LA COUNTY LIBRARY

DIY Library Program

CREATIVE WRITING

TEACH YOURSELF TO WRITE AND TELL A GOOD STORY

Recommended for Ages 12 – 18

So, you want to be a writer? Or maybe you just want to improve your storytelling skills? Mo Willems said there are three types of stories: things that happen to you (biography), things that happen to other people (history), and things you make up (fiction).[1] These types of stories can show up in all sorts of ways—in books, in newspaper articles, in movies, and even in your day to day conversations.

How do you get started? You don't need any qualifications; all you need is something to write with. Writing advice can vary widely because it changes from person to person, but two pieces of advice seem to be universal. The two best things you can do for yourself to become a good writer are:

1. Write, write, write
2. Read, read, read

The more you write, the more you will improve. Don't wait for inspiration to strike, don't aspire to writing, don't be embarrassed if you're not as good as you want to be. Just sit down, and, as Orson Scott Card says, "write your brains out."[2] Reading is just as important as writing. Author J. K. Rowling advises, "You can't be a good writer without being a devoted reader. Reading is the best way of analyzing what makes a good book. Notice what works and what doesn't, what you enjoyed and why."[3] Read a lot and broaden your reading horizons. Even if you prefer fantasy, you can learn plenty from other genres like historical fiction and mystery.

There are no hard and fast rules for writing. Some authors simply sit down and write. Others plot and outline. Some follow rules, and others do not. We have a number of exercises and activities listed here to help you get writing, but if they don't suit you, don't give up! Just try something else that works better for you. Keep in mind you can learn just as much from bad

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[1] Willems, Mo. "Writers Speak to Kids: Mo Willems" *NBC News Learn*, 17 Sep 2012, https://www.nbclearn.com/writers-speak-to-kids/cuecard/60820.

[2] Card, Orson Scott. "Orson Scott Card advice to aspiring writers? (extended answer)" *YouTube*, uploaded by Orson Scott Card, 12 Jun 2014 https://youtu.be/--0sRq8jb00.

[3] Rowling, J. K. "On Writing," https://www.jkrowling.com/opinions/on-writing/ Accessed April 9, 2020.

writing as you can from good writing. None of your time spent reading or writing is wasted, if you're learning along the way.

Questions to ponder or discuss:

- What makes writing good or effective?
    - Think of your favorite book. Why do you love it? What does that book do that other books do not do?
- What makes writing bad or unenjoyable?
    - Think of the worst thing you've ever read. What made it bad? What aspects of the writing and storytelling detracted from it? Was it boring? What made it boring? Was it annoying? What made it annoying?

ACTIVITIES

Writing Prompts:

One way to get started is with a writing prompt. A prompt can get the ideas flowing and give you something new to think about. Write a story based on one of the prompts below. (Feel free to change details about the prompts, like whether the story is in first or third person, or if the main character is male or female.)

- I never told anyone this, but I'll tell you.[4]
- In the photo I'm smiling, but my memories from that day are far from happy.[5]
- There were actually eight dwarfs, not seven…
- I have one green eye and one brown eye. The green eye sees truth, but the brown eye sees much, much more.[6]
- A senior in high school is suddenly shunned by her closest friends, and she doesn't know why.
- A 13-year-old finds a mysterious note in a library book.
- A teen is watering her neighbor's plants while the neighbor is out of town when one of the plants starts talking to her.
- A boy and a girl get off of the bus at the wrong stop and get lost.
- A teen finds an article about a girl who went missing 10 years ago, and wants to find out what happened.
- The son of a time travel scientist accidentally gets transported to 1984.

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[4] Allison, Dorothy. "Untold Stories: An Exercise to Generate Fiction." *Naming the World: And Other Exercises for the Creative Writer*, edited by Bret Anthony Johnston, Random House, 2007, 55-56.

[5] Cavallo, Amina. "Writing Prompts 101-110" Numawok Creative. https://numawokcreative.com/writing-prompts-101-110/. Accessed 10 April 2020.

[6] Levine, Gail Carson. *Writing Magic: Creating Stories that Fly*. E-book, Harper Collins, 2013.

Motives: Asking Why

The purpose of this exercise is to help you see the role of motive in storytelling. Motive helps us understand and care about characters. It is just as important for the reader to know *why* a character does something as it is to know *what* the character is doing. Below is a list of characters performing different actions. Your mission is to select one, and then come up with five different reasons why that person might be performing that action. Once you have your list of five, go through all five, and ask why again. Then go through and ask another why question (or two or three).

Here is an example of the exercise:

A boy steals a girl's phone at school. Why?

- He wants to look through her text messages to see if she's said anything about him.
- Someone else dared him to steal it.
- She took a picture of him and he wants to delete it.
- She took his phone yesterday and he's getting back at her.
- He overheard another student's intention to steal and destroy the phone and he wants to make sure that doesn't happen.

Why? Round 2

- He was dared to steal it by his friends. Why?
    - The guys who dared him to do it are cooler than him and he thinks that if he steals the phone, he'll get into their group of friends.

Why? Round 3

- Why does he want to be part of their group?
    - If he is a part of their group, he'll have power at school, which is something he doesn't have at home. (And the why's can continue: Why does he want power? Why doesn't he have it at home?)

Do you see how asking why questions over and over helps you develop character, motive and even action? Do you see how motive can completely change the meaning of someone's actions?

Now it's your turn! Here are some prompts to choose from:

- Michelle snubs Kevin at a party. Why?
- Audrey chooses not to sit with the friends she always sits with at lunch. Why?
- Erin shares a secret with her best friend, and her best friend doesn't believe her. Why?
- John doesn't show up for his basketball team's most important game of the year. Why?
- David runs away from home. Why?

Conflict: What could possibly go wrong?

Stories where everything is happy and goes according to plan tend to be boring. It's conflict, obstacles and overcoming those obstacles that make a story interesting. Read this set up from Gail Carson Levine's *Writing Magic*:

"Melanie is on her way to her graduation. Her parents are with her. They are a happy family. She is graduating with honors. The next day she's leaving for the camp she loves, where she's spent five happy summers. She has lots of friends and a boyfriend at home. She and the boyfriend plan to stay in touch all summer. She has no problems."[7]

Now do what Gail Carson Levine suggests doing when you're stuck: list twelve possible disasters. See if you can write a story around one or more of those disasters.

Creative Nonfiction: Polish a Story from Your Own Life

In this activity you're going to think of something that happened in your own life and transform it into a structured, polished story. This method is based on *Writing Radar* by Jack Gantos. You can watch Gantos tell a funny story from his own childhood on YouTube (https://youtu.be/RsUA11I6cww) and diagram it just as we're doing in this activity.

1. Think of story worth telling from your own life.

   If you think you don't have a good story to tell, you're wrong. Good stories are happening to you all the time. A good place to start might be an embarrassing moment. As Jack Gantos advises, "every painful moment in your life is a story waiting to be told."[8]

2. Identify all the elements of your story using this checklist:

   - ☐ Characters (Who is the story about? Who is telling the story?)
   - ☐ Setting (Where does the story take place?)
   - ☐ Problem/situation (What is the story about?)
   - ☐ Action/plot (What are the characters doing AND feeling? How does this relate to the problem/situation? This can include multiple actions.)
   - ☐ Crisis (What is the action building up to? What is the peak of the action? What is the breaking point? This can be physical, emotional or both.)
   - ☐ Resolution/solve the problem (How is the problem solved?)
   - ☐ Physical AND emotional end (What happens to the character? How does the character feel and change?)

[7] Levine, Gail Carson. *Writing Magic: Creating Stories that Fly*. E-book, Harper Collins, 2013.
[8] Gantos, Jack. *Writing Radar: Using Your Journal to Snoop Out and Craft Great Stories*. E-book, Farrar, Straus and Giroux (BYR), 2017.

3. Organize your elements into a beginning – middle – end structure, using this outline:
    - Beginning
        - Characters
        - Setting
        - Problem/situation
    - Middle
        - Rising action/plot
        - Crisis
    - End
        - Resolution/solve the problem
        - Physical and emotional end

4. Polish your story a little more.

    Now you have a structured story with all of Jack Gantos' writing elements. Here are a few more questions to consider as you reread to help you polish it a little more.

    - Is everything clear? Will the reader be able to see what is happening?
    - Does the rising action accelerate the story?
    - Does the dialogue build action and/or help the reader understand the characters?
    - Is it believable?
    - Do you know the motives and emotions of the characters?
    - Are you using unnecessary words, like "really," "so," "basically," etc?
    - Is the spelling and punctuation correct?

5. Find someone to read your story and give you constructive criticism.

To learn more, read *Writing Radar* by Jack Gantos. Another helpful resource is this extended conversation and presentation he gave for National Novel Writing Month: https://youtu.be/n0RBpNjoj4U.

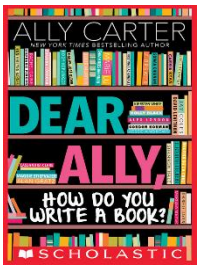
Remember:

1. The two best things you can do to improve your writing skills are to write more and to read more.
2. There are many different approaches to writing.
3. No matter the result, time spent writing or reading isn't wasted if you're learning along the way.

DIGITAL RESOURCES AVAILABLE THROUGH LA COUNTY LIBRARY

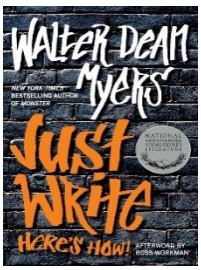
eBooks & Audiobooks

LA County Library offers numerous resources that can help you learn more about creative writing. Here are just a few, all of which are available as eBooks on OverDrive and Libby:



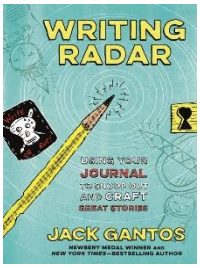
Dear Ally, How do You Write a Book? **by Ally Carter**

Popular YA author Ally Carter (*I'd Tell You I Love You, But Then I'd Have to Kill You*) covers the basics of writing in this guide for teens which also features advice from a number of popular YA authors.



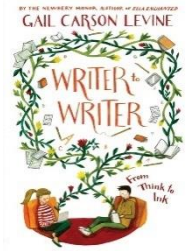
Just Write **by Walter Dean Myers**

Award-winning YA author Walter Dean Myers shares how and why he writes. The book includes examples from his writing, reading experiences and pages from his own notebooks.



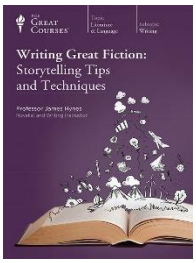
Writing Radar: Using Your Journal to Snoop Out and Craft Great Stories **by Jack Gantos**

Newbery-winning author and writing teacher Jack Gantos offers his own advice for writing with funny stories taken from the pages of his own childhood journal.

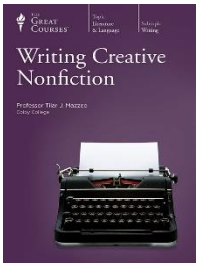


Writer to Writer: From Think to Ink **by Gail Carson Levine**

Newbery honor author Gail Carson Levine (*Ella Enchanted*) gives advice and tips on how to write and offers writing prompts and exercises.



Writing Great Fiction: Storytelling Tips and Techniques **by James Hynes**
Taught by award-winning novelist James Hynes, a former visiting professor at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, these 24 lectures show you the ins and outs of the fiction writer's craft.



Writing Creative Nonfiction **by Tilar J. Mazzeo**
Creative nonfiction covers biographies and memoirs to blogs and public speaking scripts to personal essays and magazine articles. Professor and best-selling author Tilar J. Mazzeo teaches creative nonfiction in a series of 24 lectures.

ONLINE COURSES

- *Universal Class.* Take on online class with an instructor. You can sign up at any time and will have six months to complete your course. Find a variety of creative writing courses, like Beginning Creative Writing, Historical Fiction Writing, and Humor Writing 101. https://tinyurl.com/y7rmme65

- *Gale Courses.* Take an online class with an instructor. Sessions start monthly and typically last six weeks. Class options include Mystery Writing, Write Your Life Story, and Write Fiction Like a Pro, among others. https://tinyurl.com/ybvpsun9

ONLINE RESOURCES

A great source of writing advice is to look up the website or blog of your favorite author. Many authors get asked about writing, and some of them teach writing workshops. Here are just a few:

- Holly Black https://blackholly.com/for-writers/writing-advice/
- Maggie Stiefvater https://maggiestiefvater.com/tag/how-i-write/
- Patricia Wrede https://www.pcwrede.com/blog/
- Cassandra Clare https://www.cassandraclare.com/writing-advice/
- Brandon Sanderson https://www.brandonsanderson.com/writing-advice/
- Orson Scott Card http://www.hatrack.com/writingclass/
- Judy Bloom http://judyblume.com/writing.php
- Laini Taylor http://www.lainitaylor.com/search/label/writing

- Patrick Ness https://www.booktrust.org.uk/books-and-reading/tips-and-advice/writing-tips/writing-tips-from-authors/patrick-nesss-guide-to-writing/#!?q=&sortOption=MostRecent&pageNo=1