



Writing

As close to real magic as it gets

This informal study pack offers help with the general nuts and bolts of writing.

Materials Required

- A few coloured pens/pencils
- Paper to write on
- An old newspaper or magazine
- A timer of some sort – watch, egg-timer etc.

Starting from Scratch

This section applies to poetry as well as prose, and includes a few specific words on poetry.

Finding inspiration and sources

For most of us Tolkien's work will be a major source of inspiration. That's fine, but there is a very great danger of plagiarising his work. While emulation may be the sincerest form of flattery, plagiarism is the greatest crime a writer can commit, whether or not it is intentional. If you draw too closely or heavily on Tolkien's work you also risk being compared with him! You are more likely to be successfully received as a writer, and are more likely achieve results which satisfy you, if you avoid relying totally on Tolkien's creativity.

Other sources of inspiration

Don't forget that Tolkien rewrote and expanded nursery rhymes like 'The Man in the Moon', 'The Cat and the Fiddle', as well as borrowing part of 'Bye Baby Bunting'. If you don't remember this it come in when Aragorn removes Frodo's jacket in the Dimrill Dale and sees the mithril shirt. He calls the others and says 'Here's a pretty hobbit-skin to wrap an elven princeling in!' If you remember your nursery rhymes you will remember this distinctive rhythm from

Bye baby Bunting,

Daddy's gone a-hunting.

Gone to fetch a rabbit skin

To wrap a baby Bunting in.

Tolkien's use of the familiar rhyme in LotR offers a moment of light relief amid the grief of Gandalf's fall, and evokes a brief memory, for us, of the comforts of childhood. These are simultaneously transferred into the LotR context, making the moment even more poignant as the remaining Fellowship are far from comfort and security.

JRRT was also fascinated by folk and fairy stories, so you might also consider rewriting fairy or folk-tales from a different view point. Other writers have done this and you may be familiar with

Angela Carter's small book *The Bloody Chamber*, which includes her famous rewriting of Little Red Riding Hood.

Additional sources you might consider

Some of the things that inspired Tolkien himself:

- Norse and Germanic myths and legends, e.g. *Nibelungenlied*, *Volsunga saga*, but any good book on Norse and/or German mythology will offer material.
- Icelandic sagas, e.g. *Burnt Njal*; *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise* (translated and edited by Christopher Tolkien); *Laxdaela saga*. There Penguin editions of some and many collections.
- Irish myth and legend, e.g. the mythology surrounding the Tuatha; the story of the hero Cuchulain; the story of the 'good god' known as the Dagda, and the triple goddess of war.
- The poems of W.B. Yeats drew on Irish myth and legend and offer a different option via poetry.
- Old English poetry and prose in translation such as *Beowulf*.
- There are many other OE poems of great interest to writers such as *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, *The Ruin*. All these are available in translation. Michael Alexander's translation of *Beowulf* in Penguin, as well as Seamus Heaney's version. The others can be found translated in S.A.J. Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*.

Medieval romances - the stories of knights and chivalry and adventure written between C12 and C17. Lots of choice here, so these are just examples:

- Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*.
- the anonymous *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* set in the Welsh marches and Wirrel.
- *Sir Orfeo*, set in Winchester and the fairy realm.
- *King Horn*, *Havelok the Dane*, and *Bevis of Hampton*, all of which contain story elements similar to the story of Aragorn, as a disinherited heir has to undergo hardship and battle to regain his lost realm.
- Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*: a sixteenth-century epic poem written in Spenserian stanzas which end with an Alexandrine line. Not only is the poetic form interesting, the story includes a female knight who rescues a male knight. There are dragons and monsters, and the whole can be read as an allegory, but works well at a literal level as fantastic adventure.
- The wonderful and strange stories of the Welsh *Mabinogion*, including the earliest known version of the story of King Arthur and his court.
- The *Lais of Marie de France*, courtly and magical tales written by a named female writer during the twelfth century.
- Most of these are available in modernised translations, but it is well worth trying to read Middle English - the English of Chaucer, Langland and Gower, because it is not terribly difficult and it offers lots of archaic and interesting vocabulary.

Tip for reading Middle English: try reading aloud and 'say what you see', it will sound more recognisable than it looks.

Exercise 1 (set for 5 minutes on your timer) - take any fairy/folk/legend/nursery rhyme - give it a different setting - modern/sci-fi/gangster/soap opera - think about what differences this will involve, how the original will alter the setting. Example: valkyries flying helicopters, or Aragorn

and Gandalf in humvies rather than in the famous van. Similarly, if Legolas walks out of a forest TODAY what would happen?

The Next Stage

What are you going to do with your inspiration once you have found it? You will need to give it form and structure.

Form

- Is your story to be a prose work? If so, does it feel like a short story, a small novel. Or is it going to span great periods of time and/or great distances? If the answer to either of these is yes, then you are working on an epic. Remember, whatever size it is, your story needs a clear beginning, an interesting middle, and a well-thought-out ending. The beginning should engage the reader's interest. The middle should show developments that retain that interest, and the ending should leave the reader with a feeling of pleasure at having read your work. That doesn't mean it should be a happy ending. Tragic endings can provide their own strange sense of pleasure in the form of *catharsis*. This is a release of tension, or pity, achieved through the depiction of suffering, grief or loss. But it needs careful handling.
- Do you want to use an easy prose style with a very familiar or simple vocabulary, similar to the vocabulary JRRT uses in 'A Long-expected Party' or do you want to a more elegant or learned vocabulary, with lots of unusual words?
- Are you going to write a poem, if so, what form will you impose on it? Will it be of epic length and tell a whole story in verse? If it is long, it needs a beginning, middle, and end, like a prose story. But if it is short, it should show a progression or development of ideas within and between the stanzas.
- What kind of verse form will be appropriate to the idea you want to set down.
- Will you use a form as significant as the OE alliterative long-line, with its distinctive line division and sense of pressure?
- Or will your idea be more easily or concisely expressed in short stanzas?
- Or a form as compact and contained as the sonnet - fourteen lines of intense concentration? Remember, there are several kinds of sonnet form.
- Will you use a ballad rhyme scheme, Rhyme royal, or will you opt for rhyming couplets because they are easy? The choice of how your poem rhymes - on every two lines (couplets), every other line (alternate), or something more complex than these will affect the overall tone of the poem. Couplets may be easy to write but can 'devalue' a serious theme or intention if your lines end with words that are commonplace, trite, or have two or more syllables in which the last is unstressed (known as feminine rhyme).
- It is worth getting to know more about poetic techniques. Although the jargon may look impenetrable, it is actually good fun finding out how poetry works. There are many good books available.
- Or are you going to use **free verse** and avoid rhyme altogether? If this is your choice - remember that because it is called 'free verse' does not mean you can take liberties! Free verse means that **you**, rather than tradition, control the way the poem looks, sounds and feels, so you have to exert control over every aspect of the poem and be able to justify why you have chosen that form, that vocabulary, and that arrangement of punctuation. You may choose to write the poem as a pattern, like George Herbert's 'Wings' or 'The Altar'. But that form must work with - or be significantly in opposition to - the ideas and themes in the poem. Punctuation requires the same consideration. In free verse, every comma, every semicolon, every full stop, **means** something in the context of the overall

poem. Similarly, every absence of punctuation, every run-on (enjambéd) line creates additional meaning as it blends with the next line following.

Structure of prose or epic poetry

- is your story to be a 'there and back again' adventure? If so - where from and to?
- OR a 'rites of passage' story in which the leading character develops from immaturity to full maturity? How will you plot this?
- A story of loss and recovery?
- A love story,
- or a tale of heroic sacrifice for the sake of a greater cause? Or will you try to emulate the complexity of *LotR* and weave all of these together.
- Will there be magical encounters, or monsters, and what purpose will these serve? Structurally speaking they will serve an important purpose -and may symbolise ideas about evil which are specific to our present, or your created society, or universal. They may also be used to challenge preconceived ideas and prejudices.
- Will there be chilling horror, or playful humour - and why? What will these bring to the story?
- Will you aim for a tone of nobility or be down-to-earth, or will there be a changing balance of tones and atmosphere? If you think about Tolkien's work, you will know how he balances and varies these elements to produce the characteristic richness and diversity of *LotR*, or the mythic and tragic nobility of *The Simarillion*.

Exercise 2 (set 5 minutes on your timer): write 1 sentence with at least a noun (can be a name), a verb, another noun, that could set up one of the above structures - Example: for a rites of passage story in which the girl will develop into a woman: 'A (indefinite article) *pale* (adjective) *girl* (noun) *sat* (verb) *at* (preposition) *her* (pronoun) *embroidery* (noun).'

Readers

Some of the decisions you make about your writing must be controlled by your prospective **readers**. Unless you are writing entirely for yourself, you need as a writer to consider who else you are aiming your work at. Is it to be a general readership, or particularly for adults, or for children, or for teenagers; and do you want them to laugh, cry, shudder, or be enchanted, or enlightened, or comforted, by your work?

Remember too, that anything that is published in *Amon Hen*, *Nigglings*, or *Mallorn* will be read by people who know Tolkien's works at least as well as you do, and have their own deeply held ideas about everything pertaining to Middle-earth. For this reason, it is easier to win your readers over if you do not borrow too much or too obviously from Tolkien's best-known works.

Exercise: choose a 3 situations in *LotR*, 1 that makes you laugh, 1 that makes you want to cry, 1 that makes you shudder. Look at what happens immediately before this. Then look at the language Tolkien uses to describe each situation. Is it this that creates each effect? Or is JRRT drawing on other influences. Example: the Barrow wight episode - the crawling hand is unnatural, the barrow is a burial chamber, but the crawling hand is also like the disembodied hand in the old Peter Lorre film *The Beast with Five Fingers*. You may spot echoes of other stories or films. Tolkien may not have intended any reference, but anyone who has seen the old film may feel an extra sense of horrified anticipation. This should also remind you that as an author you cannot exert complete control over the way your work is perceived and received.

Mind Your Language

Using language to create characterisation, settings and atmosphere

- Think hard about the language or linguistic style you assign to your characters. You can define them in many ways by the language you use to describe them, their attributes, and their actions, and also by the language **they** use.
- Similarly, setting can be defined more effectively by the careful choice of language.
- If you want to extend your command of over language you could try reading poetry.
- The very best poets condense language into its most powerful and effective form. They know how to use its rhythms and cadences - the rise and fall of the spoken language - something Tolkien exploits to great effect in *LotR*.
- I would recommend Michael Alexander's *Beowulf* translation for Penguin, old but better in this instance than Heaney. Then you could look at any number of other poems. Some of my more modern favourites are John Donne's *Air and Angels*, Milton's *Paradise Lost* (the fall of Lucifer and the founding of Pandemonium); Shelley's *Ozymandias*, Browning's *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came* (the title of this poem comes from Shakespeare's *King Lear*, but the original poem to which it refers has never been found. Browning made up his own story around the interesting title!), T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and *Song for Simeon*, and Siegfried Sassoon's *The Death Bed*. Among the medieval lyrics 'Westron Wind When Wilt Thou Blow' is probably my favourite, as well as the medieval version of 'The Man in the Moon', and 'Lenten is Come with Love to Town'.
- These are just my favourites; your own choice will define the individual character of your own writing. And don't forget the King James or Authorised Version of the Bible - Tolkien frequently draws on its rhythms and styles, especially in the Battle of the Pelennor Fields. You could try this source, and so 'colour' your writing with various degrees of cultural significance, or cultural tension. The Psalms and the Book of Revelations are especially worth looking at.
- You could assign characters an individual vocabulary that is either heavily influenced by words of French derivation, or Latin, or Greek, or German. In each instance such a weighted vocabulary will give each character a different 'sound', and their characterisation will take on a different effect.
- Layering the linguistic styles in your writing is fun, it also helps with differentiating characters.
- Places and their atmosphere can be treated in the same way.
- Work on avoiding clichés, unless you want to work entirely in this mode so as to create a parody.
- Think about what else you see when you look at a character's hands, feet, clothes, other attributes or possessions.
- What smells, or sounds would be characteristic of them, or remind you of them. Perhaps Sam the gardener smells of earth, Gandalf the pyrotechnician of fireworks, like the air after bonfire night or 5th of July. And maybe Lobelia Sackville-Baggins smells of mothballs, or even of silver polish!
- What sort of touch would a character have? Sam's hands are probably rough from gardening, but if you could shake hands with Legolas, his elvish hands might be soft and smooth except for the callouses where he holds the bow and bowstring.
- This works for locations too. Think of the wet smell of a forest during rain, or the pungency of a pine forest on a hot afternoon, or the smell of frost and smoke on a winter

night. There is also a significant descriptive difference between the **crunch** of ice as a character steps on frozen puddles, and the **shattering** of ice as a character steps on frozen puddles. One action is straightforward and rather homely, the other suggests violence. Such choices of vocabulary can be an important step to creating or maintaining an atmosphere or theme. They can also be used successfully to draw attention to underlying situations, or to create tension between an apparent situation and a 'real' one.

Exercise: 3 (5 minutes on your timer) You are about to create 2 characters.

- **Character 1** - decide on the characteristic that would be the first to be first noticed. You are also going to define a vocabulary for this character to use in 1 sentence. **BUT BEFORE YOU DO THIS -**
- **Character 2** - decide on the characteristic that would be the first to be noticed for this one. You are also going to define a different vocabulary in which this character will offer 1 sentence in reply to the first.

For the characters' speeches - choose any pair of speech styles you like from these pairs of styles:

- Poetic/ Eastenders
- Fairy story/ Bond, spy, thriller
- Shakespeare/ American (cowboy; gangster; oil baron etc)
- Alliterating on 'B' words/ alliterating on 'S' words (not rude words in either case!)
- Any language characteristic of Rohan/ any language characteristic of Star Wars or Star Trek

Examples: (1) Gandalf 'Give me Shadowfax, he was only lent before'. 'Make it so' OR 'he's dead Jim'. (2) A grizzled man rose out of the grass. 'I am Aragorn', he said. 'From under his plumed helm Eomer murmured, 'Eothain, I've got a bad feeling about this!'

Bangalore torpedoes and dripping water

Tackling writer's block

We've all heard of writer's block, I imagine, even if we haven't all experienced it. It's the most unnerving thing that can happen. You want or have to write, but nothing actually does happen! How can you overcome this? My preferred way is a version of free writing.

- Get yourself a piece of paper, a pen, and a timer, sit down, set the timer for 2 minutes (you can go up to five minutes at a time if you want), put your pen on the paper, start the time, and write! Doesn't matter what, **BUT YOU MAY NOT STOP WRITING OR TAKE YOUR PEN OFF THE PAPER UNTIL THE TIMER SOUNDS.**
- You can do this at the computer too. Just set your timer and write.

In both cases, if what you write is rubbish, it's just clearing that out so the good stuff can take shape. Gradually your mind will shift into the direction you want to go. Remember you can always cut and paste. This applies just as much to manuscript, if you don't use a computer.

This is the 'bangalore torpedo' - blasting a way through the block.

If you have been doing the exercises so far, then you have been doing a version of this. It is called **focused free writing**, in which you write with a topic, character, place, etc. in mind.

But you may find it easier to use the '**dripping water**' method.

- Again sit down and write anything connected with the subject you want to tackle.
- But do it in tiny chunks without a timer.
- Write down a working title for instance.
- Then walk away, make a drink, cuddle the cat, clean the bath, and see what happens.
- If nothing happens, go back and write something else, like a setting you want to use, or a character you have in mind. Example: MAIN CHARACTER-TALL, THIN, BOWMAN.
- Then try changing something. Example: SHORT FAT BOWMAN.
- Then consider what difference the change you make will have on the character and the course of your story.
- If that doesn't work, go away again and do something else.
- Keep on like this until the fragments start to coalesce. Try changing some of the terms and see if that helps to stimulate your creativity.

Don't demand instant fluency from yourself, nor fully developed ideas, but let them drip gently from your mind through your fingers to form a pool of ideas. Once this starts to happen you will have enough material to start shaping it, and that shaping process can be done in the same fragmentary way. But once you have been through the initial process the chances are that you'll feel the excitement of creating and the block will have gone.

Finding Your Inner Child

Using colour and shape to track characters and plot lines, and cutting out to aid and focus your creativity

- Cut out pictures from old newspapers and magazines and use to visualise characters and places. Create maps, and diagrams of related plot-lines if you are working on several related plots.
- Assign colour (and shape) to each of your characters and all plot strands involving them. Example: Aragorn (dark-green/sword), Frodo (gold/circle), Gandalf (grey/staff), Sam (brown/leaf). When you create your initial outline for your story write the characters' names or underline them in their assigned colour, so you can keep track of who is doing what.

Exercise 4 (5 minutes on your timer): to stimulate variety in your perception of language:

- take an old newspaper or magazine. Open flat anywhere there is text on both sides of centrefold. Read across both sides close to centre and take any bits that make a sentence - no matter how odd. Copy this so it either begins or ends one of the pieces of directed free-writing you have just done, and see what happens.
- take the paper or magazine. Again take any page, take the first sentence that catches your eye. Write this before or after one of your bits of free writing, and again see what happens. You can put the first and second results together. You can change anything you like.

The idea here is not to create anything that you will definitely be able to use, but to stimulate your perception of the possibilities. You can repeat any or all these exercises as you choose.

Non-fiction Writing

word now about **non-fiction writing** for anyone wanting to do a researched or comparative essay. Some of the point already covered will apply here too.

Inspiration for a scholarly or critical essay will come from something you read.

- You may have an idea about an episode, character, issue, or aspect of Tolkien's writing, you may want to take issue with what someone else has written or said.
- Whatever the source of your inspiration to get writing, you will need to **set out clearly what it is you are addressing and what you want to say about it**. Do this right from the start but be prepared to revise frequently as ideas develop.

If other people have written on the same thing, you should acknowledge this so you can bounce your opinions off theirs, use their views to add weight to yours, or show how your view is a new and relevant bit of thinking.

- You will need to find out who has written on the same topic.
- The web is one option for research.
- If your local library has a selection of books on Tolkien, such as Tom Shippey's books, and the unofficial Guide to Middle-earth, you can check the bibliographies at the backs of these books for more information about work already done in the area on which you are working.
- Check out the TS bibliography pages (lists of Tolkien-related publications), including Theses, Dissertations, and Newspaper articles.
- Check the personal websites of the authors cited in the bibliography pages.
- If you have back copies of *Mallorn* and *Amon Hen* check these carefully.
- Always be scrupulous about **citing your sources and references** whenever you refer to someone else's ideas or opinions, again you must avoid plagiarising anyone else's ideas.
- In the case of non-fiction, **your writing style does not need to be 'scholarly' as long as it is clear and puts across the logical progression of your argument in a recognisably grammatical way**. You don't have to have a working knowledge of post-structural-ism, or deconstruction-ism, you may not know your Derrida from your Foucault, or an anapest from a trochee, but you may still have something valuable to say.

Practical Acts

Coping with critics, avoiding plagiarism, finding publishers, and joining groups

- Coping with critics - there is no easy way round this. If you are to publish, and want to get the best out of yourself, you need critics, hopefully kind ones who will let you down gently and show you where you can improve. They may be friends and relatives, editors, or publishers' readers, if you make it that far. If you get badly mauled, it's OK to throw the ms. in a drawer, hate the critic, and go and have some chocolate. It is not OK to write back and be rude, or reach for the lager, or the sherry. Give yourself time, and if you are really committed to what you have been working on you WILL go back, and you WILL revise, and it WILL be better for the revisions.
- Plagiarism - Every author owns their intellectual property. Credit you influences if you rely heavily on them, do not lift ANYONE'S ideas, of whatever kind, without acknowledging the original source. When in doubt, err on the side of caution.
- Finding publishers - for when you are getting to the point where enjoying your writing has become more serious. We have *Amon Hen* and *Mallorn* and their hard-working and insightful editors as our first port-of-call, but if and when you want to spread your wings a bit further the ***Writers and Artists' Yearbook*** is in your local library and will be a source of invaluable information about publishers in all areas from books and magazines to newspapers, TV and film. Each entry has full contact address, gives some idea of what is required, and will say whether unsolicited manuscripts are accepted. There's no point sending your work to a publisher who will not read it. It is usually correct to enclose an SAE for the return of our manuscript.
- There is another option which is not often noted: **contacting a literary agent**. Again, this book lists literary agents and their areas of specialisation so you can choose the ones who read fantasy, or historical fiction, or crime fiction, or whatever category your work fits into. Be cautious of agents who ask for a fee.
- **Avoid vanity publishing!** ***The Writers and Artists' Yearbook*** will advise against this, and it really is better to keep trying than to pay large amounts of money to a publisher just to see your work in print. You will get no feedback and little sense of achievement. You may also get stuck with a large bill and/or a pile of books which no one wants to buy - very demoralising!
- The book also has lists of literary festivals, short story and poetry competitions, and some books on writing. An invaluable publication!
- Joining groups - can help to build confidence, can improve your skills, and give you instant feedback on your week's writing. Information about writing groups and informal courses will be in local papers. If you want to do something more serious there are a number of part-time and full-time further and higher education courses. Those in your local area can be found in the prospectuses of your local institutions which will be available directly from them or in your local library, others can be found through the UCAS website: www.ucas.org This website is easy to use and lists all the further and higher educational institutions in the UK together with the courses offered by each one. Direct links are provided.

Good luck and enjoy your writing!

If you have any writing difficulties, please get in touch with the Tolkien Society's Education Officer: education@tolkiensociety.org