

General Rules - Creative Writing

- 1. Obey the rules of grammar, usage and punctuation.** Creative writers should use language inventively, but they do not have a license to ignore the basic rules of good English. Readers will be patient with a demanding stylistic technique (like stream-of-consciousness narration) as long as the rewards it offers justify the work of reading it. Hold up your end of the bargain, and help the reader wherever possible. Carelessness is not art.
- 2. Show, don't tell.** Make your language concrete, not abstract; specific, not general. In the *Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer uses details as clues to character. The Knight wears a garment stained with rust from his armor; the young Oxford scholar keeps twenty volumes of Aristotle's philosophy beside his bed; the Prioress weeps when she sees a mouse caught in a trap; and the Reeve always rides last among the pilgrims. In every case Chaucer conveys an impression of the person without using any abstractions or generalizations.
- 3. Maintain a consistent style and tone.** If your narrator is a six-year-old boy, do not use words he could not understand. If a character is a drug dealer in the ghetto, he should speak like one. If you are writing a poem in a romantic style, an unseemly word or image can spoil the serious effect.
- 4. Use adjectives and adverbs with restraint.** They quickly start sounding artificial:

OVERDONE: *Graceful white* gulls hovered *lazily* above the *shimmering blue* sea as the *glistening, golden* sun beamed *brightly*.

- 5. Use vulgar language responsibly.** Sometimes vulgarity is appropriate; if your characters are tough guys on the street, they should not talk like nuns. However, there are more original and interesting methods than four-letter words to show that someone is tough.

If you must describe something embarrassing (sickness, for example), describing it indirectly takes more art and shows better taste. Vulgarity for its own sake only calls attention to itself and, at times, to the insecurity of the people who use it.

Fiction and Drama.

- 7. Action.** One of two common flaws is lack of action--the story that relies too much on description or dialogue, or the play in which no one does anything but talk. The essence of storytelling is dramatizing conflict through action. You do not need swordfights or volcanic eruptions; action can be subtle, but *something* should happen. The opposite flaw is the story in which there is little but action. If the only conflict in a story is whether Johnny will get a hit and win the game, the story has little interest as fiction.
- 8. Plot.** A good plot is not easy to create. There must be questions the reader wants answered, logic to the sequence of events, a conflict to be resolved, and an element of the unexpected. A story need not have a surprise ending, but it should not be predictable either.
- 9. Characterization.** It takes more art to create a real, complex human being than a stereotype. One of the secrets is to provide concrete details of appearance and manner that reveal attitudes, values and beliefs. Another secret is to give the character a past. Most

*Adapted from Keable's Guide <http://www.iolani.honolulu.hi.us/Keables/KeablesGuide/PartFive/CreativeWriting.htm>

short stories narrate only one or two incidents, but good stories often give us a sense of the characters' entire lives. Why are they the way they are? Have they been affected by the place where they live, the parents who raised them, their work, their marriage? The writer faces the challenge not only of making characters four-dimensional, but of unfolding the dimensions gradually and naturally.

10. Introducing dialogue. Common errors:

a. Introduce dialogue grammatically. A verb like *said* is required. Some verbs require an indirect object:

WRONG: He told, "I'm leaving."

RIGHT: He told his girlfriend, "I'm leaving."

Not all verbs that describe manner or speech can introduce dialogue by themselves:

WRONG: "Your move," he smiled.

RIGHT: "Your move," he said with a smile.

WRONG: He shrugged, "If you say so."

RIGHT: Shrugging, he said, "If you say so."

b. Identify the speakers with a phrase like "he said." You may know who is speaking in each paragraph, but your reader needs help.

c. Vary the location of the "he said" phrases. It is monotonous if the "he said" phrase comes at the beginning or end of every paragraph. Do not keep the reader wondering who is speaking:

WRONG: "I hate to disappoint you, but I think you're making a big mistake. Are you sure you'll feel this way next week? Or next year? Do you think you can just walk back into your girlfriend's arms if you should someday change your mind?" *my sister asked.*

BETTER: "I hate to disappoint you," *my sister counseled*, "but I think. . . ."

d. Vary the verbs that introduce dialogue. Avoiding repetition of *say* ("he said," "she said") is a problem all writers of fiction face. Any technique can sound monotonous and artificial if you overuse it, including adverbs ("he said tenderly") and inversion ("said the butler"). Edgar Allan Poe used inversion in the famous refrain of "The Raven" ("Quoth the raven, 'Nevermore'") because he wanted the poem to sound archaic and artificial.

A list of alternatives is provided below. Many words on the list would be appropriate only in certain contexts. The dullness of "he said" is preferable to something outlandish or artificial ("he opined"; "she queried"). Use the thesaurus, the dictionary, and your own imagination. A metaphor (*twitter*, *erupt*) can be effective if the context is right. Always remember that writing "he nagged" or "she whined" is less effective than showing your character nagging or whining.

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admit	concede	hint	observe	snarl
affirm	confess	hiss	plead	snicker
avow	conjecture	huff	protest	snort
bawl	coo	inquire	purr	spout
beg	declare	insist	rage	squawk
bellow	demand	interject	rail	squeal
boast	explain	jeer	rave	tease
cackle	greet	lament	recall	vow
cajole	groan	lie	remark	warble
carp	growl	mimic	roar	whimper
chant	grumble	mutter	scold	whine
chide	grunt	needle	shriek	whisper
claim	gush	note	sigh	yelp

11. Verb tense. Most stories and novels are in the past tense for good reason. It sounds natural. When you tell a child the story of the tortoise and the hare, or simply report to a friend what happened over the weekend, you use past tense. Present tense narrative is not original or innovative; it has been tried often. Sometimes it only calls attention to itself and sounds awkward:

The burglar pulls the trigger. I duck, but I am too late. I am rushed to the hospital, where I lie in a coma for two months. My family fears for my life. Every night my mother sits at my bedside crying. I recover, but over the next year my personality changes gradually. I become a serial killer. I am sentenced to death. I die. My mother weeps at my funeral.

You may use present tense, but (as with any stylistic technique) you should have a good reason.