

## Top Tips For Creative Writing

Start with a bang. Don't start your essay "Ever since I was little, I've always been interested in horses." Instead, "Velvet and tickly whiskers and a steamy sigh in my hand--Princess is snuffling my fingers for sweet feed."

Organize your material--creative means freedom, not chaos. Your readers should be able to see a clear pattern of ideas and images emerging as they read your writing. Use paragraphing and/or white spaces to separate topics.

End with fireworks. Don't trail off weakly or introduce a new topic at the end.

Location, location, location! ALWAYS let your readers know where you're writing from. Readers go nuts if they don't know. Was your first job working in a used car lot in Anchorage? Philadelphia? Phoenix? *Moscow*? Where should we imagine you? Get skillful at this: "The day our team made the headlines of the *Albuquerque Journal*"; "Growing up on a remote ranch in Northern New Mexico"; "I've always been chary of DC taxis."

Never use label words like *beautiful, delicious, awesome, incredible, fun, exciting, horrible, frightening, messy*. Show, don't tell!

Use examples! Don't say your housemate complained about your shopping, say Ziggy always griped that the bread was too soft, the cheese was too hard, the eggs were too small, and the dish soap was the wrong color.

Often, turn your examples into action scenes. Don't just say, as an example of your uncle's generosity, that one year he paid your college tuition. Say, We were sitting at the red light on Mills when Uncle Frank went up on one haunch and pulled out his checkbook. "Gimme your pen," he said, and he starting filling out a check on his knee. "What are you doing?" I asked. "I just can't feature you dropping out now," he said. "You're so close."

As often as possible, make your descriptions of people, places, and things dynamic by presenting them with an action. Don't just say the woman was a red head. Say she kept pushing her loose red ringlets back behind her ears. Don't just say the house was under an elm tree and had a tin roof, say At night we'd lie in bed listening to the comforting sound of the wind skreeking the elm branches slowly back and forth across the tin roof.

Threesomes rule! There is something very satisfying about three of anything--the balance is perfect. When you're giving examples, give three. Or create your paper around three main scenes or illustrations. (But *don't* overuse this trick.)

Use numbers! Don't say you were little and disappointed in love. Say by the time you were ten years old, six different girls had already broken your heart. Your aunt didn't just can. She put up 60 jars each of pole beans and white corn, 350 jars of Red Haven peaches, and 30 jars of watermelon pickle. It wasn't a just a tiring trip: our flight was delayed for six hours and then we had to change terminals twice and pay \$80 for a taxi that finally dropped us at our doorstep at 4:00 a.m.

Use proper nouns. Don't just say you lived across the street from a church and ate fast food. Telling your readers you lived right across the street from Our Lady of Sorrows or that Friday

nights you'd buy a six-pack of Mountain Dew and get egg rolls from the Blue Lotus Café is a lot more interesting.

Use your sense--your five senses. Always try to come up with each: how something looks, sounds, smells, feels, and tastes. You don't need to *use* each, but the experiment may help you find a fresh and original way to describe something. Always tell us how a place smells. You'll pull your readers right in. And portraits of people benefit from smells as well. My Aunt Bertha who always smelled like white carnation perfume. My Uncle Ciro who smelled like cherry tobacco. A fretful old geography teacher whose pointy black shoes smelled like vinegar.

Hearing voices. Your scene leaps into life when your readers hear people talking. Don't say your mother gave you comforting advice when your boyfriend left you. Say She took both my hands in hers and said, "Look, Honey, . . ." Don't say kids were gossiping. Say "Did you see what she had in her locker?" "Where do you think he got that truck?" "That's not what Ginny told me" "Last night, around four in the morning". . . Well, that's what he *wants* people to think. . ."

Cut, cut, cut! Imagine a crisp new dollar bill in your pocket for every colorless, factless, or repetitious word you drop. Most any gym you can attend will have their hours open early and close late in the day (18 words) becomes Most gyms open early and close late (7 words; \$11 in your pocket) Words and phrases like *quite, rather, kind of, sort of, somewhat, about* or *around* (meaning approximately), *very, really, you know, I mean, to me, in my opinion, and I guess* weaken sentences. Avoid them! It was ~~about~~ ten years ago. She was ~~kind of~~ angry when I told her the news. It was ~~somewhat~~ late. Avoid starting sentences with the empty filler word *there*. There were lots of people in the hallway becomes People crowded the hallway. You never need expressions like *in color, in shape, in size*. It was light blue in color becomes it was light blue. An oval shaped photograph becomes an oval photograph. A good way to practice cutting empty words is to highlight the key ("telegraph") words and then create a new sentence using only those words and any essential words like *the, and, etc*.

End strong! Never end sentences on boring words. Move the boring stuff like time markers, etc. to the beginning: Dick Tracy discovered the body of the drug lord in an empty dumpster early in the morning of 5 June 1956 becomes Early in the morning of 5 June 1956, Dick Tracy discovered the body of the drug lord in an empty dumpster.

Put things in order of increasing interest or seriousness. The kitten had black feet, one eye, and white fur becomes The kitten had white fur, black feet, and one eye.

Don't be shifty. Don't switch from *we* or *I* to the generic *you*. Don't shift from *it* to *they* or *they* to *it*. Don't shift from present to past tense without reason.

Never leave the reader wondering *by whom* an action is done. The buttons light up in a cool blue color when pressed becomes When I press the buttons, they light up cool blue. After the firepit was dug becomes After we dug the firepit . . .

Tell us something we don't know. We've all read essays about our trip to Disneyland, how you met your boyfriend, the best rock concert. A clichéd topic can become a wonderful topic if you have a unique take on it. Taking your blind cousin to Disneyland, falling in love during a flood, watching a rock concert with the lighting guy, etc.

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