

The Virginia Woolf Writers' workshop: seven lessons to inspire great writing
Jones, D 2007, Bantam Books, New York.

Adapted as lessons relevant for research writers: Monica Behrend, UniSA, June 2011

Virginia Woolf wrote many diaries, letters notebooks and essays which contained reflections on:

... the art of writing ... questioning what living conditions make it possible to create a work of art and identifying the qualities that writers need to succeed at their craft (Jones 2007, p. 1).

Jones' book imagines what Virginia Woolf might have taught a group of aspiring creative fiction writers. Each imagined lesson has some accompanying 'writing sparks' which are activities to encourage writing.

1 Practising

Write day after day, month after month, every morning—seven days a week—from nine thirty to lunchtime. Keep at it; you'll amaze yourself. Keep a diary, a journal to just write and try out ideas and practice specific skill ... Let yourself play, free from the burden of the perfect sentence or the perfect idea.

Virginia made sure her mornings were uninterrupted, following a strict writing schedule.

✍ *Writing sparks* ✍

- Buy yourself a notebook to use as a journal
- Commit to fifteen minutes a day to sit with your journal and let yourself play with words and ideas.

2 Working

Have a quiet room to have time to think. Have whatever comforts you need for creativity. Make it your sanctuary.

Virginia was not tidy. Her husband said her room was one of 'utter disarray'.

✍ *Writing sparks* ✍

- Create a comfortable writing space with some privacy.
- Add some of your objects to the room to express your personality.

3 Creating

Write exactly what you think—that is the only way. Record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall. Write daily; write freely, but let us always compare what we have written with what the great writers have written. It is humiliating, but it is essential.

✍ *Writing sparks* ✍

- Jot down any rules/guidelines you have learned about writing.
- Sit in a quiet place for five to ten minutes. As you sit, try to be aware of the thoughts, images and sensations moving through your mind. Then write!

4 Walking

Walking has a holiness. Use it to snap out of drowsiness and to get your mind 'in fine writing trim'. It soothes, it clears the head. Once the mind is clear, how the images rush in. Walking is good for the heart, for the good of writing. The writer needs time to think, to spread out the mind. Beat the drowse, make your brain hum, take a walk.

✍ *Writing sparks* ✍

- If you are feeling too frazzled to write, take a walk.
- As you walk, think about the problem you are trying to resolve. Bring a piece of paper and a pen with you, in case you have a break-through.

5 Reading

Read whatever inspires you, nurtures you, that helps you grow. Use reading as a warm-up for writing. Love reading and you will be a better writer.

✍ *Writing sparks* ✍

- Go to a library or bookstore and find a book that you absolutely must read. When finished, write in your journal some notes as inspiration for a short essay on reading.
- Experiment with reading as a warm-up for writing. The only rule is to read something for ten minutes before you begin to write.

6 Publishing

Give yourself the gift of apprenticeship. Let yourself try and fail and try again without the pressure of publishing. How valuable to have those years to be a beginner. Virginia finally 'found out how to being to say something in my own voice' and with that the growing confidence threaded through her. The reward is in the writing, not the approval of strangers. Don't publish too early!

✍ *Writing sparks* ✍

- Jot down a topic that primarily concerns facts. Write down as much as you can about that fact. Then reduce what you have written to a few important points. Leave the others out.
- Write a poem. Enjoy playing with language using striking imagery, concentrated language, metaphor, rhythm, even rhyme. Evoke a scene. Have fun. Make your imagined reader laugh.

7 Doubting

'Each sentence must have at its heart, a little spark of fire'. You must be committed with all your writing, to revise—revise diligently, revise steadily. You must read your work and weigh each word. Listen to the rhythm of your sentences. Test your words against your ear. Explore what has not yet been explored.

✍ *Writing sparks* ✍

- Experiment with form. Just for the fun of it!

The weighing of cadences, the considerations of pauses, the effects of repetitions and consonances and assonances—all this is the duty of a writer who wishes to put a complex meaning fully and completely before his reader (p. 50).