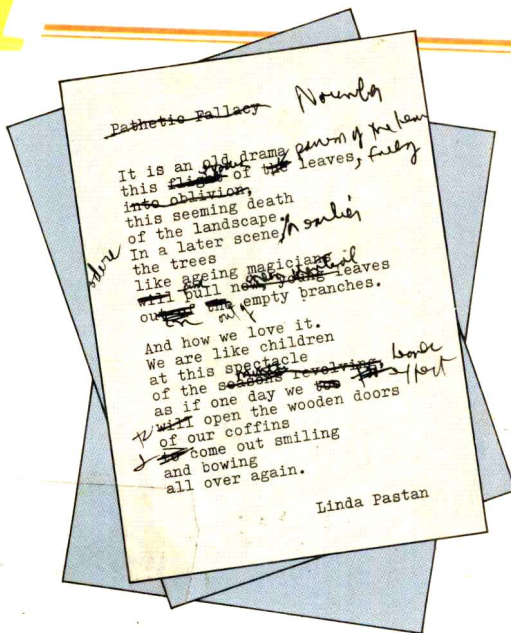


# Creative Writer's Handbook



Philip K. Jason  
Allan B. Lefcowitz

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**PHILIP K. JASON**

**ALLAN B. LEFCOWITZ**

*United States Naval Academy*



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*Dedication*

*To our students—  
Past, present, and future*

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# Preface

The *Creative Writer's Handbook* is designed to help beginners. While creativity itself cannot be taught, our premise is that you can learn to tap and shape your creative energies. We do not hold with that popular image of the creative artist as a solitary, inspired soul who spins out a sublime work without sweat and labor. Paradoxically, you need to be “practical” about creative writing.

Just as people with physical gifts can be coached so that these gifts are perfected, people with creative imaginations can be led to exercise and develop that creativity. They can be “coached” in the intricacies of language and literary structure. Though abilities will differ, our experience with hundreds of students in creative writing classes and workshops has shown us that most people have more creative talent than they realize. When they first begin to practice the craft, however, they need some direction about conventions, forms, and procedures. Each writer does not need to invent the game for him or herself.

This book began because we felt that the texts available to us, though admirable, were too advanced *for beginners*. They were like calculus to those who need algebra. We wanted a text that responded to the issues we faced in the classroom and the workshop with novice writers who needed to know everything from the rules of the game, to the proper formats, to the professional lingo. We had in mind a text that students could refer to for specific information and help on basic issues and problems.

In each chapter, we have combined the most useful theory, practical advice, and examples. The many questions and exercises are designed to

involve you in the issues and practice of literary craft. Some of them may even spark results worth developing into poems, stories, or plays.

Although your creative energies can be directed to produce successful results, not every writer can or deserves to make it into print, just as not every athlete can make it to the Olympics. Still, with hard work in a sport, craft, or art, you can improve, learn from experience and from authority, and find ways of making any such activity pleasurable and useful. Our first premise is rooted in the idea that doing creative writing is valuable in itself, if only to increase one's understanding of just how hard it is to write successfully.

Another premise is that *any* successful writing is finally the result of rigorous editing. As important as it is to get something down on paper in the first place—and we have given that problem much of our attention—it is even more important to learn how to shape and reshape, how to spot your problems, and how to work out your solutions. Every writer must learn how to take and use criticism and, at some point, every successful writer must take on the role of self-editor.

In the *Creative Writer's Handbook* we have provided a series of occasions for you to think, read, investigate, write, write again, and rewrite—and also to imitate, invent, respond, discover, and surprise yourself. However, even though we have given the order of presentation considerable thought, there can be as many paths through the book as there are readers. While this text is aimed at the student in the creative writing course, we have kept in mind the needs of the writer who wants to go at it solo.

The five chapters of "Part I: A Writer's Concerns" take up issues of importance to every creative writer; the next nine chapters—Parts II, III, and IV—focus on specific issues in the major genres; the final three chapters, Part V, contain the reference materials for writers.

Chapter 1 provides an opportunity for you to assess your motives and attitudes as a student of writing. We suggest ways that will help you to become assertive, disciplined, and ready for work. We encourage you to be serious, but not sour. Once you are "Working Like a Writer," you have a fighting chance of doing the work of a writer.

Chapter 2, "Keeping a Journal," aims to show one way that a writer forces commitment. Writers write. We provide a full box of suggestions to keep you working, but the goal is for you to strike off on your own. The journal is your lab, your practice field, where you can make false starts, mistakes, and discoveries.

Chapter 3 contains the broad, somewhat technical subject of "Point of View." In the journal, a person very close to the intimate "I" does almost all of the recording. Literary creations, however, often involve a less literally autobiographical "I." Who is the speaker in the story or poem? What difference does it make? Exploring these key questions requires careful reading and a number of exercises—occasions—to help you become confident in handling this complex, unavoidable issue.

In Chapter 4, “Language Is Your Medium,” you have an opportunity to exercise all the muscles in the body of words you need to command, and to get them working in harmony. You don’t expect a landscape painter to succeed without knowing anything about lines, shapes, and colors, and about brushes, pigments, and canvas. The writer too must master the materials, in this case the materials of language. Most of us take language for granted—it’s something we’re born to. Remember, however, that just as the demands put upon your language skills are now heightened, your concern for language must be similarly heightened. We think you will enjoy these jumping jacks, push-ups, and other language calisthenics.

Chapter 5 takes up the interplay between imagination and fact. In “Invention and Research” we share ideas and techniques, collected in many places over many years, that will enable you to access your creative energies. This chapter includes suggestions on how to find the facts you need to build the worlds your imagination will create. It also provides exercises that show how to use facts to stimulate creativity. In these exercises we show how writers can create their own games.

These first five chapters are grounded in general issues, so you can come to understand the ways in which *any* writing task can be “creative.” In the next nine chapters, you will explore the specific conventions and special concerns of the major genres: poetry, prose fiction, and drama. These chapters, the next three parts of the book, are, of course, the heart of the book; they are substantially more detailed than the preliminary chapters and require a slower pace.

The genre chapters combine information, examples, and exercises and contain both professional and student work to show various levels of achievement. We have isolated the major problems that beginners have and examined the nature and causes of those problems. Often we suggest solutions. We are convinced that effective creative writing is a network of solved problems.

Each of the three parts devoted to genre exploration begins with a chapter focusing on the conventions through which that genre defines itself. Our bias here is that without coming to grips with the conventions, you cannot reach an audience, nor can you ever become effectively *unconventional*.

In this book, “conventional” refers to the customs or protocols of a literary type. Just as religious groups have set patterns of observance, just as a meeting of foreign ministers has its established courtesies, just as a formal meeting has its way of getting things done (following, for instance, Robert’s Rules of Order), so literary types have their conventional—customary—methods of expression. Conventions enable everyone to start off with an agreement about the ground rules, and so, it is *through* these conventions, not *despite* them, that creative expression takes place. Through them, you meet the audience halfway.

Part Five is a series of short chapters that are a kind of tool box. Chap-

ter 15, "From Revision to Submission," aims at further development of editorial skills. It also explains and illustrates the conventions of manuscript form and discusses strategies for submitting work to editors. Chapter 16, "Word Processing," suggests ways to make the new technology serve the needs of the creative writer. Some of you may want to look at it earlier rather than later. The lists in "Tools and Resources," Chapter 17, are not meant to be definitive but suggestive, illustrating the kinds of books a creative writer wants to know about or own. The book concludes with a glossary of terms.

As much as possible we have followed our own classroom practice. We have tried to provide occasions for writing. Our approach is more like that of editors and writers than of critics. We have tried to give a realistic picture of the processes, demands, and rewards of the game. We cannot, of course, touch on everything. You will need someone—a teacher, workshop leader, or editor—to deal with the exceptions and complications.

### **For a Teacher or Workshop Leader**

We have included many more examples and exercises than anyone could use, even in a year-long course or workshop, so that both you and your students might have a variety from which to choose.

We invite you, as we do all our readers, to send us the results of these exercises for possible inclusion in future editions, as well as exercises of your own. We would also like to hear about aspects of craft you would like to see treated more fully. On the other hand, where do you think we could cut back? Remembering that this text is for beginning creative writers, please let us know what elements we missed completely. As editor out in the field, you become our best source for improving the book.

*Philip K. Jason*  
*Allan B. Lefcowitz*

# Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>ix</i>
<b>PART I A WRITER'S CONCERNS</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1 Working like a Writer</b>	<b>2</b>
Attitudes	2
A Digression for the Classroom User	4
On Being Unprofessional	5
Working Habits	6
A Word about Intentions	9
<b>2 Keeping a Journal</b>	<b>12</b>
Why Keep a Journal?	12
Your Journal	14
What to Write in the Journal	15
Getting Started	17
Keeping Up	19
What Will You Do with It All?	20
Suggestions for Journal Work	28
<b>3 Point of View</b>	<b>29</b>
What Is It?	29
Who Will Do the Telling?	30
The Decision and Its Consequences	34
The Range of Perspectives	38
"Rhody's Path" by William Goyen	44



<b>4</b>	<b>Language Is Your Medium</b>	<b>52</b>
	There Is No Such Thing As a Synonymn	52
	Choosing Well	55
	<i>Accuracy, 55 Precision, 55 Concreteness, 56</i>	
	<i>Appropriateness, 58 Idiomatic usage, 61</i>	
	Some Diction Problems	63
	Fun with Words	68
	Figures of Speech	69
<b>5</b>	<b>Invention and Research</b>	<b>78</b>
	The Original	78
	Originality and the Everyday	79
	The Relationship between Invention and Research	80
	Searching and Imagining	83
	Beginning with Facts	86
	Field Work	90
	<i>Ellis Island: Then and Now by Sharon Spencer</i>	
	The Time Capsule Game	98
	The World's Fair Game	98
<b>PART II</b>	<b>THE CONCERNS OF THE POET</b>	<b>109</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>The Elements of Poetry</b>	<b>110</b>
	The Nature of Poetry	110
	The Line	111
	The Line and Meter	115
	Lines and Rhymes	121
	The Line and Free Verse	123
	Lines in Combination	125
	Imagery	129
	Sound Patterns	132
	Off-Rhyme	135
<b>7</b>	<b>Practicing Poetry</b>	<b>138</b>
	Unscrambling	138
	Imitation	139
	Recasting	139
	More Unscrambling	140
	Memory Poem	140
	Formula Poems	140
	Ritual Poems	142
	List Poems	143
	Dramatic Poems	146
	Epistolary Poems	147

Wordplay Poems	148
Synesthetic Poems	148
Picture Poems	149
Music Poems	150
Found Poems	150

## **8 Poetry Problems 153**

Archaic Diction	153
The Anonymous Voice	154
Appalling Abstraction	155
Unintentional Humor	156
Jarring Diction	157
For the Sake of Rhyme	157
The Clash of Poetic Elements	159
Writing Past the Poem	159
Treasure Burying	160
Saying Too Much	161
The False Start	162
Punch-Line Endings	164
Ineffective Line Break	164
Out of Order	165
Derivative Drivel	166
Revision: A Brief Case Study	167

## **PART III THE CONCERNS OF THE FICTION WRITER 171**

### **9 The Elements of Fiction 172**

The Nature of Fiction	172
Plot and What It Does	174
Setting	178
Point of Attack	181
Character and Characterization	185
<i>Action, 190 Appearance, 191 Thought, 193 Dialogue, 195</i>	
<i>Indirect discourse, 198 Other means, 199</i>	
<i>Functionaries and stock characters, 199 Naming characters, 201</i>	
The Relationship of Character, Plot, and Setting	202

### **10 Narration and Its Problems 204**

Exposition	204
Flashbacks	207
Scene and Summary	210
Verisimilitude	217
Problems	220
<i>Needless complication, 220 Misuse of dialogue, 221</i>	
<i>Sudden comfort, 222 Sudden omniscience, 223</i>	

*Ping pong*, 223 *Wrong technique*, 224 *Pogo stick*, 224  
*Descriptive clutter*, 225 *Other problems*, 225

## 11 **Six Stories** 226

- "A Very Short Story" by Ernest Hemingway 226
- "Sunday in the Park" by Bel Kaufman 227
- "Balancing Act" by Joyce Reiser Kornblatt 230
- "The Boarding House" by James Joyce 236
- "The Lost Cottage" by David Leavitt 241
- "Good Advice Is Rarer Than Rubies" by Salman Rushdie 256

## PART IV THE CONCERNS OF THE PLAYWRIGHT 261

### 12 **The Elements of Drama** 262

- The Nature of Drama 262
- Storytelling with People and Things 263
- Characters 271
- Presenting Character 274
- Stock Characters and Character Development 276
- Characters in Place and Time 279
- Beats 281
- Setting 284

### 13 **Dialogue and Its Problems** 288

- Dialogue: The Essence of Drama 288
- Principles and Common Errors 292
  - Your exposition is showing*, 292 *Contractions and formality*, 294
  - Interruptions and other ways of creating verisimilitude*, 295
  - Fake dialogue or the dialogue dummy*, 297
  - Designators, or stealing the actor's and director's jobs*, 297
  - Long speeches*, 298 *Grunting and pausing*, 298 *Accents, dialect, and verbal tics*, 299
  - Swearing*, 300 *Locker Room Raillery*, 300

### 14 **The Browning Version** 307

- Introduction 307
- The Browning Version* by Terrence Rattigan 310
- A Word on Plays for Film 348
- Summary 349

## PART V THE WRITER'S BUSINESS 351

### 15 **From Revision to Submission** 352

- Revision 352
  - When to revise*, 353 *How to revise—checklists for poetry, fiction, and plays*, 353
- Mechanics 355
  - Checking for correctness*, 355

Some Words about Proofreading, 356	
Finding a Home for Your Work, 358	
Manuscript Form—Poetry, Fiction, and Plays 360	
<i>Cover letters, 367</i>	
A Miscellaneous Checklist 368	
What about Copyright? 368	

## **16 Word Processing 370**

A New Tool for the Writer 370
Streamlining Your Editing Work 371
Special Features 371
A Desk on Your Disk 374
Some Possible Problems 375
New Freedoms 377
Selecting a Word Processing Program 378

## **17 Tools and Resources 381**

Keeping a Journal 381
Language Is Your Medium 382
<i>Dictionaries, 382</i>
<i>Thesauri, 383</i>
Invention and Research 383
<i>Reference, 383 Facts, 384 Quotations, 384</i>
Writing Poetry 385
Writing Fiction 386
Writing Plays 386
Additional Texts on Creative Writing 387
From Revision to Submission 387
<i>Style manuals, 387 Markets, general, 387 Markets, poetry, 388</i>
<i>Markets, fiction, 388 Markets, plays, 388</i>
Word Processing 389
Glossaries 389
Periodicals 389
Organizations 390

## **Glossary of Key Terms 392**

## **Acknowledgments 409**

## **Index 414**

PART  
**I**

# ***A Writer's Concerns***

# Working Like a Writer

## ATTITUDES

The mere *desire* to be a writer is not sufficient. You need to train yourself in certain habits of mind and work, develop the attitudes, that can help carry you from the desire to the reality. This chapter focuses on one attitude in particular — *taking a professional stance* toward your work, your audience, and your editor.

While one can have many motives for writing, usually the reader has only one motive for reading and that is to experience writing that pleases both in its shape and subject. Of course, experts in and students of a field — let's say nuclear physics — might slug their way through poorly expressed prose to get information they need in order to understand the Big Bang — but most of us would not. To satisfy the readers' desire for writing that pleases, you have to be aware of their needs and then take pains to satisfy them. In fact, 90 percent of what is "creative" in creative writing grows from a professional attitude toward taking pains over what the amateur thinks of as mere details.

For most of us, the *mature* stance toward writing that we are talking about here does not simply happen.

Good creative writing is good writing. In all good writing, the conventions of English mechanics and usage (grammar, punctuation, spelling, word order) remain relevant. These conventions ought not be looked at as a block to creativity; in fact, they are the very things that allow others to share in your creativity. For example, conventional spelling allows you and

the reader to share a way of recognizing a word. Misspell to many words and see how rapidly the good will of your reader disappears.

Of course, you may take license with these conventions for special purposes. For example, you may have a character who speaks in ungrammatical ways, or you may decide not to use capitals or punctuation for particular effects (as did e e cummings, the poet). These are purposeful decisions you make from your knowledge and control of the language system. However, flawed prose does not become good poetry. Carelessness, slovenliness, and ignorance do not become virtues just because you are doing "creative" writing.

A professional writer is not satisfied with mere self-expression. If you write only for yourself, you have severely restricted your audience. In any case, your writing will become more effective when you are aware that you must please, involve, awaken, provoke, excite, move — other people. The sense of a potential audience should create in you both energy and a feeling of obligation. Unless you make something happen to a reader, you are not doing anything worthwhile *as a writer*. (There are therapeutic uses of writing, of course, but those are not concerns of this book.)

How can you determine your success? One way is by being in a course or workshop that will provide feedback from the instructor and the other participants. They are your sounding boards, to be replaced at some point by editors and by your own developed editorial capabilities. Learning to invite and make positive use of this feedback — even of harshly negative commentary — is essential to your growth as a writer.

Listen carefully, take notes, and keep an open mind. Of course, you can't write and revise merely to satisfy others. You are the boss. However, you shut your ears to such responses at your peril. The reactions of your teacher and your fellow writers help you develop a consciousness of audience, and your responses to their efforts can sharpen your own editorial skill.

Being a writer means being a reader in a new way — being more conscious of how the game is played. Almost without exception, great athletes are fans of their sport, artists visit galleries and museums, musicians attend concerts. It is reasonable for writers to read, both for pleasure and for professional development. You don't have to reinvent everything about writing to be creative. Existing stories, plays, and poems are the essential context for new work in each genre. As a writer, you must have a knowledge of genre conventions, the scope of literature, and the contemporary literary environment. If you have aspirations to poetry, you should be constantly reading poetry. You need to read your contemporaries as well as the major voices of each literary period. Read, analyze, ponder, imitate, and record your impressions.

As you read, keep your eyes open for blunders you think the writer has made and work out how you might have handled the problem differently. Look for techniques that you can borrow and apply to your own

writing. Imagine your own variations on another writer's characters, images, themes, or premises. Writing is a response to other writing just as much as it is a response to life.

Don't expect miracles. Part of being professional is having patience. Successful writing comes through a mixture of talent, learned skills, and commitment over a period of time. About commitment we have little to say — except that it is indispensable.

## **A DIGRESSION FOR THE CLASSROOM USER**

All we have said until this point assumes that you are serious about becoming a published writer. However, there are many other reasons for reading a book or taking a course in creative writing. Let us discuss some of the possibilities.

- You always wanted to try writing something, so you thought you would take this course. A good enough reason. Your desire to experiment, to try something new, should be given an outlet. Take maximum advantage of this pleasant fact: your school has made this opportunity available to you. Though you may never go further with your writing than this course, you will have satisfied your curiosity. Certainly, you will come away with some sense of the demands placed upon a creative writer, and your appreciation of literature should only be enhanced by your having faced the series of complex problems that a successful writer must solve.
- You always had trouble with writing in other courses, so you thought you would take a course that focuses on writing. A good motive, but maybe this is the wrong course. A creative writing course is neither a remedial course, nor a review of grammar and mechanics; successful creative writing builds upon a firm control over the basic conventions of the written language. On the other hand, if you write correctly but not *effectively*, a creative writing course can help you. The attention to writing strategies, diction, organization, figurative language, and other issues can benefit any writer. All writing becomes creative when it escapes being bland, meandering, and impersonal. So, yes, your efforts in imaginative literature will make a positive contribution to your general writing ability — though only if the fundamentals are well in hand.
- You needed to fulfill a distribution requirement and this was the only humanities course that fit your schedule. A practical reason, certainly, but not an impressive one. The key to what happens now is your attitude. Others are in the course for more urgent, personal reasons. As a matter of respect for them, you have to agree to be serious



about this endeavor. Be positive. Get the most out of the situation. You will meet some interesting people, and you will have fun reading their work as well as the work of accomplished, published writers. Remember also that everyone can benefit from the kind of engagement with language and human issues that this course will afford.

## ON BEING UNPROFESSIONAL

You will have a productive, professional attitude when you no longer offer defenses for unsatisfactory work. Here is a small sampling of unprofessional stances toward criticism of one's writing:

1. "That's how I felt" or "that's what I believe," when somebody points to a writing problem in a work. This "defense" confuses the issue. If the criticism is about fuzzy diction, for example, by defending the legitimacy of our feelings or belief, we are avoiding the issue of the *effectiveness* of our writing. What often happens is that the writer has only managed to state an emotion or idea and hasn't made it live for the reader. Moreover, the excuse assumes that the reader cares about the "I" or that a record of personal experience or belief, in and of itself, has merit. The writer's job is to create experience through language. Of course, we always know (or do we?) what *we're* talking about, so that as readers of our own work we are privileged in ways that make us poor critics of it. The reader doesn't care how the writer feels. The real question is: Has the writer made the *reader* feel?
2. "But it really happened like that." Related to (1) above, this excuse focuses on events rather than feelings. We mistake a certain kind of accuracy in rendering events that are our source experiences with the needs of the work at hand. The mere fact that something really happened does not justify placing it in a story, play, or narrative poem. The writer's job is to use experience, not be used by it. If it is important *to the story* that the gas tank was one-quarter full or that early Beatles tunes were being played on the radio or that the predicted thunderstorm did not come, then give the reader such information. Remember that the demands of the story are not *necessarily* what happened, especially if what happened is downright tedious. Your job is to convince the reader that the event *happened in the story*, not that you saw it happen in the streets. Of course, if something is important to the story and did not happen, put it in.
3. "Doesn't 'creative' mean I can do what I want?" This is almost a meaningless question. It's similar to saying "doesn't 'freedom' mean I can do what I want?" Both questions reveal frivolous attitudes. The freedoms we have are a result of our agreements to limit ourselves;