



## Claire Cook's Creative Writing Tips For Teachers

***Claire Cook** is the bestselling author of **Must Love Dogs** (the movie version starring Diane Lane and John Cusack is now on DVD), **Multiple Choice** (about a mother and daughter who go to college at the same time), **Ready to Fall**, and the upcoming **Take It or Leave It**. For sixteen years prior to becoming a novelist, she taught children in preschool through eighth grade. She is a member of the Cape Cod Writers Center faculty and has been a judge of the Thurber Prize for American Humor. To read excerpts of her novels and her blog, go to [www.clairecook.com](http://www.clairecook.com).*

### **You can't be a writer unless you're an avid, joyful reader.**

When you read book after book after book, a template begins to form in some mysterious part of your brain, and that's what you tap into when you write your own book. So I always tell emerging writers of any age to read, read, read!

When I was teaching writing to middle-schoolers, the first thing I would ask my students at the start of the year was, "How many of you love to read?"

In a good year, maybe half the kids would raise their hands. "Great," I would say, beaming at the already converted. "And the rest of you . . ." I'd continue, looking around the room and pretending to glare while they pretended to cringe. "You just haven't found your book yet. But don't worry - you will."

And that's where we'd start. The kids and I would bring in a crazy assortment of things - novels, magazines, comic books, manga, biographies, encyclopedias. The readers in the class would bring in their favorite books. I'd sprinkle in some award-winners and some of the books that had first hooked me, antiques like the original Nancy Drew mysteries. We'd swap everything around and curl up in corners all over the room and just read.

For the not-yet-joyful readers, the pressure was off. Many of them, I think, shy away from reading because it doesn't come as easily to them as it does to some of their classmates. Maybe they're slow readers, maybe there are some underlying learning issues, maybe they'd rather be out playing soccer. The way to make

reading easier is to pick up speed, and the only way that's going to happen is if you read a lot, and the only way that's going to happen is if you give the kids some choice and make it FUN.

The truth, as I see it, is once you fall in love, really in love, with that first book, you'll never be able to stop. There will still be plenty of time to introduce the classics.

Now, in my new life as a novelist, every once in a while I'll get a letter from a reader like this one:

"Dear Claire, all my life I've envied my friends who are readers. The truth is I am a slow reader and have never been able to enjoy it very much. I almost never finish a book. I am writing to tell you that someone gave me one of your books, and I couldn't put it down. I stayed up late two nights and FINISHED IT! After I read the rest of yours, I'm hoping you can suggest some other books I might enjoy."

I like to picture this woman curled up in bed with a cup of tea and a huge pile of books on her bedside table, maybe even daydreaming about the book she'll write herself someday.

**JUST WRITE.** Every student in the world should have a journal, if not a cool vinyl diary with a lock and key. Every teacher should probably have one, too, and the good news is that if the kids are writing in theirs, that means you'll also have time to write in yours. It's such a great place to put all those thoughts and feelings that bubble up, and, along with exercise and chocolate, a great strategy for dealing with raging hormones (theirs or yours.)

Tell them to have fun. To write whatever they want, because no one will see it unless they choose to share it. Some of the kids will dive right in, while others might be intimidated by all those blank pages. Journal starters, either verbal or actual strips of paper that can be pulled out of a box, can help kick-start the writing: Write a list of your favorite songs, your favorite expressions, what you imagine it feels like to live on another planet, to be a movie star. Transcribe some overheard conversation because all writers are big eavesdroppers. (Sad, but true – I'm the person at the restaurant listening to the conversation at *your* table, not mine.)

For the emerging writers in your class, journaling is such a great way to develop the writing habit. As a novelist, I write two pages a day, seven days a week, when I'm writing a novel. At that pace, I have a draft in six months. Writing takes persistence and determination, as well as skill and talent. What a gift even ten minutes of daily journal writing, or even a nightly assignment, is to your students.

**Nature/Nurture.** When I was three, my mother entered me in a contest to name the Fizzies whale, and I won in my age group. It's quite possible that mine was the only entry in my age group since "Cutie Fizz" was enough to win my family a six-month supply of Fizzies tablets (root beer was the best flavor) and a half dozen turquoise plastic mugs with removable handles. At six, my mother submitted my first story (about Hot Dog, the family Dachshund) to the Little People's Page in the Sunday paper, and when they printed it, I was officially a published author.

As one of eight children, I'm really not sure if I was randomly selected as the family writer since doctor and artist had already been spoken for, or if I really did show signs of talent, "Cutie Fizz" notwithstanding. It doesn't really matter, I guess. What I do know is that I still remember every kind and encouraging thing anyone ever said to me about my writing, especially my teachers. Largely because they cheered me on, I had my first front page story in the local weekly newspaper at sixteen, and, at seventeen, wrote and revised a short story that I later revised again to gain acceptance to a college writing workshop.

Every writer I've ever met remembers the teachers who encouraged her/him. We also remember every negative word that was ever said to us, and I know writers who've been so demoralized by early criticism that it took years to shake it off and get back on track. It's so important that we always, always, always, remember just how fragile our students are, and just what it takes to put oneself out there creatively, at any age.

When I critique a story myself or allow students to team up for peer review, the golden rule is always this: Meet the writing where it is and say three positive things before you give your carefully phrased, constructive criticism designed to bring it to the next level for that individual. You just never know which student will ride the wave of your praise all the way to becoming a writer.