Personal/Creative/Expressive Writing Guide

1. Personal, creative writing is the opposite of formal, academic/essay writing in most ways. For example, academic writing has longer paragraphs with an introductory sentence and very obvious structure to each paragraph, each of which is ideally about a quarter to a third of a page (no less, no more). Personal writing generally has shorter, punchier paragraphs. Sometimes informal, personal writing even contains one-sentence paragraphs.

No, really.

One sentence paragraphs are for dramatic effect and are sometimes called “pop paragraphs.” You can see how tossing in a single-sentence paragraph in the middle of longer paragraphs gets reader attention. It does this by adding contrast. If you’re doing the same thing over and over and you suddenly do something different… it wakes people up. Contrast adds interest.

1. The main point of academic writing is to sound smart. The main point of most personal, expressive writing is to have much more interest, emotional content and reader engagement than academic writing usually tries for. When writing informally, you have to shoot for a greater degree of colour, personality and interest than when writing a formal, academic piece intended only to be factual and well argued. Expressive writing can be fictional or true, for entertainment only, or with a message.
2. More on one-sentence paragraphs: in personal writing, dialogue is often used, giving the impression that readers are listening to a conversation going on.

**To make the continual back and forth easier to follow, informal story-style writing generally does not do this thing right here:**

“Is this well written?” Joe asked. “Actually, it is,” Rebecca replied. “Are you sure?” Joe repeated. Simon ate a sandwich and said nothing. “Be confident in your writing,” Rebecca told him. “I’ll try” he said very quietly. She took her coffee and went out to the parking lot. There she was abducted by an alien.

**That’s a mess to read. Instead, everyone gets their very own paragraphs:**

“Is this well written?” Joe asked, waving the wad of yellow sheets at her. He was quite worried that it was not, and distracted by the friendly, reassuring manner with which Rebecca had been approaching conversations of this kind lately. Did she like him? Her hair looked great today.

“Actually, it is,” Rebecca replied, as a paragraph created just for her began.  *I can’t believe how good Simon looks today. Smells nice, too. I wonder if he noticed my hair. I further wonder if there’s coffee? (I like to think in italics that no one else can hear.)* “It’s written just fine. Send it off.” She shivered slightly, as the air conditioner was turned up too high. Again. *I’m going to have to tell Joe how much I hate when he does that*.

“Are you sure?” Joe repeated, snug in his own personal paragraph. “Is it good?” He was suddenly aware of a fly buzzing around, caught between both panes of the window. Should he kill it? (The narrator, not being merely a character in the story, but a nameless being who knew everyone’s thoughts, chose to report Joe’s thoughts in third person this time, rather than transcribing them directly in first person and putting them in italics as he had done previously.)

Simon, in a form-fitting teal blue Under Armour shirt, ate a sandwich and said and thought nothing at all, yet got his very own paragraph in which to do that.

“Be confident in your writing, Joe!” Rebecca exclaimed, using the mark that is for exclamation. *Good! There’s coffee right there.* “I’ve gotta go, though.”

“I’ll try…” he said very quietly, ensuring the “h” in “he” was not capitalized, for the sentence had continued on long after the closing quotation mark had landed upon the waiting page.

If she had not spoken to him by name, the readers might have thought “he” was Simon, for Simon had been the last male person mentioned until she spoke it. But she *had* spoken it, and done so in a calm, warm tone, so Joe’s identity was clearly conveyed without risk of confusion. As for she herself, being the only female character in the exchange meant the readers always knew which character “she” referred to. Her. She. Her’s. It could all only mean Rebecca.

“Bye, guys!” she said in a tired voice. “See you later.” She said this second thing in the same tired voice as before, but the narrator worded it differently, and “she” had a capital this time. The sentence had not continued on. “Anyone need me to pick up anything?” she asked. (She did not “question,” as she was not a police detective grilling murder suspects.)

She quickly took her coffee, sloshing gently in its green paper cup, hastily collected her lavender purse and headed swiftly out the door that led to the parking lot where she had previously left her car. The narrator had lost all control of himself, and had used *far more* than the one adverb per page that is fashionable.

The setting having changed, the parking lot got a whole new paragraph of its own, though it was grey, dingy and on the whole not a particularly interesting place. And nothing more significant than Rebecca finding her car had been stolen would ever happen there. (That and her not hearing the green phosphorescent creature shambling up behind her with the aluminum nightstick.)

Bam.

It was fully two hours later when Rebecca regained consciousness. She found herself on an unknown planet in an unknown galaxy, far from PaperCo, neurotic Joe and dreamy Simon. The line of whitespace above the paragraph in which she now found herself, having been reserved for a moment precisely like this one, and not squandered after every. single. paragraph. meant that the whitespace now clearly conveyed significant passage of time and a shift to a truly distant setting. This was a whole new scene. She’d not simply gone out to a dingy parking lot this time. She was somewhere farther and altogether less familiar. The setting would need to be described in detail. Soon. The shocking lack of indent also provided a clear visual clue that this was a brand new section, as every other paragraph in the section before this one had had one. Rebecca’s head hurt. So much. Far too much to even think in complete sentences equipped with all of their grammatical parts. No verbs, even. None at all. But the paragraph was getting uncomfortably long…

*What the hell? Where am I?* Rebecca realized she wasn’t going to make it to CostCo after all. The case of Kraft Dinner and the ketchup would have to wait.

Suddenly, shockingly, a Thing happened! And just like one always does whenever *anything* at all gamechanging or sudden happens, a new paragraph dramatically occurred to mark the occasion. This was the way of things.

1. Note that even people who don’t say anything get their own separate lines to eat their sandwiches, or get coffees, or leave to go the parking lot. Italics may or may not be used for thoughts, depending, and modern readers expect narrators to be a bit telepathic, and to include readers in the inner thoughts of most characters. Modern readers also don’t like stories to be in black and white. So, colours. Sounds. Sensations. Thoughts.
2. Although high school students often write in present tense, this is fairly rare in fiction by professional authors, *The Hunger Games* being a notable exception. Randomly switching verb tenses is a no-no. (If writing in past tense, don’t accidentally slide into present, and vice versa.) Verb tense changes have to be done carefully.