



## CREATIVE WRITING MATTERS

by Charlotte Safieh

I work in classrooms in Toronto teaching creative writing and publishing students' stories in their own professionally published chapter books. What a wonderful journey it has been—every student's story paints a unique picture that expresses who they are. My experience has shown that giving students unrestrained freedom to write their own stories makes writing a truly creative process. Perhaps you too are interested in helping your students become authors of their own narratives.

### **Why Creative Writing Matters**

Including an in-depth story writing program in the school year develops students' maturity in terms of understanding themselves and others, and helps them to make sense of the world. This learning occurs partly because it accesses their unconscious, something shared with any creative pursuit. As Carlos Ruis Zafon, author of books including *The Shadow of the Wind* and *The Angel's Game*, says, "A story is a letter that the author writes to himself, to tell himself things that he would be unable to discover otherwise."

When students are telling their own stories they become engaged in the writing process, they care more about their writing, and they develop a more positive attitude to writing and a strong sense of ownership. It becomes very important to them that their writing is clear and easy to follow, that their story makes sense and that they have put quotation marks in correctly for their dialogue.

Many teachers already know this, and are doing a wonderful job of nurturing their students' creative writing. However, if you are a little hesitant to dive into a full creative writing program, I hope this article will help.

## **How to Teach a Creative Writing Program**

So where to start? Begin by giving your students personal writing journals, but do not read them; just make sure they are writing in them, at least ten minutes a day in class. I often put music on; you can provide a photograph or a question to get them started. Get them in the habit of allowing their writing to flow—punctuation and spelling do not matter at this point. Allow them to think and look out the window if they need to, but the idea is that they have time focused on writing without talking.

In addition to this journal writing time, give your students skills for writing. My program runs for twelve weeks and for the first five weeks we look at one element of writing a story each week, as follows.

### **Week One: Generating Stories**

How do you come up with story ideas? Not sure where to begin? Explore different ways to find stories from your experiences and stimulating prompts. Have fun discovering the stories inside you.

### **Week Two: Descriptive Writing**

Word choice is an important skill when writing descriptively. Learn how to use exciting, powerful and specific words to make your writing more descriptive. Explore techniques such as onomatopoeia and metaphors.

### **Week Three: Describing a Setting**

A story has to take place somewhere that you describe for your reader so they are there with you. Use all your senses to describe your setting.

### **Week Four: Developing Characters**

How do you create characters that engage your reader? Discover how to build believable characters that make your story unputdownable.

### **Week Five: Plot**

What makes an exciting plot? How do you sustain your plot for a whole story? Learn how to build problems, create tension and resolve stories in creative ways.

Now we are at week six and they are ready to put it all together. I use a graphic organizer to ensure they have a plan, but always remind them that the plan is just a guide and can be changed

later. Some of my students' best stories were the ones that came after their first attempts were quite far along, "Miss, I have a better idea can I start again?" Then they are sitting in the corner of the classroom writing furiously to catch up. Be flexible, it is a creative venture and creativity is not always an organized and linear process. Students will likely have some ideas already from their journal writing and the writing exercises they have done to help put their plan together. Once their plan is done they can begin chapter one.

Chapter one is an important place as a teacher to spend time evaluating every student's work. If chapter one is on the right track, hooray! Let the writer keep going. If not, you need to go back to ensure the key elements are in place: introduce the plot, have a main character and set it somewhere. Go back to the plan and work with your students until they are happy they have a good starting point.

The goal is to write a chapter book of at least five chapters, but the length is up to the student. I have had some books with a few sentences in each chapter and some lengthy books with twenty chapters. It doesn't matter; that is their choice, and if they are not strong writers they can still be successful. However, do encourage them to write more if you think they can. I often find students have a much more complete and exciting story in their heads that they can talk about, they just did not include it in their writing. Ask pertinent questions and ensure they keep improving, adding and editing.

I find peer editing is a great way to develop a community of writers; students can share their stories, ideas and their learning. Ensure they do not always work with their best friends. Provide a good introduction to the rules of a peer editing workshop and clear worksheets to guide them. The first step in editing is to expand and improve the story—save the punctuation and polishing to the end. Ensure your students understand the difference or it just becomes a red pen exercise.

Read alouds are an important part of the process. Some will be more confident than others, but gradually as the program progresses, the hesitant ones will hopefully become brave enough to share a chapter of their stories too.

Write with them and share your writing and your writing process with your students. This will encourage them. It is not easy to write a good story, and if they see you struggle and solve your problems along the way, they will learn from that.

Never close them down. If they are writing violent stories, remember that most Disney movies involve a fair amount of violence, think Lion King or Peter Pan. Dark and violent themes in stories are not to be discouraged, that is their choice and their right. Harry Potter is not exactly light and fluffy! A quick reminder about appropriate language is all that is needed.

One important point during editing is to remind your students that every part of a story needs to be there for a reason. If someone turns up on an invisible motorbike in chapter one, that has to be important to the story. Random characters who turn up for no particular reason can be cut. Make sure they tie up all the loose ends.

Community circles are an effective way to problem solve and share successes. Many times if

someone is struggling with one aspect of writing others will be too. See if they can solve issues without you, the less you say in a community circle the more empowered they will feel.

The icing on the cake of this project is to publish the books. I have used blurb.com for the last three years and found them to be user friendly and affordable (approximately \$7.50 per book). You cannot include any pictures within the book, but you get beautiful colour pictures (photos or scanned art work) on the front and the back, with your title and blurb printed on top.

Finally, the celebration. Host an event for parents, and present the students with their published books. You can also invite the local press and school board officials. This is a very proud moment after three months of sustained hard work. And lastly, enjoy their stories, love their characters and zany plots. I have met a future Roald Dahl, a future Kenneth Oppel and a future J. K. Rowling on my travels through the 150 or so chapter books I have helped to publish to date. They love to tell their stories and you will love to read them.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



#### CHARLOTTE SAFIEH

Charlotte Safieh qualified with the Ontario College of Teachers in May 2010 and since then has been working in various schools teaching creative writing in the classroom. To find out more about Charlotte's work you can visit her website at [www.storyquest.org](http://www.storyquest.org).