I believe that everyone is creative, even if they don’t believe it yet themselves. And I believe that we owe it to each other to use our creativity because, in the words of Brenda Ueland, “there is nothing that makes people so generous, lively, bold and compassionate.” Since you are engaged in the creative process any time you sit down to compose a paper, whether it’s for a creative writing class or a research class, I think it might be worth our time to explore some ideas for tapping into your creativity.

Idea #1: Become an observer of yourself.
The creative process isn’t a linear one and seems to vary from individual to individual, so the first piece of advice I can offer is to find what works for you. Become an observer of you, listen to your instincts, and act on them. As a high school student, I was taught that when writing a paper I first needed to do my prewriting, then an outline, then a first draft, and finally a polished draft. This is what I was told by my teachers, but it isn’t the process I actually followed. If an outline had to be turned into a teacher, I would write the essay first and then do the outline afterwards. My brain didn’t work in the linear steps the teacher had prescribed, so I worked backwards. I trusted what worked for me.

And when I was in college, I noticed that when I forced myself to sit at the computer and come up with ideas for my papers, nothing happened. If I went for a walk or danced around the room for about 30 minutes, however, then I would have ideas for my paper and the words just flowed. It almost seemed like magic at the time, but looking back on it, I now realize that I was tapping into my learning style and a concept called “flow,” coined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

Idea #2: Discover your strengths.
Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner came up with a theory of “multiple intelligences,” which has helped us to rethink our definition of the word intelligent. I used to equate “intelligent” with “studious” and “intellectual,” but after learning about the multiple intelligences theory, I now know that there are many kinds of intelligence and that a person can be intelligent in multiple areas. For example, I am predominantly a bodily/kinesthetic learner, which means I learn best and create best when I am moving, but I also test high in the areas of musical and linguistic intelligence. This would explain why I’m listening to music while I’m writing this article.

To learn more about multiple intelligence theory, go to www.howardgardner.com. If you’re interested in discovering your learning style, go to the CGCC Learning Center website and click on “Study Skills.” From there you will find a list of online resources under the heading “Helpful Learning Style Links.”

Idea #3: Tap into the “flow.”
As mentioned earlier, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi coined the concept of “flow,” which I believe is integral to the creative process. In his book On Course, Skip Downing defines flow as being “characterized by total absorption in what one is doing, an altered sense of time (usually seeming to pass more quickly than usual, though sometimes more slowly), and a loss of self-consciousness (concern about yourself)” (208). To help us put this concept in the context of writing, I’m going to borrow an example from Ralph Wahlstrom’s The Tao of Writing. Wahlstrom writes about a time when he was sitting in front of a fire on a winter evening:

I was half dozing, daydreaming, when the idea came to me for my short story titled (appropriate enough) “Getting Burned.” Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi suggests that we are often the most creative in these moments of seeming inattention. He describes the “aha” moments of

See SPARK page 2
Yeah, Write.

Having trouble brainstorming ideas for your English paper? Not sure how to get started on your next writing project in your history class? Need someone to help you think about your organization in your business proposal paper? Visit the Writing Center. Drop in tutoring available for all your writing needs.

"Write quickly and you will never write well. Write well, and you will soon write quickly."

-Marcus Fabius Quintilianus

SPARK from front page

prominent people in business, science, and the arts, profound moments that just seemed to happen while these people were engaged in essentially meditative activities, whether it is strolling down a path, jogging, driving, or fishing. It seems that creative people often find the elusive “moment of insight” during these times of unawareness. (54)

Wahlstrom’s example mirrors my own. I often find that my moments of creativity and inspiration happen not when I am trying so hard to make something happen, but rather when I have let go, when I have walked away from the computer and done something fun, like taking a walk or dancing. At the time, I felt like I was procrastinating, but it seems that when I allowed my mind to take a break, I was actually opening myself to receive the insight I needed to complete the task at hand. It’s something that I can’t explain, but C. G. Jung put it well when he said, “The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the objects it loves.”

To discover how you can create flow in your life, you might consider the following exercises from Skip Downing’s book titled On Course:

* Write about a specific past event when you experienced flow in any part of your life. Remember, flow is characterized by total absorption in what you’re doing, an altered awareness of time, and a sense of performing at your very best.
* Write about how you could bring more flow into your life through play. Use past experiences as feedback, but let your imagination design fun that you would like to create in the future (211).

Idea #4: Daily Morning Pages and a Weekly Artist’s Date

The last idea for sparking your creativity comes from Julia Cameron’s book The Artist’s Way, which is well worth the read as it is devoted to helping readers discover their creative selves. The two basic tools to help you recover your creative self are what Cameron refers to as morning pages and an artist’s date.

She defines morning pages as “three pages of longhand writing, strictly stream-of-consciousness: ‘Oh, god, another morning. I have NOTHING to say. I need to wash the curtains. Did I get my laundry yesterday? Blah, blah, blah…” (10). They are not meant to be beautiful works of art. They simply consist of putting on paper whatever comes to mind at the time, which means they often sound petty, repetitive, and childlike. That’s okay. She says that “there is no wrong way to do the morning pages” (10). The second tool is an artist’s date, which is “a block of time, perhaps two hours weekly, especially set aside and committed to nurturing your creative consciousness, your inner artist” (Cameron 18). Think of this as a time to play and have fun, and the only rule is that “you do not take anyone on this artist date but you and your inner artist, a.k.a. your creative child” (18).

Cameron compares the morning pages and artist’s date to a radio receiver and transmitter. She explains, “It is a two-step, two-dimensional process: out and then in. Doing your morning pages, you are sending—notifying yourself and the universe of your dreams, dissatisfaction, hopes. Doing your artist date, you are receiving—opening yourself to insight, inspiration, guidance” (18).

Writing is not a linear step-by-step process; it’s personal. Start observing yourself to see what clues you can uncover about the way you operate. Discover your learning style and do activities that utilize those strengths. Create opportunities for flow in your life by playing and repeating experiences from the past that have helped you maintain a state of flow. And, lastly, do your morning pages on a daily basis and your artist’s date once a week. If you’re feeling like your creative life just needs a spark, try one of the above steps. If you’re feeling in need of a total creative life makeover, though, combine all of the above steps for an explosion of creativity!

References


This month’s issue focuses on sparking creativity, and English faculty and creative writing instructor Patrick Finn is the person to highlight. Patrick has taught writing at the University of Arizona, Western Nebraska Community College, and the University of North Carolina at Asheville. And, he’s also an accomplished writer, having published stories in Quarterly West, Ploughshares, The Richmond Review, Third Coast, Punk Planet, TriQuarterly, and the Best American Mystery Stories 2004. His first book, the novella A Martyr for Suzy Kosasovich, was just published by the Cleveland State University Poetry Center and is available on Amazon.com. But, he’s quick to point out that writing is tough work: “I wrote steadily for eight years before I had a story published,” Patrick says. “It’s time-consuming, lonely work, and you have to work a long time before you’re recognized by a larger audience. If you can be patient, work through the rejection and anonymity, you’re much more likely to endure, to succeed.”

“I’m not sure there’s any such thing as a ‘born writer,’” explains Patrick. “The implication is that some come straight from the womb able to effortlessly kick out drafts of stellar writing, and I don’t know any writer—no matter how great he or she is, no matter how accomplished, experienced, published, award-winning, whatever—who doesn’t struggle with the process of completing a story, poem, screenplay, essay, or play. It takes a great deal of effort to write even a first draft of anything.” At CGCC, Patrick is excited to work with student writers and help build a community of artists to dispel what can often be lonely and difficult work. He’s helping to develop CGCC’s creative writing program, which will include courses that meet the various creative interests students might have. “Taking a creative writing class exposes students to a fairly complex and often technical definition of what the process of writing entails: dedication, close study of work by experienced writers, attention to intent, and the craft of language,” he explains.

Patrick is also the faculty leader for CGCC’s Creative Writing Club, which is another way for writers to help build community with one another. Members of the club share writing and support and encourage each other’s growth as writers. Club activities include attending public poetry and fiction readings at local bookstores and area poetry slams. The Creative Writing Club will also produce and promote several public student readings and slams here at CGCC.

For budding creative writers, Patrick advises, “if a writer wants to jump in and start writing, my advice would be to do just that: sit down tonight with nothing but a pen and paper and write. Write anything. Describe the room you’re in. Describe the sounds outside. Get in the habit of making time to compose, no matter how busy or demanding other elements of your life may be. Get in the habit of allowing your imagination space to explore in a concentrated space every day.” Additionally, Patrick suggests that writers read as much as they can: “Let me emphasize that the second-most important thing (outside of writing) a writer does is read. Every day.” According to Patrick, writers should also read what they don’t normally read; if a writer wants to write science-fiction, for example, he or she should read other kinds of literature to keep their work fresh.

Introduction to Creative Writing (CRW 150) will be offered Fall 2008. Contact Patrick Finn at patrick.finn@cgcmail.maricopa.edu for more information about creative writing classes and the Creative Writing Club.
Dear Grammar Goddess –

I’m really excited about what I’m writing about in my history class! I want my readers to know that I’m excited and that my research is very important! Is it ok to use a lot of exclamation points to show how enthusiastic I am?!
-- Exclaiming Excitedly!

Dear Exclaiming: For sure, an exclamation point does indicate strong feelings about ideas; however, overuse of the punctuation mark can often weaken its impact. In academic writing, an exclamation point is typically not used very much at all. Usually, an exclamation point is used for exclamatory sentences (“The temperature is 121 degrees today and it’s only March!”); for a strong command (“Be back by your curfew or else!”); or for an interjection (“Wow!”).

In your writing this semester, if you really want to show emphasis, try to rely on strong verbs to convey that emotion.


"There is no great writing, only great rewriting."    - Justice Brandeis

**Did You Know?**

The internet can be a useful place to find inspiration when you’re stuck on a writing project, whether it’s for school or not. These sites can offer you guidance when you need a little extra help with your writing:

**Paradigm: Online Writing Assistant:**
www.powa.org
A very easy-to-navigate site developed by Chuck Guilford, who has had thirty years experience teaching writing at the university level. He created Paradigm as a way to help students expand their ideas. Create a free account to save your writing on the site, and try the suggestions in the “Discovering what to Write” section, as well as the “Freewriting” area.

**Writers Digest: Free Writing Prompts:**
www.writersdigest.com/writingprompts.asp
Many professional writers advise to stay limber with writing, aspiring writers should try to write every day. But, what to write about? This site can help! With many different prompts describing imaginative situations, the prompts on this site can help you on your way to a great story or novel.

**Hatch’s Plot Bank:**
www.angelfire.com/nc/tcrpress/plotbank.html
Ranging from the bizarre (“the best man and ring are missing and long gone”) to the mundane (“learns to drive”), the 2000+ scenarios here can help a budding writer get a story going. When you’re just not sure what to do with characters in a story you’re thinking about, check out this site.

**Language Is a Virus:**
www.languageisavirus.com/index.html
This site has just about everything a writer would want; from electronic widgets to cure writer’s block (like an online magnetic poetry set and the “haiku-a-tron”) to visual inspirations for writing, this site is chock-full of strategies and techniques to stir creativity.