WEB writing courses for and by writers

AFA

Creative Writing

WRITE-1 Portfolio

Report on the Examination

CW19

May 2019

Introductory Comments

Portfolio samples from this first cohort of 38 candidates for the AFA in Creative Writing came from seven centres, and the moderator was pleased to observe the impressive range of writing across all four forms from all seven centres. It was clear that the spirit and the detail of the programme had been fully understood and engaged with, enabling writers of all ages and abilities to produce genuinely vibrant, inventive, and controlled writing with strong personal voices. In general, it was also pleasing to note a significant development in each writer's ambition and control as they moved from the exploratory nature of Section A into their specialist form for Section B.

In Section A, the most popular forms were Poetry and Prose Fiction, followed closely by Prose Non-Fiction. Script writing in this Section of the Portfolio was intended mostly for the stage, but there were also a few examples of screenwriting (and, in a few cases, of dramatic monologue for an indeterminate medium).

In Section B, the most popular specialist form was Prose Fiction, the choice of eighteen candidates. Joint second in terms of popularity were Prose Non-Fiction and Script, the choice of eight candidates each, with Script specialisms being sub-divided among writing for the stage (five candidates), the screen (two candidates) and radio (one candidate). Finally, three candidates chose to specialise in Poetry.

By far the majority of candidates had chosen their specialism carefully, and were able to demonstrate a real depth of engagement with and playful adaptation of the language and structural conventions of their chosen form. It was a pleasure and a privilege to read these submissions. Similarly, the depth and quality of critical reflection improved from Section A to Section C.

Much care and attention had been taken over drafting and proof-reading, with final versions of pieces often having benefited very palpably from structural and linguistic emendation.

Nature of Centre-Assessed Work: Assignments and Assessment Objectives

Section A (Exploration)

As mentioned above, Poetry and Prose Fiction were the most popular forms, but Script and Prose Non-Fiction were not far behind. The specification is clear that the purpose of this section of the portfolio is to encourage candidates to explore and experiment, to take risks with writing in unfamiliar forms, and to approach their development as writers with an open mind, prepared to tackle new challenges. The required word lengths are short for this reason, and while this does create some challenges for forms such as Script and Prose (Fiction and Non-Fiction), where there is arguably only limited room for the development of an idea, most candidates found thoughtful ways through, such as writing flash fiction, short short stories, very tightly-focused essays, or dramatic monologues.

In some cases, these needed to be more clearly signposted as specific types of Script or Prose Non-Fiction: for example, some so-called dramatic monologues might equally well have been labelled Prose Fiction. Simply labelling something as 'Monologue' does not necessarily satisfy the requirement to write in three separate forms. More successful examples of Script were characterised by being

clearly intended for stage, radio, or screen, both in their use of conventions and formatting, from the very first line. By a similar token, some blog posts felt a little indeterminate as types of non-fiction, and might've benefited from being more clearly signposted as a magazine article, or essay, or more clearly related to the style and format of writing by popular newspaper columnists and essayists. Nonetheless, there were some very fine examples of travelogue/memoir and review.

There was some lively and inventive Prose Fiction, with deft turns of plot, and vivid and evocative descriptive language. As mentioned earlier, flash fiction was often successful, but short stories and openings of putative novels, also provided examples of rich, crisp writing. It was good to see a developing sense of narrative voice coming through, aided by the use of techniques such as free-indirect speech and minor sentences, although this was on some occasions inexpert, and there was still, with respect to AO2, rather a lot of comma splicing. On a similarly pedantic note, unless it's clearly a function of the style, the numbers one to twenty should be written as words, and numbers above this written as numerals.

Poetry submissions showed plenty of invention with line and language, and often contained striking moments, even if the work as a whole was a touch uneven. Sometimes, language was a touch purple and self-consciously poetic, with words like 'magical', 'beautiful', 'cerulean', 'azure' and 'luscious' rather unnecessarily in residence. With regard to technical accuracy in poetry, it's fine to dispense with punctuation (as shown in the work of Alice Oswald and many other contemporary poets) and especially so where line-breaks and other aspects of form are being used instead, but such techniques do need to feel deliberate throughout. The same is true for poems with significant variation in line length. Forms such as haiku are generally more challenging than they appear, and the use of stimulus material from Early Modern texts can produce rather awkward and archaic lexis and syntax, or clangingly unsubtle end-rhymes. It was good to see parataxis in play to assist punchier phrase-making, although this device was occasionally working more in tension than in synchrony with grammar.

Task setting sometimes led to a similarity among pieces from candidates in a particular centre. To a certain extent this is inevitable for work in Section A, but it's worth re-stating the desirability of individual, self-commissioned work. While there's a fair degree of flexibility with a tolerance of 20% either way, word counts were within tolerance, including those portfolios that included Poetry,

Section A (Critical Commentary)

The Section A commentaries generally provided a thoughtful and perceptive blend of the personal and the editorial, with AO3 often being tackled more successfully than AO4. In terms of AO3, the most successful examples managed to create a synthesis of the following four elements: comments on the genesis, stimulus and backstory of each piece; specific advantages and/or restrictions of writing in particular forms; editorial comments on structural changes, emendations to narrative point-of-view, time-frame, stanza and line, beginnings and endings, etc.; comments on editorial minutiae, including changes of lexis, syntax, responses to specific observations arising from the critical workshop.

AO4 was generally tackled less successfully, and was more effective when something specific from a candidate's reading was applied to something specific in their writing. This may seem self-evident, but textual reference (from the candidate's reading and own writing) is a necessary part of

conveying such influences convincingly. Making a few points, perhaps two to three, about the influence taken from a specific writer or text, is another way of conveying such influences convincingly. Given the constraints of the word-limit, it's worth stating that it's therefore possible to access the highest band by focusing on only one or two texts/writers per form. For radio and screenplay, it may not always be possible to refer to published scripts in the same way that it often is for stageplays, but it is possible (by means of iPlayer, etc.) to refer to specific features of language and structure, enhanced by textual reference, and candidates should do so. Occasionally, texts identified in the commentary were rather familiar old friends from GCSE and A-Level Literature specifications and/or were rather archaic. It's not a hard-and-fast rule, as it depends on how convincingly candidates comment on such influences, but the general principle is to encourage engagement with independently chosen contemporary texts.

Section B (Specialism)

The most popular specialist form was Prose Fiction, the choice of nineteen candidates. Joint second in terms of popularity were Prose Non-Fiction and Script, the choice of eight candidates each, with script specialisms being sub-divided among writing for the stage (five candidates), the screen (two candidates) and radio (one candidate). Three candidates chose to specialise in Poetry. In all cases, candidates satisfied the requirement to specialise in one of the forms they'd explored for Section A.

The most pleasing aspect of moderating the portfolios tended to come from the clear and obvious stepping-up of ambition and control in the work submitted for Section B. There were very few cases where a candidate didn't demonstrate a deepening understanding of and engagement with their chosen form. In nearly all cases, personal voices, styles, and choices of subject matter and theme, started to assert themselves with pleasing and agreeable confidence in the writing for Section B.

Much of what I've said about the four forms in Section A could also apply here too. With regard to Prose and Script, I would emphasise that the choice to submit three or even four short pieces, rather than one more extended piece, usually (although not always) limited a candidate's ability to fully realise an idea, or to show fully developed control of structure. In terms of Prose Fiction and Prose Non-Fiction, there were some impressive adaptations of form, such as a hybrid piece of Prose Non-Fiction that blended academic writing with poetry, along with some highly assured narrative voices.

In terms of formatting and presentation, the general principle should be to submit writing that is as close in appearance as possible to published writing in that form and genre. Hence, there's no need for double spacing or centred text in poetry, paragraphing in prose should use indents without a line-space, scriptwriting should obey the conventions for each specific medium: stage, screen, radio, etc..

Section C (Critical Commentary)

While a few commentaries remained more personal than editorial, as with Section B, there was generally a marked stepping-up from the work submitted for Section A. Again, AO3 was generally approached with greater success than AO4, and most candidates were able to show a more developed

and sustained knowledge of their chosen form and its conventions, as well as of their own process, than they managed for Section A.

In terms of AO4, again, depth, detail, relevance, and believability are important watchwords when choosing what to include. While there's no magic number, it's likely that comment on three to five writers/texts will be sufficient to access the highest bands, as fewer than three would not really show a full engagement with published work in the chosen form, and more than five would probably lead to each individual reference being somewhat cursory or superficial. The very best commentaries achieved a fully convincing synthesis of AO3 and AO4 in commenting on the development of their writing.

Assessment

The moderator was pleased to observe general agreement with the marking of centres. With the creative work submitted for Section A, it's worth restating the importance of taking a best-fit approach, and especially where writing in one of the three forms is less controlled and accomplished than for the other two. While this might prevent a candidate from being placed at the top of a band, for example, it may not necessarily demote them to a lower band if there's enough evidence of the candidate meeting criteria in the writing submitted for the other two forms.

There was much clear evidence of consistent and accurate interpretation of Assessment Objectives, especially with respect to AOs 2 and 3, and only occasional leniency with regard to AOs 1 and 4.

It was generally clear how marks had been awarded, with many portfolios rich in perceptive and professional comment from the teacher/assessor, marginalia that showed accurate application of the Assessment Objectives, and formative and summative comments at the ends of pieces and on the PCS-1. By way of summary, the following points may be worth noting:

- it's fine for the majority of comments to be primarily summative and formative, and addressed to the candidate, especially as that reflects usual practice when marking creative writing and working with learners
- however, once portfolios are being prepared for in-house moderation, the moderator would expect to see some additional marginalia which identifies candidates meeting specific aspects of the Assessment Objectives, including words and phrasing from the band descriptors
- the moderator would also hope to see some evidence of moderation, the most likely being additional marginalia and comment in different hands
- with respect to AO2, it instils confidence when the moderator sees technical slips of spelling, punctuation and grammar being circled or underlined as often as they occur
- there's no need to award a mark for individual pieces: all the numerical marks can be contained on the PCS-1
- comments explaining the award of marks on the PCS-1 were generally very perceptive.

Administration

The majority of samples were well presented, in an easily manageable form, and arrived in good time. However, there was some variation in the presentation of samples, and this occasionally impeded ease of moderation. It may be helpful to clarify some expectations:

- please do check the addition of marks carefully: the moderator found a handful of clerical errors on the PCS-1s
- there were also some missing word counts and/or unclear identification of pieces and forms on the PCS-1s
- please ensure there is a draft (one to two pages) for each of the three forms submitted for Section A, and one full length draft for Section B
- please ensure drafts and final pieces are clearly labelled
- please organise portfolios as follows
  - PCS-1
  - Section A Creative (finished pieces)
  - Section A Creative (early drafts)
  - Section A Critical Commentary
  - Section B (finished pieces)
  - Section B (early draft)
  - Section C Critical Commentary
  - Bibliography
- and secure the portfolios with a treasury tag rather than a staple, paper clip or document wallet
- the addition of section breaks, and contents pages can be helpful
- centres with more than ten candidates need only send a sample of ten portfolios, including the portfolio with the highest and lowest overall marks
- while it was encouraging to see some excellent examples of writing journals, there's no need to send such journals with the sample.

Conclusion

The moderator would like to thank all centres for engaging so professionally and enthusiastically with the portfolio. It was a genuine pleasure and privilege to read such engaging work, and to see such palpable evidence of so many emerging writers finding their voice, form and subject.