

## Study Guide Transcript



Spring 2025

*This study guide transcript has been provided to support learners in following the **Way2Learn Creative Writing** course.*

*While the guide serves as a useful resource, we highly recommend that learners watch the course episodes on the **Way2Learn channel** or via the **Video-on-Demand** service to gain a full understanding before completing the answer book.*

*For your convenience, episode times are listed on **page 4 of the answer book**, within the **Way2Learn prospectus** in your library, and in the **quick-glance guide**.*

## Episode 1: Finding Inspiration

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### Introduction

Welcome to the Way2Learn Creative Writing course, created in association with the Scottish Book Trust.

This course is designed to equip you with the writing and literacy skills needed to craft engaging, well-structured fiction.

If you have a passion for storytelling, this guide will help you unlock your creativity, develop your writing process, and build strong foundations for your stories.

Many people dream of writing a bestseller, but all great writers start in the same way: by writing. We can't promise a shortcut to a publishing deal, but we *can* give you the tools to help your writing stand out.

This first episode explores the sources of inspiration that help writers find ideas for their stories. Whether it's personal experience, observations, media, or pure imagination, inspiration is all around us.

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### Getting Started as a Writer

A common challenge for new writers is knowing where to start. The answer is simple: just start writing. You might think you need the perfect idea before you begin, but waiting for inspiration to strike can slow you down. Instead, start practising regularly—inspiration will come with time.

"You only become a writer by writing."

Writing is a skill, and like any skill, it improves with practice. Set aside time to write every day—even if it's just a few lines in a notebook. Over time, creativity will flow more naturally.

Many famous writers began their careers by writing about everyday life. The smallest moments—a conversation overheard in a café, a stranger's expression, an old photograph—can all spark a great story.

If you feel stuck for ideas, don't worry! This episode will help you find new ways to discover inspiration.

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### Where Do Writers Get Their Ideas From?

A common question asked to authors is: "Where do you get your ideas from?"

The truth is stories are everywhere. Writers learn to observe the world differently, turning small, everyday moments into compelling narratives.

According to Phil Earle, an award-winning writer:

*"We are surrounded by stories every single second of our lives, whether we are awake or asleep."*

However, modern life often distracts us. Many of us spend so much time looking at our phones that we miss the world around us.

Try this:

- The next time you're walking down the street, put your phone away.
- Observe the small details—people's expressions, body language, conversations.
- Imagine the untold stories happening all around you.

If you start paying attention, you'll see that stories unfold everywhere.

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**Using Real-Life Events as Inspiration**

Phil Earle once found inspiration in a small newspaper article.

The story was about a doctor in London who had lost her husband, an actor. Three years after his passing, she struggled with grief, especially because she had forgotten the sound of his voice.

Then, a friend told her:

*“Go to Embankment Station, northbound platform.”*

She followed the advice and, as she sat on a bench, she heard an announcement over the speakers:

*“This is Embankment Station. Please mind the gap.”*

The voice belonged to her husband.

Years earlier, he had recorded a voice-over for the London Underground, and though she never knew about it, that recording had just been reintroduced at that one station.

Every day, she now takes a detour to that station, just to hear his voice.

Phil Earle was so moved by this tiny, 150-word newspaper story that he carried it around in his pocket until it dissolved.

*“I chewed the idea around in my head until I knew how I wanted to retell it. In my version, the story is about an 18-year-old boy who lost his dad. The details changed, but the emotion stayed the same.”*

This is a great example of how real-life events—no matter how small—can inspire fiction.

When looking for ideas:

- Read newspapers, blogs, or magazines—small human-interest stories can spark inspiration.
  - Think about stories you’ve heard—family histories, local legends, or personal experiences.
  - Change the details—ask “What if?” to create a new version of the story.
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## Finding Stories in Everyday Life

Your daily routine is filled with potential stories—you just have to pay attention.

For example:

- Look at the front doors in your neighbourhood—each home hides a unique story.
- Observe strangers—who are they? Where are they going? What's their backstory?
- Listen to conversations—a single overheard sentence can spark an entire story.

Great writers see the world as a treasure chest of ideas.

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### Music as a Source of Inspiration

Many writers use music to help shape their ideas.

*“People say the perfect pop song is three minutes long and tells an entire story. There’s a lot of truth in that.”*

For Phil Earle, music played a huge role in writing his book *Heroic*.

Every morning before writing, he listened to the same song:

- *“Terry’s Song” by Bruce Springsteen*

The lyrics and mood of the song helped him focus on the emotions he wanted to explore in his book.

To try this yourself:

- Choose a song that resonates with your story’s themes.
- Listen to it before writing to immerse yourself in the mood.
- Pay attention to song lyrics—many tell powerful stories in just a few lines.

If musicians can create emotion in just a few minutes, imagine what you can do with a whole novel.

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### How to Tackle the Answer Book Tasks

Your Answer Book includes exercises designed to help you discover your own sources of inspiration. Here's how to approach them:

- Self-Description or Childhood Memory
  - Don't overthink it—write naturally about yourself or a memory that stands out.
  - Focus on sensory details (what you saw, heard, smelled, or felt).
  - Keep it personal—even small moments can be powerful.
- Observing the World for Story Ideas
  - Take a short walk and look for details you normally miss.
  - Imagine a hidden story behind a simple moment (e.g., a person carrying a suitcase—where are they going?).
- Using Different Forms of Inspiration
  - Try using a newspaper article, song, or real-life event as a story prompt.
  - Change the details but keep the core emotions intact.

The more you train yourself to notice inspiration, the easier writing will become.

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### Summary

Writing is about observing and translating your observations into compelling stories.

- Carry a notebook and jot down ideas.
- Set a small daily goal—one paragraph a day can become a novel in a year!
- Keep your eyes and ears open—inspiration is everywhere.

Now, work through episode 1 of your Answer Book, using these techniques to help you.

Once you're done, watch Episode 2 before moving on to the next section.

Good luck, and happy writing

## Episode 2: Characters and Setting

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### Introduction

Think about the books that have stayed with you long after reading them. Often, it is not just the plot but the characters who leave a lasting impression. Whether they inspire us, frustrate us, or challenge our perceptions, well-crafted characters bring a story to life.

But characters don't exist in a vacuum. Their surroundings shape them, challenge them, and influence their journey. A vivid setting can act as more than just a backdrop—it can enhance the mood, drive the plot, and even function as an obstacle or ally within the story.

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### Creating Strong and Believable Characters

Every great story is built around characters who feel real. As readers, we want to connect with them, to understand their struggles, and to feel invested in their journey. But how do we create characters that resonate with readers?

A useful starting point is to think about emotions. Consider a character's fears, ambitions, regrets, and dreams. What motivates them? What holds them back?

Award-winning writer Phil Earle explains his approach to character creation using his novel *Being Billy*. The main character, Billy Finn, is a 15-year-old boy growing up in the care system. Although Phil Earle had no personal experience of the care system, he wanted to understand Billy's emotional world.



To develop Billy as a character, he explored key emotions:

- **Anger** – at the system and the people around him
- **Abandonment** – feeling forgotten by his parents
- **Isolation** – struggling to connect with others
- **Resilience** – the fight to take control of his own life

By understanding these emotions, he was able to create a character who feels real to the reader.

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### How to Develop Your Own Characters

#### Step 1: Ask Deep Questions

One method for developing well-rounded characters is hot seating—a technique used in theatre. This involves interviewing your character as if they were a real person.

For example:

- **What is their earliest memory?**
- **What makes them happy or afraid?**
- **What is their biggest regret?**
- **What is something they would never tell anyone?**

Even if these answers never appear in your final story, they help you understand your character's mindset.

#### Step 2: Make Every Character Matter

Even side characters—those who only appear for a few pages—should feel three-dimensional. If they exist only to serve the plot, they will seem flat and unrealistic.

For example, in *Being Billy*, Billy initially sees his carer, Ronnie, as an enemy. However, as the story develops, we see that Ronnie and Billy are actually very similar. Without careful character development, this complexity wouldn't exist, and their relationship wouldn't feel authentic.

#### Step 3: Observe Real People

Many great characters are inspired by real people. Pay attention to how people talk, move, and react to different situations. Mannerisms, speech patterns, and habits can all help create more vivid, authentic characters.

### How to Tackle the Answer Book Tasks on Character Development

Your Answer Book contains exercises to help you build strong characters. Here are some tips on how to approach them:

- **Exploring character emotions**
  - Instead of just listing emotions, write a short scene where your character experiences them.
  - Think about how emotions are shown through actions rather than just descriptions.
- **Using personal experiences**
  - Consider people you have met or observed in real life.
  - Use elements of their personalities to shape fictional characters, but make sure to adapt and change details.

By working through these tasks carefully, you will develop characters that feel real and compelling.

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### The Importance of Setting in Storytelling

When we read a book, we often visualise the world the characters live in. Whether it's a bustling city, a quiet countryside village, or an alien planet, setting plays a key role in shaping the story.

Some writers use real-world locations, drawing from places they know well. Others create entirely imagined worlds, particularly in fantasy and science fiction.

Regardless of whether the setting is real or fictional, it should feel believable. Readers should be able to see, hear, and feel the environment through the descriptions on the page.

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### How Setting Affects Plot and Character Development

A setting is not just a backdrop—it can influence the plot and characters in significant ways.

For example, in Louis Sachar’s *Holes*, the protagonist, Stanley Yelnats, is sent to a prison camp in the middle of a desert. The harsh, dry landscape with no water and extreme heat becomes an obstacle for the characters. Every day, Stanley and the other boys must dig holes under the scorching sun. The environment adds tension, hardship, and a sense of isolation—all of which shape the story’s conflict.

Another example is *Harry Potter*. At the beginning of the series, Harry is forced to live in a cramped, dark cupboard under the stairs, symbolising how small and powerless he feels. In contrast, when he arrives at Hogwarts, the setting is grand, magical, and full of possibility, mirroring his newfound freedom and adventure.



### How to Use Setting to Strengthen Your Story

- **Make setting an active part of the story**
  - Instead of just describing a place, consider how it affects your character's emotions.
  - Does the setting make them feel safe or trapped, excited or afraid?
- **Use setting to create atmosphere**
  - A rainstorm can add a sense of foreboding.
  - A quiet street at night can create a feeling of loneliness or suspense.
- **Use setting as an obstacle**
  - A character lost in a maze-like city
  - A journey through a dangerous forest
  - A space station running out of oxygen

Great settings don't just exist in the background—they play an active role in the story.

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### How to Tackle the Answer Book Tasks on Setting

Your Answer Book contains exercises designed to help you bring your setting to life. Here's how to get the most out of them:

- **Describing places in detail**
  - Use sensory descriptions—what can be seen, heard, smelled, and felt?
  - Think about how the weather, time of day, and surroundings affect the atmosphere.
- **Making the setting meaningful**
  - Ask yourself: *Why does this setting matter to the story?*
  - Try to connect the setting to your character's emotions.

By carefully working through these tasks, you will learn how to create settings that enhance your story rather than just existing in the background.

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### Summary

Both characters and setting are essential for building an engaging and immersive story.

- Characters should be believable, multi-dimensional, and emotionally rich.
- Settings should enhance the mood, impact the plot, and reflect the character's journey.

As you work through your **Answer Book**, remember:

- Take your time to fully develop your characters and settings.
- Use real-life inspiration but adapt details to make them your own.
- Think beyond just descriptions—characters and settings should feel alive on the page.

Now, work through episode 2 of your Answer Book, applying these techniques as you go.

Once completed, you can move on to Episode 3, where we will explore plot and dialogue.

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## Episode 3: Plot and Dialogue

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### Introduction

A well-crafted plot and engaging dialogue are two of the most **powerful tools** in creative writing. They bring stories to life, keep readers engaged, and ensure characters feel real and dynamic. In this final episode of the Way2Learn Creative Writing course, we will explore:

- How to structure a compelling plot
- The importance of character transformation
- Techniques for writing believable and engaging dialogue

A strong plot provides the framework of your story, while dialogue adds depth, personality, and energy. Together, they shape a narrative that will captivate your audience from beginning to end.

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### Understanding Plot: The Backbone of Your Story

A plot is more than just a sequence of events—it is the structure that holds your story together. A well-plotted story should have a clear sense of progression, with each event impacting the characters and driving the narrative forward.

To put it simply:

- Plot is what happens.
- Structure is the order in which events unfold.

Without structure, even the most exciting ideas can feel disjointed or confusing. A good plot keeps readers engaged, ensuring that every moment builds toward something meaningful.

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### The Journey from Point A to Point B

Phil Earle describes plot as a journey that your character undertakes—from Point A (where they start) to Point B (where they end up).

By the time they reach Point B, something must have changed.

Your character should grow, evolve, or be tested by the events of the story. Without change, the plot feels flat, and the character remains static and uninteresting.

A useful way to think about this journey is to visualise a mountain range.

- The climb to the peak represents the rising action—where tension, obstacles, and challenges build.
- The peak is the climax—the moment of highest tension or transformation.
- The descent is the falling action—where things begin to resolve, leading to the conclusion.

Now imagine this journey as a rollercoaster instead of a straight incline.

A well-structured plot should include:

- Moments of success—where the character overcomes obstacles.
- Moments of failure—where they face setbacks or defeat.

By making characters struggle and forcing them to pick themselves up after failure, we make their eventual triumph feel more rewarding.

### Example: Stanley Yelnats in *Holes*

Louis Sachar's *Holes* is a brilliant example of a character transformation driven by plot.

At the start of the novel, Stanley Yelnats is an unlucky, powerless boy who has been falsely accused of stealing. He is sent to a brutal desert camp, where he and the other boys must dig holes all day under the scorching sun.

Stanley starts off as a passive victim, but as the story progresses:

- He grows stronger—physically and mentally.
- He stands up for himself and his friends.
- He uncovers the truth behind the camp's secret purpose.

By the end of the book, Stanley is no longer powerless—he has proven himself, changed his own fate, and broken his family's cycle of bad luck.

His journey is compelling because it is filled with obstacles, challenges, and personal growth.

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### A Simple Exercise to Build Your Plot

Award-winning author Anthony McGowan suggests a simple four-question exercise to help structure a plot:

1. Who is your main character?
2. What do they want to achieve? (Goals, ambitions, or desires)
3. Who or what stands in their way? (This could be an antagonist, society, or even their own self-doubt)
4. What happens if they fail? (The stakes—what's at risk if they don't succeed)

If you can answer these four questions, you already have the foundation of a great plot.

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### Endings: The Most Crucial Part of Your Story

A weak ending can ruin an otherwise brilliant book. Readers who have invested their time in a story want a satisfying conclusion—something that feels earned rather than forced.

Phil Earle warns against endings that feel too perfect or unrealistic.

For example, in his novel *Being Billy*, the protagonist, Billy, has had a difficult, painful life in the care system. Halfway through the story, Billy discovers he has a talent for boxing.

It would have been tempting to give Billy a fairy-tale ending—to have him go on to win championship titles. But that wouldn't have been believable. Instead, the ending had to be true to Billy's journey, reflecting both his struggles and his personal growth.

When planning your ending, ask yourself:

- Is this outcome true to the character's journey?
- Does it feel satisfying and justified?
- Have I avoided a predictable, overly neat resolution?

A good ending doesn't mean a happy ending—it means an earned one.

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### Writing Effective Dialogue

Dialogue is one of the most powerful storytelling tools. It reveals character, builds tension, and makes a story feel alive.

However, writing believable dialogue can be challenging. If it sounds forced, unnatural, or unnecessary, it will weaken the impact of your writing.

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### Phil Earle's Five Tips for Writing Dialogue

#### 1. Listen to real conversations

- Pay attention to how people speak in real life.
- Notice pauses, interruptions, and natural rhythms of speech.
- Observe how people's personalities shape the way they talk.

#### 2. Watch great TV and films

- Screenwriters are experts at writing tight, purposeful dialogue.
- Observe how dialogue moves the story forward rather than just filling space.

#### 3. Read your dialogue out loud

- If it sounds unnatural when spoken, it won't feel real on the page.
- This helps identify clunky phrasing and unnatural speech patterns.

#### 4. Avoid trying too hard to be trendy

- Slang and pop culture references age quickly and can make dialogue feel forced.
- Instead, **focus on capturing the essence of a character's voice.**

#### 5. Use dialogue to show, not tell

- Instead of writing: *"He was nervous,"*
  - Show it through dialogue: *"I... I don't know if I can do this."*
- Instead of writing: *"She was furious,"*
  - Show it through dialogue: *"You think this is okay? You think I'm just going to let this go?"*

Good dialogue reveals emotion through words and rhythm rather than explaining it directly.

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### How to Tackle the Answer Book Tasks on Plot and Dialogue

Your Answer Book contains exercises designed to help you build strong plots and engaging dialogue. Here's how to make the most of them:

- **Mapping out your plot**
  - Start by using the four-question structure from earlier.
  - Try writing a one-paragraph summary of your character's journey.
- **Writing a strong ending**
  - Consider multiple possibilities—then choose the one that feels most satisfying.
  - Avoid endings that are too convenient or unrealistic.
- **Practising dialogue**
  - Write a short conversation between two characters with different personalities.
  - Read it out loud and adjust for flow and realism.

Through these exercises, you will develop a stronger understanding of how plot and dialogue shape a great story.

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### Summary

Plot and dialogue work hand in hand to create engaging, memorable fiction.

- A well-structured plot ensures every scene has a purpose.
- Believable dialogue makes characters feel alive.

Now, work through episode 3 of your Answer Book, applying these techniques to your own writing.

Once completed, you will have developed the key skills needed to craft compelling, well-structured stories.