First, two myths to counteract:

'Creative minds love nothing better than to be unfettered, without boundaries, given limitless options and scope.'

A principle dearly held by all, but a myth.

If you gave a student 10 blank canvases and told them they could paint whatever they liked, sooner or later they would have to discover what they kept returning to to paint, whether it was landscapes or portraits or bowls of fruit or abstract patterns. They would find their subject matter because they were looking for it, wondering what to fill that blank canvas with. Writing on a blank page is very like that. You start to notice what you keep needing to look at.

If teachers had unlimited time, this would be great. But our creative minds shy away from endless possibilities and no parameters, and the process ceases to be fun and starts being onerous and stressful, and this will repeat like a stitch when students do their critical or creative response to the stories.

The creative mind loves**:**
patterns
echoes
meaning
experiencing a shock of recognition
parameters

So use constraint as a framing technique and a method of dismantling the threat level. Instead of saying 'Write about whatever you like and hand it in whenever you're ready', try the opposite: 'Write exactly two pages about a bad Christmas morning.' Give a definite prompt – a first line or last line they must use, or better still, an object which must appear in the story and be used in some way (a unicorn! A vengeful clown! A stolen wallet!) or even a list of objects or words to incorporate (grandmother, glasses, sportscar, poodle). Try imposing a time limit, like a game. Draw things out of a hat. Find a word at random in a dictionary. Tell them to take one photo as homework and use five words as a caption for it, no more, and let that one photo tell the whole story. Circumvent the 'freeze' response and allow plenty of fun. Let students work in pairs, challenging each other (e.g. '20 uses for this paper clip' or 'My 15 word life story').

Another myth:

'A good story is all about planning and executing a plot.'

Actually, the plot is best discovered in the writing, which is triggered by an urgency based on curiosity or character. You don't 'plan out' a plot and hope for a successful story (by successful story I mean one in which students might surprise themselves with what they have been able to satisfyingly create).

Plot is very simple: you have someone do something wrong. This engenders behaviour and reaction, and action/reaction is the basis for dramatic storytelling because behaviour is what forces the character to emerge. Plot finds itself in character under some kind of compelling pressure.

So instead, use character as a prompt – one of the characters in the existing stories, a secondary character, someone on the sidelines we don't hear from directly – anything to get students projecting themselves into the consciousness of another human being who is not themselves. This exercise of 'parabolic projection' is, to my mind, the absolute essence of learning to create fiction and poetry which moves others, and allows students the phenomenal experience of immersing themselves in 'otherness' so essential to developing empathy and the urgency to share interior thoughts and ideas. This is also why reducing the threat level is so important in the early stages – because fear overwhelms interest, and saps the willingness to take risks on this process.

Our hardwired response to watching characters in action is to think 'What are they going to do next?' which invariably becomes 'What would I do, if that was me?' Immediately we are in the territory of a galvanized and ethically complex moral universe, one in which student writers are now not just consumers of media, but creators of it.

Another technique is to invent a character who has something to hide, and make sure it's something worth hiding. Make something take place which forces them to risk showing someone what they're hiding. This doesn't have to be a soppy emotional love triangle, or something lifted from 'Home and Away', either. What if … (a great prompt opener – the two best words in the story generating factory) … what if a character shoplifts something, or finds something incriminating in their step-father's car, or finds a wallet with Grand Final tickets in it? What if it's something as simple as cheating on an exam so that parents aren't disappointed in them? To put this in technical 'craft' terms, invent a catalyst in a story which disrupts stasis.

Just focus on bringing a character to life

Start with a character we can care about, who is confronting some kind of trouble or pressure. When we do this, we have to let go of grandiose intentions, overblown plots, ambitiousness, a need to be impressive, witty or 'the best in the class'. The process is not driven by anxiety or strain, but by the urgency or desire to connect. A point comes where this urge to connect overrides our fear, and that allows us to want to tell our truth, and have others read our work or hear us read it. This freeing and joyful process is very memorable for a young writer because they tend to believe in one of these extremes: 'I am so weird that I could never tell on the page what is really, secretly going on in my mind.' Or: 'I am so boring, nothing ever happens to me, so who would want to read about me?' Or: 'I am alone in my emotional existential suffering … nobody understands it like I do … there's no point risking ridicule by trying to express it, so better to broadcast a persona that nothing matters.'

These responses are rooted in shame. They also reflect a burgeoning self-conscious maturity and sophisticated emotional cognition, which is all part of the process of truly writing towards self-insight.

Writing and shaping and redrafting gives students **control** over what they reveal, and allows them to **endow a character** with the weird interior stuff they're keeping under wraps. We get to mine our quirks rather than feel oppressed by them! Creating a character is like creating an avatar. Instead of inadvertently or unconsciously 'exposing' your inner mess, you can explore it safely, and get a dopamine hit rather than a sense of dread and self-betrayal.

Practise writing scenically

Students may feel they have zero experience in writing stories, but they're actually experts at reading codified information and predicting/extrapolating interior motivation as illustrated in dramatic action. What they fear is planning, composing, completing a whole complicated story and somehow getting it 'wrong'. That does seem very daunting, so work to remove mystique around process by breaking it down. Ask students to write in **scenes** rather than in passages of **explanations** of **inner motivations, flashbacks or backstory**, which will only deaden the prose itself and make the energy of the story itself skid to a tedious halt.

Remove explanation of motivation – just show. Trust your reader.

Only include in the scene what people **say** and what they **do**. Don't sermonize or get tangled up in what's happened a year ago. Keep your reader focused on the **immediacy of the scene**. This creates impetus to keep showing, and inventing other scenes which let the reader catch up and 'get it' without being told what to think and feel.

- Write a scene where the boy who likes the girl asks her on a date, and finds himself helplessly lying and telling her he has a car.
- Write a second scene where it's now 6.30 pm on Saturday night, and he still hasn't asked his father about borrowing the car. Invent a reason why not. Violence? Car not working? Father doesn't trust him?
- Write a scene where someone comes home to find the locks have been changed.

Just trust the character to **do** something which does at least one of these:

- reveals character
- pushes the story forward.

Practise cutting all the stuff which doesn't do this, and you will see how your story starts to come alive.

Specificity

> *Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass' (Anton Chekhov)*
>
> *You don't write about the horrors of war. No. You write about a kid's burnt socks lying in the road. (Richard Price)*

Specificity: a hard word to say, but an important word to remember! Short stories are an exercise in **compression**. Only what absolutely has to be in the story to make it satisfying needs to be there. What makes it satisfying is **change.** Something transformative takes place for the narrative character. Students will soon begin to realise that this transformation is initially interesting when it takes place in the 'larger world' of the story (e.g. World War Three ends and the remaining humans must work out how … etc), very interesting when it takes place between characters (same plot, but a small band of survivors is trapped in the basement of the State Library) and most interesting when it happens **inside the narrative character** (an autistic boy learns he must navigate the terrifying city to find his father, a boy wizard finds his inner power to defeat the force that killed his parents …). This degree of reader engagement is modulated by specificity.

Small, specific and sensory is going to trump vague and generic every time, and for students keen to write blockbuster trilogies, this is a huge discipline to understand. Something generic, 'Two people go shopping', is not a bad story idea, but it is too vague to seize a reader's engagement, and will be too banal to actually know **where to start**. Don't encourage students to strain to be 'original' or impressive or melodramatic – get them to be more **specific** and **directed**. 'Two people go shopping during a thunderstorm' or 'at 3 am in the morning' or 'and one of them shoplifts something and is caught on CCTV cameras' is the way to zoom in on the focus and see a place to 'open' with a scene which illustrates the stakes immediately to the reader, so that they don't lose interest. This is why the first sentence in any story is called a 'hook'. Students will have watched thousands of hours of compelling TV drama which amply illustrates this principle to them. Directors call 'Lights, camera, action!' and a story also must start on action to hook us in and not make us impatient or annoyed.

Don't force 'themes' as a writing prompt

'War', 'Peer Group Pressure', 'Divorce' etc., are big, generic, monolithic rockfaces which are impossible to get a finger-grip on. Take some time to sit quietly and let the mental camera zoom in on something small and manageable, and give the creative mind some breathing space.

If you're writing a piece of fiction, I'd urge students (and you, their teacher) to stop straining to prove anything - which is what working from a theme provokes —and instead, try to *discover* something. There's no way to write anything powerful and revelatory unless your unconscious takes charge.

The biggest problem for young literary writers, besides plot, is how to characterise: how to make a character seem like a real human being.

Inexperienced writers tend to think that their own prose is the compelling thing. You have to discourage that through practice, I think, and see how to 'kill your darlings'. The less 'present' or intrusive you can be, the more you can be the character you're trying to write about.

As we read good writing, we're not thinking about the prose. We're thinking about the truth. We're in a dream the writer has conjured which lets us FEEL, rather than intellectualise or dissect themes.

Start early and integrate

Once I was invited to a class of Year 12s in a regional school who were about to undertake their final writing exams. They had just completed their 'pracs' of either doing a persuasive piece or a creative response, and I asked the boys present to tell me which they'd chosen. Two-thirds had done the persuasive piece and without exception they had all written on the same subject: 'Why the Holden Commodore is superior to the Ford'. The other third, who'd chosen the creative response, volunteered that their stories all had pretty much the same title: 'The Day I Got My First Holden Commodore.' The whole class laughed for a few minutes (the boys with delight, the girls with a kind of long-suffering resignation) then we moved on to something else, but for a long time afterwards I thought of what a fantastic time we could have had with that topic had we been starting our writing class in February rather than November – if we could have used that revelation as a jumping-off point for

writing rather than the final product. Imagine the material you could explore about gender, country towns, the rites of adulthood, the relationships between fathers and sons. Imagine asking those boys to write a story about the day a new, rich, good-looking kid arrived in town driving a Porche 911. Imagine asking them to rewrite a few pages of 'Romeo and Juliet' if the feud between the Capulets and the Montagues is Holden vs Commodore, setting the scene at a raceway, and asking them to act it out …

My point, I guess, is give yourself time to integrate their creative writing into other aspects of the curriculum if you can, and show them how this process of rewriting can be fun, entertaining, and enlightening. Don't leave the actual writing until the last minute so that anonymous assessment is the only outcome and only reward. Anything you can do to trigger an endorphin rush as part of learning is going to stay with them as a memorable and worthwhile experience for a very long time.

Humour is also a great endorphin rush, and a great antidote to fear and embarrassment, and can really nurture new confidence. Make your exercises fun, especially the early ones. Have them write the worst possible story they can, for example, and show it to their table or group, or try a writing 'game' the first few times, rather than asking them to bare all in a profound poem about loneliness and regret. Resistance is fear, so laughter in the face of fear is a powerful bonding experience.

Break the pattern, and build.

In the classroom, you are up against long-established conditioning that sets up students as consumers of new data and information, rather than creators. They will unconsciously keep falling into the comforting patterns (as you probably will!) of a more familiar system – expecting you to provide them with themes, for example, or read out what they've written for discussion and judgement led by you. See what you can come up with to counteract this conditioning by subtly altering the pattern, to offer something fresh and unexpected, and to keep all of you in a different mindset.

This can be as simple as moving the chairs into different configurations, or going outside to work, or putting on some quiet music and establishing that while the music's on, people have to write instead of talk. Or try pulling subjects out of a hat, reading a phrase out of the daily paper or showing a selection of memes to get them writing.
Objects can work as very potent triggers. Make a trip before class to the opshop and find a few curious little things to bring in. Some objects that have worked very surprisingly for me –
A nest
An old clock
A broken music box
A pair of shoes
An unfinished embroidery
A photocopied sign for a lost dog

Things that seem to have their own secret, untold story, or very evocative images, are very effective.

Suggest prompts which focus on process rather than outcome. For example, instead of setting a 'theme' exercise like 'Write about bullying and peer group pressure' try suggesting 'Write in the voice of someone who hasn't been heard until now'. Keep your prompts open-ended, rather than closed. If you do do a few exercises as a group – like writing one line each

and getting them to arrange the lines into one big poem and physically pasting this together - put that poem up on the wall. Watch how they operate as a group to make its meaning coherent. Try the same thing a few weeks later using a different prompt or image and put that one up next to the first one. Emphasise process, re-vision, self-insight, respect, the desire to share. Next time, find a metaphor in the text they're studying and use that as a jumping-off point. Next, take a topical phrase some celebrity's uttered somewhere and use that. It is just amazing to stand back and observe which 'themes' will emerge organically from this process rather than the dutiful echoing of the ones you impose. What's more, it will 'build' in a way you could never have predicted.

Establish confidentiality and respect in the room, and stick to it

Show them the power of self-regulation, for this process. Tell them not to worry, in particular not to stay up late at night fretting about not getting this right.
Do it early, or during class time if you need to, so it's down on paper rather than churning in their heads as something onerous. Once in a while, give them the 'homework' of writing one thing then going to bed early, and looking again at that one thing as the first thing they do when they wake up. Some students have very little quiet at home, and very little time without screens and stimulus. Do whatever you can to show that this is a process for them, rather than for you or the school or their final results.
Don't walk around reading over their shoulders; that's excruciating and increases the atmosphere of judgement, assessment, and pressure. Don't tug their work in progress out from under their pens and stand out the front and read it as an example. If you'd hate it happening to you, don't do it to them. The atmosphere of confidentiality and willingness to take risks will develop through example.

Use reverse psychology

When in doubt, do the opposite thing they expect. Don't beg them to write as much as they can – instead tell them the story has to be exactly 500 words long, no more, no matter how much they want to write more. Or say 'the final line has to be this …' or 'write the whole thing without using the letter "p" or in words of two syllables.' Impose limitation and constraint. Subvert expectations.

Sometimes their curiosity to hear what the rest of the class has done is strong enough to make them stop you and ask if and when they'll have a chance to read each other's. It's great if you can make this impulse come from them voluntarily, rather than from you. Ask what ground rules they want to set up if they share their work with the rest of the class. Maybe they'll want to walk around the room quietly and read what's on the tables without comment. Start with this if you can, rather than demanding they 'critique' each other's work early on. Give them the chance to absorb the process on their own terms first – the crafting and feedback can come later – preferably, again, from them rather than exclusively from you. Trust takes time.

If you feel burnt out and exhausted at the prospect of trying this, subvert your own expectation. If they volunteer ways to do this differently – (e.g. working in pairs or trios, brainstorming, getting out of the classroom, impro games, etc,) – at least consider taking their ideas on board. When the motivation to do this comes from them, you have approximately 28 times the energy and commitment to the process in the room as you have if you're pouring your single finite supply of enthusiasm into a demotivated class. If you can, try to follow the voluntary energy.

Paper and pencil: do it differently

Get rid of the screens. Turn off that hum and use pencils and paper, and let them wreck it, and scribble their first draft out later, and keep those scraps which are physical things rather than virtual. Reading online is definitely altering the way we concentrate and absorb information. Maryanne Wolf in her now-famous article, 'Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain', suggests that the problem is that we obey the style promoted by the net, which puts 'efficiency' and 'immediacy' above all else. We tend to be 'mere decoders of information', an experience in which the mind is denied the 'deep flow' state necessary for the flourishing of creative ideas and complex thinking, just as it is when we are bombarded with jarring, continuous over-stimulus.

Whatever you ask them to do, have a go yourself

It makes a huge difference to the atmosphere in a classroom when a teacher sits down and has a go at whatever I'm asking the students to do. I do it myself, as well. It's a salutary experience to collect up those poems or short bursts of writing and shuffle them, then read a few at random, without saying who they're by. This is not about expertise, it's about the willingness to risk a true connection. The connection is not intellectual, it is emotional. You are giving your students a life skill when you instil a desire in them to revise their work later based on making a more precise and controlled emotional impact. When you can't tell whether a student or a teacher or a professional writer has written the poem, you've just heard, a scaffolding gets built.

As they write, sit down at a desk and write as well. When it's time to share, don't separate your piece out, just include it with the others. Don't apologise or make excuses, just let them see that what you write in early drafts is no better or no worse than what they've written – that's the greatest lesson you could give them in the early stages. It's hard to overestimate the impact of a teacher risking by example rather than establishing the illusion of expertise – letting them see that your hands shake and your voice wavers when you read aloud is going to accelerate the trust in the room exponentially. If there's a fearful undercurrent of paralysing self-criticism in the room, this is a cure.

If your students find it especially difficult to read their own work aloud, volunteer to put all stories into a mix and draw them out to read anonymously. This is especially good for exercises which are funny or poems which might be emotionally revealing. Try to read with gusto and expression and give it all you've got – take their work seriously, don't use the opportunity to remark on grammatical or spelling errors, etc. They will love guessing whose is whose – keep this full of praise rather than derision.

If you are analysing a story or poem, explain that there's no conspiracy - no author has put something in a book to make them feel stupid or small. It's not an arty trick designed to humiliate anyone. An author wrote a story to communicate an idea with a reader, to show them something, to ask them to reflect on it somehow. It's great to 'reinforce', 'predict', 'check', 'analyse', 'deduce', 'discuss', and so on, but don't forget 'enjoy'. Include some pleasure in your reading with your students – show them you're a voluntary reader yourself, not just concerned with 'torturing a confession' out of a text – and that reading is not something onerous to be endured that you can stop doing as soon as you're not forced into it. It's the same thing which got you in front of a classroom in the first place – the urge to connect, to enlighten, and to share.

Don't need to be right all the time

On that note, restrain yourself from jumping in with a solution or 'correct answer'. Don't worry about technical perfection too early – focus on creating an emotional effect. The desire to rewrite and improve to make it technically as good as it can be should come, if possible, from their own growing sense of pride in writing it rather than your direction. If it moves you, tell them. If something's not clear to you which you can articulate, you've given them something concrete to work on to improve their ability to make a more precise emotional impact. If it's within your power to build this into the study, practise talking about what's getting written to let them feel both sides of the coin – how it feels to both give and receive feedback. Maybe you'll have to be the brave one to read yours first, and ask them to please tell you what they thought of it. Be specific. Did the characters feel real? What about the dialogue? Did you use too many adjectives? Show them you've taken their feedback on board by rewriting or redrafting some of your piece for next time. (see: 'subvert expectations'!)

Share work: be part of it, don't drive it ('work alongside')

Give them a chance, at some point, to hear how their own work sounds when it's read aloud. The ear hears – the eye can't. Speaking something gets it out into the world, out of your head, beyond you. Of course it's scary. When they see you doing the same thing, they'll feel braver. This takes time, and it takes a hell of a lot more time than a one hour guest talk. It takes time, and it's a slow cook.

But the desire to connect can be greater than our stage fright, and we can really only imagine ourselves doing what we have seen others like us do. I didn't learn to write from visiting writers to my school – nobody ever visited my school, I didn't have any idea what a writer or any creative practitioner might even **look** like. But I had a teacher who was moved by poems she read to us – I could see it. It was strangely electrifying to think **this** was our continuum – that something written by someone hundreds of years ago in a different language and culture had exactly the same thoughts and feelings I had, and my hardworking and rather strict English teacher saw it, and read it aloud for us, and I heard the genuine emotion in her voice … I remember the moment to this day. She stopped and wiped her eyes, and didn't apologise. That's what did it for me.

Mary Shelley can't come into your classroom – neither can William Shakespeare or Sylvia Plath or W. H. Auden or Raymond Carver or Toni Morrison. There's just you there, a conduit for connection. And that's more than enough.

Thank you! If you've had success using creative writing methods you've come across yourself, I would love to hear about them.