



Workshop Guide

A 10-step guide to running your
own blether writing workshop
for Book Week Scotland 2019

Book Week Scotland 2019

10-step guide to running a creative writing workshop on Blether

Are you part of a writing group, writing workshop or book club? Do you have a particular conversation that changed your life? A passing comment which you still think about today?

We want to hear about your blethers – from the deep and meaningful to the funny and heart-warming, and everything in between.

Let's have a blether!

While we may not always be consciously aware of it, conversations – both big and small – forms major parts of our lives. We blether with friends, family, loved ones and even strangers. A blether can make all the difference. A reassuring word can invigorate you. A gossip, catch up or a talking to can have a profound effect. Conversations are seeds which grow, forging friendships and leading to a better understanding of ourselves and how we fit with the world around us. Sometimes the right words are all you need

Everyone has had a conversation which has impacted them. Maybe it was the first mumbled words of a new relationship; the time you told someone that it was you, who spilled tea on the nice new carpet. It doesn't matter if your conversation lasted hours or was only a few moments, if it means something to you we want to know! Who knows, your piece may even inspire others to reconnect and have conversations they've been putting off, or to be kinder with the words they use.

Use this handy guide to run an interactive creative writing session and help to get your group's stories down on paper and then encourage those who attend your session to share them on our website. These guidance notes are to help you help them to submit their work in any form they prefer, it could be a short story, a poem, comic strip, play, diary entry or letter – and we welcome entries in Gaelic and Scots too.

Our favourite stories will be published in a free book distributed during Book Week Scotland 2019 – our national celebration of books and reading.

We are hoping to receive a variety of pieces, both in terms of form and tone. These might be childhood stories or humorous stories, or they might be letters or poems that deal with more personal subject matter. The resulting book will showcase the different ways that the people of Scotland have responded to the theme.

Of course the theme of Blether may suggest difficult issues for some people and we don't wish to discourage people from responding to the theme in whichever way they

choose. However we are foregrounding a light-hearted and positive approach to the theme in order that we can try to maintain a balance of tone across the submissions we receive.

All stories submitted will appear online at Scottish Book Trust and a selection will be published, alongside commissioned authors' work, in an anthology entitled Blether. Please refer to our terms and conditions / background to submission section online, in advance of submitting your entries.

scottishbooktrust.com/files/terms_conditions.pdf

Submission details

As mentioned, your group can be creative about how they write, as creative as they like, and submissions can take a variety of formats, such as:

- a story
- a poem or a riddle
- a diary entry
- a letter
- a sketch or a scene (like a short play)
- an article (newspaper or magazine)
- a personal piece of writing

Entries can be submitted on Scottish Book Trust's website or by post, all entries must be received by the closing date **5 June 2019**. The entries can be short in length or a longer piece but no more than **1,000 words** in total.

Entries should be pasted into the body of the webpage entry form found at the following location:

scottishbooktrust.com/reading/blether/submit-a-blether-story

If your group usually meets for two hours, you can complete all the activities below in one two-hour session. If you usually meet for only one hour, you can run a one-hour session by omitting the activities that are marked 'optional'.

1) Icebreaker (optional)

If your group is meeting for the first time, or if you have some new members who don't know everyone, an icebreaker is a good way to start the session. Icebreakers are short activities that make sure everyone feels welcome and ready to contribute. You can find three sample icebreaker activities here, on **the Scottish Book Trust website**, or you can come up with your own.

2) Examples of Blether stories already submitted

We will be uploading stories by budding writers from the general public as we receive them. These pieces of writing may help to provide inspiration for your workshop. You will be able to download examples from the following link:

scottishbooktrust.com/reading/blether/blether-stories

3) What makes a story, and dialogue, interesting? (Optional)

You may want to discuss particular scenes from books or films where conversation plays a central role. For example, the iconic 'I am your father' line from Star Wars; Conversations between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy or when Frankenstein's monster confronts Dr Frankenstein.

You could also discuss a selection of the example/s on the Scottish Book Trust website (as above) and pick out what your group likes about them: What caught their attention? Are there any lines or images that they particularly liked? The following guidance from the author Liz Lochhead contains a few questions to get your discussion started.

If your group is quite large, you could discuss in pairs or small groups, and then feed back to the whole group with everyone's ideas being written on paper, a flipchart, whiteboard or smart board. In the examples you have read for inspiration which ones adhered to Liz Lochhead's suggested writing rules as outlined below?

4) Inspiration – Liz Lochhead's writing tips . . .

- **Write what *really* interests you**, not what you think you ought to be interested in.
- The old **five senses**. See it, touch it, taste it, smell it, hear it. '*Turn yourself into it*', said Ted Hughes, '*and then the words will look after themselves*'. Well, certainly I have to turn all my censors, inhibitors and ego, and false sense of myself *as a writer*, and certainly any attempts at cleverness, off - *in the first draft at least*.
- See, it's only when you read back what you have written down, tasting and testing the words *as words and sounds* you can see where you have captured a bit of life in the language, an image, a wee detail - and that won't be necessarily in the bit that felt like it flowed or had the fancy words, but often in the bit that you struggled over and in the end, och, just put down what would have to do for now...
- Throw away all the bits that *don't* have that bit of life in them, keep these surprisingly **real or surprisingly honest and vivid bits**, the bits that, to tell the truth, surprised you – mibbe by their simplicity - and start again with them.
- **Don't explain**. You don't have to give the reasons for going there or the co-ordinates on a map. Consider cutting off the beginning and the end paragraph or stanza of what you have written – and do this once you think it's finished and cut down to the bone already. No 'vamping till ready', no summing up. Just trust your reader to be right there with you in the middle of the place you are writing about. '*Get in, get out don't linger*', said Raymond Carver.

- **Don't try and describe your feelings.** An emotion named is an emotion obliterated from any text. Stick to those five senses, stick to objects and actions, what's done, what's said. Get this right and all the feeling in the world will be in this.
- It's all in the details, in *the particular*. Small things. **Plain words**, probably. But which ones? Ah, I said the advice was simple, I didn't say it was easy...
- Enjoy yourself. Struggle with not enjoying yourself until you begin to, very much. (If I can't, or won't, then it's usually because I'm not obeying Rule Number One.)

5) Your Blether stories

Now your group can start talking about their story ideas that would fit the theme. Ask them to start thinking about different environments or occasions where a blether led to a significant event in their lives? Here are some examples:

- Talking to a stranger
- Conversations over the garden fence
- A conversation you had, perhaps in your formative years, which gave your life direction or purpose
- A conversation, which felt inconsequential at the time, but has always stayed with you
- A blether which always puts a smile on your face

Encourage your group to add more ideas to these headings to help stimulate memories of bletthers.

6) Mapping your blether stories/scribble down ideas (optional)

Once you have chosen the event or memory you would like to share, you can start thinking very roughly about how you might write about it. Begin to think creatively about this story by drawing a mind map or spider diagram. Note down bullet points or single words or write a quick first draft.

Start thinking about the best angle from which to talk about your story. Do you want to tell it from your point of view? Or could you take a more abstract angle? For example, a conversation over the garden fence could be told from the perspective of yourself, your neighbour or even the fence!

7) Where to begin

There's only a limited space for you to tell your story, so consider how you can make the story really exciting and interesting to readers. You can jump in anywhere. We're all used to starting the story of Cinderella with Cinderella working in her wicked stepmother's kitchen. But imagine if the story started in the middle: with a beautiful

girl running out of a castle, one shoe missing, her clothes turning to rags around her... what an opening!

8) How to end

A good story ends with a memorable image. Think about the best thing that happened or the reason you have always remembered this particular conversation. You should consider putting that right at the end, so the reader leaves the story remembering the great part! If it helps, you could even write down your ending first and then work towards that ending.

9) Drafting and redrafting (optional)

If you have time, write out a first draft, so you can read over your story, change and tweak it before you decide it's ready to send off. The word limit for submissions is 1,000 words.

10) Sharing (optional)

Once you have written your story, you could read it aloud to the rest of your group if you feel brave enough! We hope you'll also send it off to Scottish Book Trust and share it with us! Please refer to our submission guidelines below to find out how to do this.

How to submit stories:

Go to the following section of Scottish Book Trust's web site:

scottishbooktrust.com/reading/blether/submit-a-blether-story

And scroll down to find the online form. Complete this form and submit it to us electronically or complete the online form, print it out and post it to us at the following address:

Nyla Ahmad, Scottish Book Trust, Sandeman House, Trunk's Close, 55 High St, Edinburgh, EH1 1SR

If you need help submitting your story or have any questions about the project contact nyla.ahmad@scottishbooktrust.com 0131 524 0170

Other things to consider

Mental health and well-being

As always with our annual campaign, people will interpret the theme in a wide range of ways. You should be aware that this theme may lead people to share very personal and emotionally affecting stories and it is important to be prepared for this. Being prepared to listen to what someone wants to tell you is a very powerful supportive act in itself, however you may also need to be prepared to point people towards organisations that provide specific, professional support.

We will be providing links to a range of support organisations on the Blether section of our website – this will be a useful resource for anyone who might need more support than you are able to provide. Please ensure that you deal sensitively with any information that is shared with you, and remember that there is a possibility that this is the first time your learner has told anyone else their story. Always be honest, open and clear about your role as a literacy support worker.

Ground rules

Because we specifically ask participants to share true, personal stories it is important that your learners feel their experience is valued and heard. With the theme of Blether, you may find a wide range of experiences and perspectives are discussed. In order to ensure that everyone's contributions are heard and respected you may wish to establish some agreed ground rules with the group to begin with. These might include:

- Respect – give undivided attention to the person who has the floor (permission to speak)
- Confidentiality – what we share in this group will remain in this group. If someone wishes to share their story further, for example by submitting it to Blether, that is their decision
- Non-judgmental approach – we can disagree with another person's point of view without putting that person down
- Sensitivity to diversity – we will remember that people in the group may differ in, age, race, religion, cultural background, sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression, ability, and/or parental or relationship status and will be careful about making insensitive or careless remarks

Have a good time – when sharing stories and making stories it's fine to have a good time!
