Teaching Creative Writing—The Spice in Your Composition Program
BY BEVERLY WHITE

So writes Marlene D. LeFever in her book, Creative Teaching Methods: Be an Effective Christian Teacher (2004). Nowhere is creative teaching more necessary than in the teaching of creativity itself and in teaching its close companion, creative writing. In today’s world, the ability to write well is well-recognized as a vital, lifelong skill; logically then, teaching students how to write well is equally important. A survey of the titles and subtitles of English textbooks reveals the frequency of the word composition somewhere on the first page. Likewise, a typical survey of teaching journals shows numerous titles and activities on creativity, creative thinking, “writing across the curriculum,” and related topics. Yet in discussions with English teachers at all grade levels, who use a spectrum of English textbooks, many admit that they do not teach enough composition, some because they “do not have time,” others because they “don’t know how,” many because of both reasons. And much of the composition they do teach is not creative writing; thus Christian school educators, and English teachers in particular, would do well to evaluate the importance of teaching their students creative thinking and writing skills.

This article focuses on developing creative writing skills, not only through direct composition instruction, but also through activities designed to develop creative thinking skills. But before a teacher can teach creative writing, he must know what creative writing is, as well as what it is not. Certainly to a point all composition is creative, requiring the writer to synthesize ideas in a verbal form that is different from any other previously written work. Yet often what is called creative writing is in actuality exposition or persuasion. Expository writing is writing to inform; Minot (2003) calls it factual writing. Expository writing includes the essay, reports, research, reviews, and other types of factual and nonfiction writing—the types of assignments that account for most composition assignments in the school setting. Exposition generally follows a standard format: thesis or topic statement, support, and conclusion. The format is basically the same whether one is writing an expository paragraph, a summary, or a doctoral dissertation. In expository writing, regardless of the topic, the main concern is that the facts are presented accurately and that proper credit is given to the sources of the factual information.

Persuasive writing is purposeful and focused, intended to motivate the reader to believe or do something. Assigned formats for persuasive writing vary; but, again, the form is fairly standardized: premise, logic/reasoning, and conclusion. Well-written persuasion relies on valid logic and reasoning, which ultimately results in a valid conclusion. Effective persuasion challenges the reader to evaluate his own opinions, beliefs, or actions, determining why, or why not, he agrees or disagrees with the writer.

Exposition and persuasion are important composition genres—for students in the school setting and for lifelong applications. These types of writing require analytical
thinking, some type of list or outline, logical sequence, and unity and focus of thought. The preplanning stage for these genres is significant; in fact, developing a quality thesis statement and support outline may often take up to one-third of the entire writing time for a specific composition assignment. Yet they are not generally considered creative writing genres.

Creative writing, in contrast, relies more on imagination than on factual accuracy (Minot, 2003) and is generally considered the domain of three literary genres: poetry, fiction, and drama. Though creative writing may be based on fact and personal experience (it has been said that all creative writing is somewhat autobiographical) and may even have an informative or persuasive agenda, the methods of creative writing focus on literary techniques more related to beauty of design, sound, and sensory details. Additionally, the three creative writing genres are generally considered writing to entertain.

Thus, together, exposition, persuasion, and creative writing exemplify and encompass the three main purposes for writing: to inform, to persuade, and to entertain. And, generally speaking, though perhaps more at the secondary level, students have relatively few opportunities to develop their creative writing skills, writing for enjoyment. In fact, too often students, and even teachers, pronounce a negative opinion of the creative writing genres, particularly poetry and drama (English teachers, this is the time to cheer for Shakespeare and Milton, for Frost and Homer, for Evangeline and Murder in the Cathedral!).

The English departments in most schools rely on a grammar/composition textbook; most grammar and composition textbooks include units or assignments designed to develop skills in expository writing, admittedly varying greatly in teaching strategies and focus. Some textbooks also include narrative assignments, but rarely instruction in the techniques and structure for writing fiction, poetry, and drama. Thus, if a teacher wants to teach creative writing (and thinking), he probably will need to develop his own teaching ideas and methodology.

This article cannot substitute for a writing curriculum. Hopefully, however, elementary and secondary English teachers can enrich their courses, and their students’ learning, with some of the ideas and activities that follow. A few schools may even be able to add a creative writing course to their secondary electives. With the need in today’s society for quality Christian fiction, drama, and poetry, encouraging and developing a love for reading and writing these genres is a valuable goal for Christian schools.

Starting with a Love for Words and the Sound of Words

Creative writing at all grade levels can be encouraged through the use of activities that require creative thinking and activities that focus on developing a love for words—having “fun with words.” Younger students love rhyming and word games—but enjoyment of word games should be nurtured and encouraged with older students also.
The following list provides only a sampling of activities used successfully with students, but it also illustrates the variety of creative writing activities at the “word” level, including activities appropriate for kindergartners to secondary students:

- Complete similes. “Red as . . .” “Soft as . . .”
- Complete descriptive phrases. “A raindrop is . . .”
- Make a “pair/pear” tree. (The fruit are “pairs” of homonyms.)
- Sing the “Crazy Compound” song. “Did you every see a butter/fly (ear/drum; milk/shake)?” Illustrate the compounds.
- Use words to describe a color. “Red is . . . (sights, sounds, smells, feelings).”
- Make up words for “animules” and illustrate them: buffalopes, kangarooster.
- Keep a class list of palindromes, words that are the same backward or forward or become a different word when reversed: tot, eye, nun, mood-doom.
- Illustrate the multiple meanings of a words such as rose, trunk, etc.
- Rewrite a story, replacing as many of the words with antonyms as possible.
- Write and illustrate idioms. “She has cold feet.”
- Keep a class list of words that sound like their meanings (alliteration): hiss, tick-tock.
- Share lists of words that rhyme (or start the same, have the same middle sound, etc.).
- Study foreign words that have “strange” sounds for the letters: French “-que”; English silent letters as in “Vauxhall.”
- Make class or individual illustrated dictionaries (pictionaries).
- Study and discuss connotative words such as color words (red, green, etc.).
- Design word trees. The root is the trunk; related words are the branches.
- Create and share phrases using alliteration or other poetic devices. Tongue-twisters are good for this: “Rapid Reese racing right ’round the rink.”

Poetry itself is a wonderful vehicle for instilling a love for the sound of words. Just watching a kindergarten class do the motions to a nursery rhyme, or bob to the beat of a
jingle illustrates this. Teachers of all ages can build on this natural affinity for rhyme and rhythm by making poetry reading, memorizing, and interpreting an integral part of the curriculum—and not just in English class. *Paul Revere’s Ride* is a wonderful poem for history class; in fact, one eighth grade history teacher dramatizes the poem each year for her class. An example of a great resource for American history is *American History in Verse* (Stevenson, 1975), which provides poems (though not all of the highest literary caliber) and appropriate narration for U.S. history. Biblical poetry can be used in science class (God’s speech to Job is superb for this), as well as for public speaking—talk about effective rhetoric! From Dr. Seuss, to Shel Silverstein, to limericks and the perennial favorites of “Casey at the Bat” and “Jabberwocky,” students of all ages enjoy well-read quality poetry. (Please note for this article that we are not distinguishing between poetry and verse.) Of course, this focus on fun is merely one aspect of poetry enjoyment. Students should also have ample positive experiences with traditional classical poetry. Epic poems such as *Evangeline*, *The Odyssey*, and *Beowulf* can be taught creatively and enjoyably to secondary students. And no student should graduate from high school without having stomped in iambic pentameter and read, orally of course, and acted in at least one small-group rendition of a scene (five groups, five acts, that covers it) from a Shakespearean drama. *Taming of the Shrew* and *Henry V* tend to be popular for this. Notice “assign to read” and “tested on” have not been mentioned. Teachers of Shakespeare, or any type of drama, can consult one of the *Shakespeare Set Free* (1993) books for ideas to help students enjoy Shakespeare through dramatic interpretation rather than assigned reading and testing.

**Breaking Down the “I’m Not Creative” Barrier**

Most primary children respond positively to assignments that require creative thinking; but by about fourth grade, many students have decided that “I’m not creative!” Too often English teachers share that their middle school and high school students groan at the thought of writing a short story or, “even worse,” a poem, which means that elementary and English teachers must develop a plan to help their students enjoy thinking creatively. Tsujimoto (1988) lists thirty strategies for teaching poetry writing, including writing a two-word poem, creating a poem from a “list of twelve,” and illustrating a paradox. A self-description in recipe form can easily become a poem. Drury (1991) suggests having students choose a favorite poem and substitute/replace as many words as possible with a word of the same part of speech to make a new poem, a wonderful way to overcome the “I don’t know how to start” syndrome.

Another way to encourage students who hesitate expressing themselves creatively is to use writing portfolios, with an emphasis on the writing process. Students can develop sections in their portfolios: ideas; works in progress; works I’m not enjoying now but may want to finish later; works ready for peer review; works in final form; works ready to be published. Too often students think every writing attempt must be “A” quality; encouraging them to think more like professional writers helps them understand that every writer has bad days and writer’s block, some writing attempts deserve to be forgotten, and not every work needs to be revised into publishable form. (By the way, with many schools now purchasing anti-plagiarism software, a positive byproduct is the
ability to let students peer review the work of their classmates.) For those not familiar with the use of portfolios in the classroom, Danielson and Abrutyn (1997) have developed an excellent booklet describing strategies for using portfolios as a teaching and learning tool.

Brainstorming and other creative thinking activities can also encourage students in their creative writing attempts. In How to Develop Student Creativity (1996), Sternberg and Williams list “25 Ways to Develop Creativity.” They address basic tips for teaching, including allowing time for creative thinking, allowing mistakes, and providing an encouraging, creative classroom environment. When every question has only one answer and every activity has only one acceptable product, creativity is stifled. Creative thinking and creative writing require time and nurturing, and teachers must use creativity to supply these in their classrooms.

Writing Poetry

As already discussed, poetry appeals to students’ natural love for sound and rhythm. Poetry writing can begin with one-word poems, simple similes, extended metaphors, and structure poems such as haiku and shape poems; poetry is so versatile it can fit any teacher and class. A study of biblical poetry supplies models for sensory imagery, repetition, simile, metaphor, personification, in fact, basically every poetic device students will use except rhyme. LeFever (2004) includes a whole section in her book with suggestions for using Bible poetry to model and teach poetry writing. Additionally, as part of a poetry writing unit, students, in a few weeks, can develop their own personal poetry anthology, a motivational strategy not possible with other types of creative writing. The key is that teachers share their personal love for poetry and their own favorite poems, rather than focusing on analysis and “understanding.” In fact, Drury (1991) recommends focusing less on understanding the poem and focusing more on experiencing and enjoying the poem. In other words, rather than just trying to explain what a poem means, focus on its beauty of words, sound, and feeling.

Writing Narrative Fiction

Short story writing may be the most common fiction writing assignment. The use of the narrative outline, plot mountain, and elements of literature follow the same patterns as most literature studies, and many English/composition texts include narrative assignments. Extremely important, however, is allowing students enough time to work through the writing process when working on narrative fiction. The “traditional” one week to write a first draft, revise, and recopy the final draft will not produce quality fiction; a minimum of four to six weeks is recommended, with class time provided for peer review. As they revise their works, students should work to develop well-rounded characters, not caricatures, revealing character through dialogue rather than narration. They should practice painting pictures with words, modeling their description after such works as Deerslayer by Cooper or Lord of the Rings by Tolkien. They can evaluate their writing according to the three basic characteristics of a good short story: can be read at one sitting, has one central mood, and everything in the story contributes to that mood.
Dealing with Drama

Poetry probably provides the easiest way to start students writing creatively; narrative is probably the most common creative writing. But students can also enjoy writing and producing original drama. Elementary students can write and present their own skits, while high schoolers can begin by dramatizing a favorite short story, novel scene, or narrative poem. The narrative sections of Job, for example, are easily dramatized, as are the opening scene of *The Scarlet Letter*, the first court scene in *Tale of Two Cities*, even Dr. Seuss. Works such as *Beowulf* adapt well to readers’ theater. Most students have studied the elements of drama—plot, character, dialogue, tone as in fiction, but also the use of props, staging and stage directions, and interpretation, which are unique to drama writing and production. And, obviously, since the purpose of drama is performance, every effort should be made to provide opportunities for students to perform their original dramas for an appreciative audience—an elementary class, the room next door, or at the least, the rest of the class.

Secondary students are capable of more advanced drama writing. They should, however, be warned and coached to avoid melodrama in their dramatic works (Minot, 2003) just as they should avoid the trite plot and conflicts common in poorly written fiction. Positively, they should be encouraged to include brief monologues, foils, and dramatic irony in their works. Perhaps the greatest challenge in writing drama is to develop character through dialogue, a goal in narrative writing, but a necessity in dramatic writing (Minot).

Implementing Creative Writing Into the Curriculum

Implicit in creative writing assignments is integrating them, first of all, with the school's literature program. Classic and quality modern poetry, fiction, and drama provide the models for creative writers—students should read them, enjoy them, analyze them, perform them, share them. In other words, the more students are positively immersed in quality literature, the more basis they have for writing quality works, and for wanting to write them.

As a last encouragement, every effort should be made to produce a student literary anthology—whether for a class or a school, whether by the seniors, creative writing class, journalism class, student government. Students love to see their works published. Additionally, numerous publications and competitions cater to publishing student works. The final step of the creative writing process is publishing, putting the work into final form for a reader audience.

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References


Creative writing is any writing that goes outside the bounds of normal professional, journalistic, academic, or technical forms of literature, typically identified by an emphasis on narrative craft, character development, and the use of literary tropes or with various traditions of poetry and poetics. Due to the looseness of the definition, it is possible for writing such as feature stories to be considered creative writing, even though they fall under journalism, because the content of features is