

Everything I Learned in a Top Creative Writing Course

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A few years ago I decided I needed some help to push my writing career forwards. I had been telling people I was a 'writer' since I had left school, but the reality was a little different. My writing was sporadic and unfocused — I was one of those people with a hundred half-finished drafts and almost no completed pieces. And I was always distracted with big questions: *What type of writer was I? Was I any good? How should I be writing?* I needed some advice.

I'd known about this course for a long time. It's one of the good ones, with a long roster of success stories from award-winners to bestsellers. I knew I didn't have the time for an MA or MFA, but this was the next best thing: several months of classes that combined taught sessions, peer feedback and career advice. It was a great mix of theoretical and practical, and treated writing seriously as both a craft and a business.

From day one, I fell in love. Those hours became the highlight of my week. They nourished me and kept me going through whatever difficulties I experienced outside the course. I kept that regular appointment with near-religious devotion. Each week was a different subject, usually with recommended reading, exercises, and drinks afterwards where we would dissect and discuss everything from the class. We had access to some incredible guest speakers, some of whom rank among the most inspiring people I have ever met. And we had a close and supportive class of different ages, backgrounds and writing styles, who all learned with and from each other.

Everything I Learned

So I guess I learned a lot in those weeks. I must have. But if you asked me now what lessons I remember from the course, I could summarise quite easily for you:

- Nothing.

That is to say, I can't remember a single thing we were told. (I guess I could if I checked through my notes, but to be honest I didn't even write many of those.) There were no great secrets or tricks revealed to us. We weren't taught any easy ways to find success, or tips to make our writing instantly more readable, enjoyable or unique.

But let me re-frame the question. What do I now *do* that I didn't before the course?:

- I write. Not quite every day, but often.
- I read with the mind of a writer. (And not just read, but watch, listen and experience the world.)
- I practice my craft — I set myself prompts and exercises, I experiment.
- I value and seek out the feedback of my peers.
- I fail without fear.
- I speak with confidence about my abilities as a writer. (And when people compliment me, I take the compliment!)

Learning to Unlearn

It turns out, the best thing I did on the course wasn't to learn, but to unlearn. I unlearned my fear, and with it I unleashed a lot of my potential.

Fear prevents us moving forwards, and writers and other creatives are particularly susceptible to this. It makes us procrastinate, and discourages us from putting pen to

paper. It stops us thinking of ourselves as writers, and therefore prevents us gaining the opportunities that this can bring. It makes us fearful of taking risks, experimenting with our work or trying out things that may be uncomfortable — all things that are necessary if we want to develop an authentic and distinctive voice. It stops us showing our work to others for fear of criticism. And it prevents us owning who and what we are.

In short, fear suffocates us. And it kills our writing.

Now, you are never going to banish fear entirely as a writer. And I'm not sure you'd want to. A little fear is human, and you can only write well if you can tap into the part of you that is most human and most vulnerable. But most of it needs to go, and in those months I learned how to control mine. I wrote so much that I forgot to be afraid each time I started. I showed my work to people and realised that although doing so is scary, it is also deeply, deeply rewarding. And I slowly gained the confidence to call myself a writer.

From Fearlessness to Authenticity

My writing improved over the period of the course. But when the final lesson ended, it didn't stop improving. This is because I hadn't just been learning ways to write better; I had been learning *how to learn* to write better.

The simple fact is that before I attended those classes, I

wrote what I thought I was supposed to be writing: I copied my favourite writers or created fictional scenarios that felt suitably *literary*. And then I'd read back what I had written and would feel ashamed at how insincere it sounded. It wasn't me, after all. It was a semi-competent impression of other writers.

I now write in a wide range of styles and about many subjects, but all these writings are still essentially *me* in a way that nothing before was. They sound like me. They have my rhythm. They express my truth. Or at least they do a hell of a lot better than anything I wrote five years ago.

When you peel back layer after layer of fear, you know what's left? Authenticity. And that's where truly great writing can begin. It's a long process. I'm not there yet, and I'm not even sure it's a destination — but I'm on the path, and I'm enjoying the journey.

Be Your Own Teacher

If a writing course is what you want to do, I advise it. It's liberating, confidence-building, and one of the best ways to spend your free time and meet people who will support you. But if you don't have the time or money right now, or if you don't feel it's the right step for you, there are a lot things you can do to unlearn your fear on your own:

- Write as often as possible. The practice of sitting

down for half an hour or more every day will become a habit. And if you can learn to write without overthinking, you will start to write fearlessly.

- Stretch yourself. Set out to write something that you *know* will be bad — really bad. If you've never written a sci-fi short story before, write a sci-fi short story. If you haven't written a sonnet, write a sonnet. How did it feel? Did the world end? No? Do this again and again.
- Own your skill. Think about what makes *you* a good writer. What are your unique talents, your special perspectives? Maybe make a list. Believe in it. And when someone asks you what kind of writer you are, don't say 'oh, I haven't written much yet'; tell them what you *can* do.
- Find other writers and swap work. Give each other regular feedback. Develop an honest and respectful relationship. Not only will you discover how great it feels to have people pay close attention to your work, but you will slowly detach your writing from your ego, and this will help you take risks and be open to learn.

If you are stuck where I was a few years ago, you have two options: you either stay there, or you move forwards. And this is a guess, but I don't think you want to stay there.

If you do these things, and work at them, you are going to move forwards. You are going to unlearn your fear and

discover a lot about yourself as a writer. I can't promise how — it won't be linear, and not every day will feel easy. You will have doubts and days where the words just don't come out. But over the weeks and months, you will build greater confidence, write more, and begin to find a voice that will feel like *you*. And that's a greater lesson than money can buy.