

TOP TIPS

Bidisha's ten top tips for Budding Writers

Anyone can write. Forget everything you've heard about creative types being tormented souls suffering from melancholy and madness. It's far better to have lived your life - however ordinary it may seem to be - with humility, honesty and humour, because those are the qualities that go into brilliant writing.

Here are my tips for writing a great short piece of prose to enter in the Time Out: Write Up Your Street competition.

1. Do what comes naturally.

To begin to write, all you have to do is put pen to paper and express how you see the world. Begin by describing something – anything – in a few sentences. It could be a favourite walk, a friend, a hobby, the place where you go to think, even the weather, the view from your window or the things in your room. Focus on one thing and write down what comes to you, in four or five sentences. Trust that your brain, heart and soul know how best to express your perceptions and remember that vivid details are more important than grand statements.

2. Write about what you know.

Don't wrack your brains coming up with a thrilling Hollywood-style concept for your competition entry. Simply take a bit of time to jot down what you notice about your life and surroundings: the small details, funny incidents and odd conversations, the interesting people you encounter and the feelings they evoke. You will soon find that the 'little moments' you've captured join together to create a world which is just as vivid, humorous, precise and captivating as the real one. Focus on your street, your home and family, your office, or a local place you visit. Get into the habit of really looking at the world, noting its different textures, colours and rhythms.

3. Get out and about in London.

When thinking about what to include in your piece, venture out and see what's on your doorstep, keeping a notebook to hand. In a city of seven million people there are seven million unique viewpoints informed by each person's history, hopes and perspective. Everyone has their own London, so write about what the city means to you. Take a journey and let it inspire you into writing about the people you meet, your neighbours, local businesses, the landscape and the history of your area. Don't leave something out because you think it'll be boring – writing about familiar things in your unique style will bring new life to them, making others take notice too. You may be writing from the position of a long-time Londoner who's seen the city change through the decades or as someone who's recently arrived and is just making their life here. Yet we all share the same space: in expressing our view of it by writing a short piece, we also share a part of our lives.

4. Get organised.

Creating a piece of writing is just like any other type of craft. You need the right tools, the right time, the right location and the right approach. First, clear a space for you to write in. Doesn't matter if it's the corner of the bed or a table in your favourite café, just make sure it's a comfortable place where you feel peaceful and inspired. Next, find the method that feels the most natural: writing by hand or computer, writing in the day or the evening, with the radio on in the background or no noise at all. Finally, give yourself the time to write, when you know you won't be interrupted by chores, errands or sudden demands. Don't worry if you can only manage a few sentences at a time. Do it regularly and after a while you'll surprise yourself by having accumulated a sizeable chunk of completed work, without the feeling that you had to labour hard to produce it.

5. Your voice is important.

It's easy to lose faith in yourself when the little voice of doubt whispers, 'Give up. It's all been said before.' But it hasn't, not by you. Don't talk yourself out of expressing your take on life in your area of London. If you write from the heart, you can't go wrong. Usually it's the voices of so-called 'ordinary' people which are the most powerful, and it's simple depictions of ordinary life which are the most vivid. All you need is the courage to think small and the belief that your point of view is worthwhile.

6. Don't give up.

If after a few tries at writing a short piece you think it's going nowhere and feel like abandoning your competition entry, think again. Few things are perfect the first time – or even the second. Often, things go wrong because you're putting too much pressure on yourself to make them interesting. If the piece isn't coming together, set it aside or try coming at the same topic from a different angle. For example, if a scene isn't working as a comedy, take a step back and write it 'straight', like a report. Make less effort, not more. And remember, nobody sees the bad stuff but you.

7. Get a friend to help.

If you think you're on the right track but aren't quite sure, show your writing to someone whose opinion you trust. A second pair of eyes is always useful: often it'll be a simple thing that's not working, but you're too close to it to see. Choose a person who understands you, has your best interests at heart and has the time to look at your piece carefully. Get them to mark your piece like homework and scribble suggestions in the margins, or talk you through where they felt the writing was stuck or unnatural. Stepping away from your work will always help you clear the cobwebs out of your brain.

8. Don't do too much.

Sometimes, the problem isn't one of too little inspiration but too much. In your eagerness to make your entry interesting you may cram too many things into one bit of work. Remember, that a short piece of writing benefits from a simple, steady focus, almost like a snapshot. If you try to introduce ten different settings, tones, voices and characters, the reader will feel as though you're indecisive as you jump from idea to idea. Three hundred words is just enough to broach your topic, fix on one important thing – an event, a sight, a person – that you can go into with a fair amount of detail and then round off neatly in one or two sentences. You have to give each image and action the space to breathe.

9. Tell the truth.

The most important question, when it comes to writing, is “Does it tell the truth? Does it express something genuine about the world?”. The temptation is to inject unnecessary drama instead of letting a scene’s detail and dialogue speak for itself. It doesn’t matter how small your subject-matter, it’ll work as long as you’ve expressed yourself, honestly and clearly without too much fuss. If you’ve written anything inauthentic it’ll jump out when you read it back: a joke may seem too laboured, an action scene too melodramatic, a romantic image too sugary. Take out the offending line and replace it with something simpler. If nothing does jump out, you’re ready to show your writing to the world.

10. Know when to stop.

This is about recognising when you’ve completed your piece. If you’ve been on the right track you’ll know instinctively; your words will come to an end at the right moment. After that, don’t think about inserting a clever joke, a gut-wrenching finale or an astute observation where it isn’t wanted: every piece has its own rhythm, which you’ll disrupt if you try to crowbar something in at the last minute. However, if you think you’ve finished but something wakes you up at night and sends you back to the piece to re-read it, it’s a sign that something’s not quite right and needs to be addressed. When you feel calm and relieved, the piece is ready to go. Good luck!

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