

A computer monitor is the central focus, displaying the title 'HOW TO WRITE FICTION' in large, bold, black capital letters on a white background. The monitor is on a black stand. In front of the monitor, a pair of hands is shown typing on a black keyboard. The background is a gradient of orange and yellow. The overall style is high-contrast and graphic.

**HOW TO
WRITE
FICTION**

GURMEET MATTU

HOW TO WRITE FICTION

Gurmeet Mattu

Gurmeet Mattu is an award-winning writer, a trained journalist and a qualified trainer. He has written professionally for print, stage, radio, TV, cinema and online. This is the perfect combination to bring you an easily absorbed course in the methodology of creative writing. Not only does he have vast experience in writing in different mediums, his qualification as a coach (Scottish Vocational Qualification in Training & Development, Level III) means he knows how to design and deliver training courses.

Following the 15 modules in this course will give you a clear insight into the requirements of creative writing, from building characters to delivering believable dialogue. Best known for his comedy writing Mattu brings a light-hearted approach to the serious business of writing fiction.

He has written three novels, so if you'd like to actually read what he's written, to see if he's any good, you can find them at his website by clicking the banner below.



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2. (Module 1) **NON-FICTION**

Hold on, you say, I want to learn about creative writing. This Module will teach you about news writing, in effect 'losing your voice'.

3. (Module 2) **RESEARCH & ANALYSIS**

To become a writer you must read, but with a critical eye.

4. (Module 3) **FINDING YOUR VOICE**

Having helped you lose your voice in Module 1, I now help you to rediscover it. This is about confidence.

5. (Module 4) **PLOT & NARRATIVE**

To plot or not to plot, that is the question.

6. (Module 5) **CHARACTERS**

Where do you find them?

7. (Module 6) **DIALOGUE**

How to make it natural.

8. (Module 7) **STRUCTURE**

Classical dramatic structures still works. Find out why.

9. (Module 8) **TEMPO**

How to vary the pace of your writing.

10. (Module 9) **SYNOPSIS**

How to make this chore work for you.

11. (Module 10) **STYLE**

Can you write high colour?

12. (Module 11) **DRAMA**

Exploring other outlets - theatre/radio/TV.

13. (Module 12) **FORMATTING**

Different markets demand different styles.

14. (Module 13) **EDITING**

How to kill your babies.

15. (Module 14) **MARKETING**

Publishers, agents, commissioning, producers and similar riff raff. Have you considered selfpublishing, POD or ebooks?

16. (Module 15) **TASKS**

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INTRODUCTION

Is the pen mightier than the sword? Can words have so much power?

Consider the Bible, the Koran, Das Kapital, The Wealth of Nations. Only words, and yet they have moved nations and destroyed empires. Words are powerful beasts and the ability to control them makes the writer a potent foe. If you are a writer you are a dangerous entity. If you are a good writer you are a positive menace. But just as anybody can wield a sword, not everybody can be a master swordsman, and not everybody can be a great writer. But with instruction and practice you can improve your skill.

So, this creative writing course doesn't teach you how to write, it teaches you how to be a better writer.

Welcome to an adventure I hope you'll find enjoyable as well as educational. The aim is to take your innate talent and teach you some skills and techniques that will make you a more confident writer. Remember that word, confidence. I can't make you a great writer and I certainly can't guarantee that you will be a great success, but I can promise that if you take on board what I give you in these pages you will be a much more rounded writer and one that is not afraid to tackle any subject in any format and thrust it in front of any audience - a confident writer.

The 14 informational Modules are structured, but in a fairly loose way and you will be subject to my digressions at points. Bear with me on this, everything has a point, if only in letting you get to know me better. The Modules vary in length, but all are equally important in building your skill set. Take your time and try to absorb what I'm trying to tell you and why. If you put up barriers against learning you can't expect to gain anything from the Course.

Performing the Exercises is not mandatory but I'd recommend that you have a crack at them. Reading what I write is easy, but doing the Exercises gets your mind working on a different plane and builds good habits. There may be points where you think I'm stating the obvious or, alternatively, that I'm being over complex, but this is inevitable with the nature of this Course. I have no way of knowing at what stage in your writing career you are, or even how bright you are. A certain level of intelligence is no doubt necessary for any writer but the art of writing is such a broad church that genius status is not required to achieve. I'm proof of that.

The final Module is the Tasks and you should really be able to tackle these by that point.

Enjoy the process, it's the best way to learn.

MODULE 1 (Non-Fiction or News Writing)

Why non-fiction?

Because if you learn to master the art of writing or reporting on reality you'll find the creation of fiction much easier.

Having said that the journalist or reporter is rarely a writer. They act more as detectives, gathering information which is then collated into readable prose by sub-editors. We all learn to write as very young children, but somehow many never manage to master the techniques of producing basic understandable prose which transmits the writer's message clearly and concisely. Any brief browse round the internet will prove that. Websites abound with grammatical and spelling errors and yet one assumes that those who post this material are at least computer literate.

So what differentiates writers from non-writers? Writers write and non-writers don't. Seems simple, but in writing, the competent writer learns and enhances his ability.

You can too.

I'm not here to teach basic spelling or grammar, that's a task you must assume yourself. The only comment I'll make is – don't trust spellcheckers because they know nothing of context. To them 'their' and 'there' are both correct spellings, but only in the correct place. By all means run a spellcheck over your material for glaring errors. But you must do a personal check to pick up what the machine's missed.

So, let's get to it.

The first thing the young journalist is taught is how to structure a news story. Remember that word 'structure', you'll be reading it a lot.

Here are some facts -

Johnny Wilson is dead.

His mother is divorced from his father.

They live in the Kingston area.

The bus was traveling at forty miles per hour.

Johnny was 11 years old.

Johnny's mother's name is Kathleen.

The accident happened at 11.15.

Mrs Wilson has two other children.

The driver of the bus was Mr Abdul Kareem.

There was snow and ice on the road.

There were no witnesses to the accident.

Johnny was going to the local shops.

The bus skidded at the corner of Hearn Street and Forest Avenue.

Sgt. Thomas of the local police said “Our enquiries are continuing. No one has been charged.”

Mrs Wilson works in a local factory.

Let’s turn this into a brief news story, suitable for a local newspaper, using the following formula-

What happened?

Who did it happen to?

Where did it happen?

When did it happen?

How did it happen?

Why did it happen?

We should end up with something like this.

An 11 year old boy was killed by a skidding bus at the corner of Hearn Street and Forest Avenue yesterday morning.

The boy was named as Johnny Wilson who lives locally. He is survived by his mother and two sisters.

Johnny was visiting the local shops when the bus, driven by Mr Abdul Kareem, seemed to skid on the icy roads and hit the boy. The local police are investigating the accident.

That transmits the vital information of this tragic accident by a simple process of editing. Follow up stories may well dwell on Mrs Wilson’s divorced state and her occupation in a factory, but at the moment they are irrelevant.

I’m telling you this because good writing is not writing it’s rewriting, or editing. If you can’t take your raw material and structure it you’re wasting your time. Admittedly, anyone reading the basic facts as given above would have been able to establish the events, but the writer makes it easier by turning them into an easily digestible narrative. The same principle is used by fiction writers, but in their case to generate an emotional response, whether terror, humour or whatever.

And these same principles apply to all writing in spades. Burn this into your brain – STRUCTURE, STRUCTURE, STRUCTURE !!!

But we must carry this theory of structure down a level into the very paragraphs and sentences your prose consists of. And if you think that’s carrying structure a little too far, be glad we’re not structuring individual words.

Don’t look upon structure as your enemy, claiming that the creative muse is stifled by such constraints. Let it help you in developing your argument by submitting your material to analysis.

You're better doing the analysis yourself and finding the flaws before somebody else does it for you and saddles you with unwanted criticism.

Imagine the events in your story actually happened in real life and were to be reported in a newspaper. How would it read? I'm asking you to get involved in a process of reverse engineering, where the news story comes before the 'events'. Having created the structure with the news story, your fiction should then just require you to fill in some extra details (and some flair!).

If this sounds too mechanical, don't worry too much. I'm only putting you through this because you have to learn to walk before you can run. Once this process becomes second nature you will be not only able to run, but fly.

To take the news-writing analogy one step further I want you to step into the world of the TV news reporter to help with your visual sense.

Filming of the actual event would be brief and distressing but the reporter, without access to this, has to set a scene and convey information and an impression.

Nowadays TV news crews are fairly small units and the reporter will instruct the cameraman on what shots he wants. Let's work this:

Opening shot - Reporter direct to camera.

2. Cut to: Bus

3. Cut to: road junction

4. Cut to: Interview with mother

5. Cut to: Interview with policeman

Closing shot - Still photograph of victim

This is a fairly traditional format and conveys the story the reporter wants to tell. It passes no comment, because that is not the reporter's job.

You, as a fiction writer, may question whether the boy had been sniffing glue, or whether he was shoved in front of the bus by one of his friends, playing a daredevil game. Of such things are fiction born.

It's also a nice hook to present your story with a bare news report and then subject it to analysis as it opens up and other facts emerge. This is particularly useful in crime fiction.

News, however, is not as impartial as it would have us believe. The old headline 'FOG IN CHANNEL, CONTINENT CUT OFF' tells us about the insularity of the English. Analysis of other news headlines tells us not only what happened, but also the socio-political views of the writer, his editor and publisher. All news is slanted and even the legendary impartiality of the BBC can be questioned if subjected

to analysis. Some of the more honest journalists do attempt to be as objective as possible but human nature being what it is, personal bias cannot help but creep in.

You, as a fiction writer, have a choice in this matter. Do you espouse your own views or simply tell your tale?

You have to consider why you write and what the purpose of your writing is intended to be.

You have to consider the views of your readership. It's doubtful if anybody espousing fascist dictatorship, unless for comic effect, will find many readers.

I would imagine I'm a fairly left-wing, liberal kind of person but can I imagine the thought processes of a right-wing bigot? Because I can't write him unless I know him. I once interviewed Lord Chalfont who was a Labour MP who'd drifted right and was now promoting the lifting of sanctions against apartheid South Africa. I knew my argument was right, but he ate me up. He had the facts and he was ready. I wasn't. But it taught me to prepare and know what my enemy knew. Whether Chalfont believed in what he said, I do not know, but he put it across with the skills he had gained from his years in politics. In the end run it didn't matter, he could have been an actor mouthing lines and I hadn't learnt my part.

Take the interviews with mother and policeman suggested above. They could be scripted because neither the mother or the cop are going to say anything sensational. They are going to mouth the platitudes they are expected to. Life is like that. Don't forget it, even in your wildest flights of fantasy.

EXERCISES

Your Exercises for this Module are in 2 sections

(1) Go to the website of a major newspaper. Find a news story. Copy and paste it into your word processor. Now, in no more than 1,000 words, turn this news report into a short story.

You are not permitted to change any of the basic facts, though you may create dialogue between characters. If the report does not come to a conclusion (eg verdict in a court case) you may invent one to give your story an ending.

(2) The Russians were first on the moon in 1969, beating the Americans. Write a 500 word (approx) news report detailing this achievement.

MODULE 2 (Research & Analysis)

The fact that the writer must read is a given, to check out the opposition if nothing else. But the writer, in order to learn his craft, must also read with an analytical mind, avoiding the narrative's attractions so that he can see the methods the author has used in creating his piece. The best way to do this is to avoid reading what we enjoy - harsh, but unavoidable. Whatever type of fiction you're into, its joys are not for you for the moment. So, western readers, turn to science fiction, and romance fans to detective thrillers. Pick authors who are good and popular, though these may be contradictory.

What you're looking for is the techniques the writer has used. Ask yourself questions such as -

What is the average sentence length?

Does the writer vary this by much?

How much description does he give when introducing a new character?

Does his dialogue flow?

Does he describe action well?

Do you get any sense of an 'act' opening and closing?

Later, once you see what there is to be learned from such analysis you can return to your favourite authors and subject them to the same tests. You may be surprised at the results. You may find yourself wondering if that's all there is to writing, the application of formulaic techniques.

Thankfully, it is not, there is an art.

We are blessed in living in the age of the internet where research on any subject is almost laughably easy. I growl at the way what could have been a global library has become instead a global marketplace, but as a research tool the web beats trudging down to the library on a wet Tuesday hands down. Most of the classics are available on the Gutenberg Project. Track them down and delve into them, because every little you learn has value.

You'll note that I'm not giving you any links to follow to find this site. This is deliberate. That's what search engines are for, and research is an art form in itself and one you should get used to.

It's going to help you write about being a spy in Istanbul when you failed the MI5 entrance exam and you've never been to Turkey.

It is imperative that you look at what other people write, whether it is in newspapers, magazines or books. Each publication, like every writer, has a different style and you must be able to identify them and ultimately copy them. Even comic books have a value. Someone had to sit down and write the captions and the contents of the speech balloons and that someone had to be a wordsmith of the first order, because space is extremely limited in a comic book panel which is going to be devoted mainly to the graphic.

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