Then select one that best fits the meaning of each sentence.

plod	limp	rush	whizz	wander
stray	scamper	drift	stroll	swirl
dawdle	divert	penetrate	tiptoe	obscure
divulge	murmur	appeal	nip	seep
droop	demolish	saturate	thwart	dash
drone	grin	stalk	strive	

1. This morning my father woke up late so he _____ to catch the bus.
2. I _____ happily along the busy street, being in no hurry.
3. The farmer _____ slowly across the muddy field in his gum boots.
4. A child _____ away from the caravan and became lost.
5. An empty box _____ slowly past our yacht.
6. The fast-moving stream gurgled as it _____ round the rocks.
7. My professor _____ because he had a large blister on his heel.
8. The mouse _____ back to its hole after sighting the cat.
9. Our cows had _____ into a neighbour's paddock.
10. An arrow _____ out of the forest and embedded itself in a tree near the explorer's head.
11. The soldiers _____ and drag themselves down the long street to the welcoming arms of the anxious crowd.
12. Now, thousands of stray dogs _____ the streets of Bangkok have been sterilized and then brought back to the streets.
13. A slight gust of wind _____ the loose snow around the horses' hooves as they walked.

14. When they heard strange footfalls on the stairs the thieves _____ away into the deep shadows of the night.
15. Large flakes of frozen water _____ from a cloud gray sky.
16. An asteroid big enough to wipe out cities _____ past the Earth last month before astronomers even knew.
17. When the police arrived on the spot and took action, the gangsters carried their wounded friends into the cars, and _____ away in fear.
18. Witness said my secretary _____ out of the office as soon as she saw her ex-husband.
19. We end up in a quiet building at the end of the road, the location of which neither of us ever _____ to anybody as there seems to be a leak somewhere.
20. "Good afternoon sunshine" he _____.
21. I like my sister, but she always _____ on and on when we are together.
22. With feet dragging, head _____, and spirits at the zero hour, he hardly moved.
22. Smog _____ my view of the road.
23. Traffic was _____ around the scene of the accident.
24. Citrus trees can have low branches _____ off.
25. A bullet _____ his chest and lodged by his heart.
26. Superman always successfully _____ the evil plans of the villains.
27. The students can look like they're working when in fact they're _____.
28. It has been reported that a majority of 1000 year or older buildings in our province have been _____ for commercial development.
29. Water has been _____ through cracks in the grout in the shower.

30. The dying man collected all his forces and finally _____ to his dear daughter.
31. Santa Claus _____ into the first room. The children were asleep. The holy visitor then pulled his presents from an old sack and laid them down.
32. The rhythm of piano practice _____ each room of the house.
33. The idea didn't _____ to me.

EXERCISE 5

Instruction: The following sentences are vague. Revise them, replacing each word in italics either by selecting word(s) specific enough to express it exactly or using descriptions that can give the readers a clearer picture.

1. It was an *awful* trip in my life ever.
-
2. It gave me a *funny* feeling in my stomach like when I went down the massive hill on a rollercoaster.
-
3. The injury that our best player suffered was *serious* enough to keep him out of the game.
-
4. I *ate* my lunch, hurrying so that I wouldn't be late for class.
-
5. I *look* at my lost car key lying on the bottom of a tank at school.
-
6. It was my first time so I *made* a sweater a size too small for my husband
-
7. The university building has a *nice and neat* structure.
-

