

# Interdisciplinary Questions: The Academy's Most Misunderstood Fields

Public confusion is one thing, but some subjects provoke quizzical and sometimes dismissive frowns even among colleagues from different departments. Here, nine academics set the record straight about what they do – and why it matters

May 27, 2021

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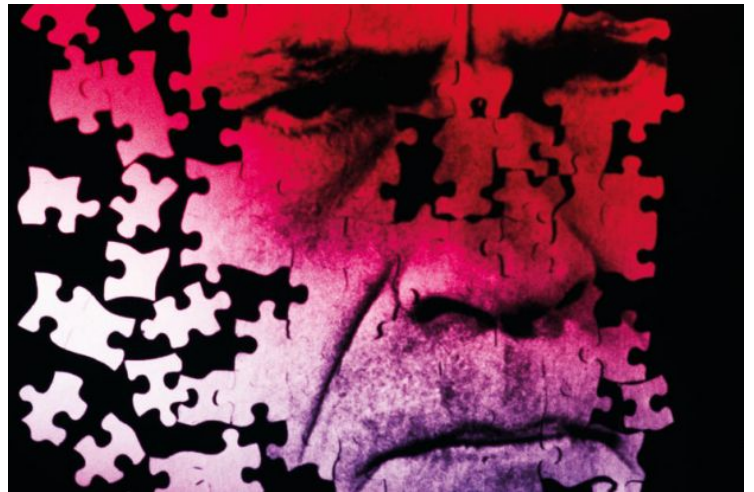


## Psychology: Neither Doctor Nor Freud

We both hold PhDs in psychology, one obtained in England in 1991 and one obtained in Australia in 2019. One of us has worked around the globe in various top research positions, the other has never worked outside Melbourne. Yet we have each heard remarkably similar misconceptions about our discipline – not merely from the public but also from university colleagues.

Sometimes we're mistaken for psychotherapists ("Can you read my mind?"), even though neither of us has ever seen a client in our lives. And while professional psychologists certainly deliver some forms of evidence-based psychotherapy, there are many other forms (such as those in the psychoanalytic tradition) that professional psychologists do not administer.

Other times, we've been confused with psychiatrists ("Can you prescribe opioids?"), even though we don't administer medication, treat patients or hold medical degrees. We do work in mental health and occasionally publish in psychiatrically focused journals, but psychiatry and psychology are distinct professions.



Source: Getty

## Creative Writing: A Damaging Narrative

Before Covid, I took my creative writing class to the zoo to practise writing about animals. When a colleague of mine – a lecturer in economics – found out about the trip, she emailed to say she was envious.

"I wish I could do that in my class!" she said. "You know, muck around every day, go on excursions. You don't know how lucky you are! I'm teaching deadweight loss and Harberger's triangle, and you're writing about wombats!"

Her flattery was punctuated with a suspicious number of exclamation marks. Thanks to my training in textual analysis, I could read between the lines. Creative writing is fun, easy, light. Economics is serious, difficult, important.

I carefully crafted my reply: "Creative writing is an academic discipline that requires the same skills as economics: critical thinking, working with constraints, testing different theories, understanding complex relationships, navigating market madness. If your students are bored, they can take CWR101 as an elective."

A crash course in clear communication could only make for better economists, I thought.

My colleague responded combatively with unrestrained sarcasm and another barrage of exclamation marks: "Sounds great! Thanks! I would love to audit your course!"

I attributed her attitude to a bad day, but still, her email bothered me. I recognised in her bizarre attempt at self-validation a complete misunderstanding of creative writing and what a university writing course entails.

For one, the misguided idea that anything "creative" is a soft option is an unsupported resentment that still lingers in the academy; its negative charge often rubs off on students who come to class with the misconception that a creative writing course will lower their stress and raise their grade point average.

"What this course taught me," one of my students reflected, "is how difficult it is to construct a good sentence, and how writing is both a discipline and an art."

"What I know about writing," another confessed, "is that everything I thought I knew about writing is wrong."

For most students, the moment of epiphany comes with direct experience and the delayed benefit of hindsight. For most academics, even those with good intentions, the flash of insight never strikes at all.

This has consequences for the institutional perception not only of our teaching but of our research too. Members of creative arts departments face an ongoing and utterly unjust struggle to have creative work recognised as valid research. As University of South Australia dean of research Craig Batty broods, "Imagine, for example, being told that you can't submit your novel for review as a research output because it didn't come out of a theoretical problem. Or that you can't submit your award-winning short film because it's not long enough. Or that your music composition doesn't contribute to innovations in the form because it was broadcast commercially."

For the artist-academic, the quest for recognition is often undermined by the government's relentless attempts to reduce the vitality and respectability of the arts, often through funding cuts and other de-investments. These cutbacks are not only materially devastating for artists but culturally and symbolically damaging too.

For instance, another misconception, both within and outside the university, is that creative writing is a leisure activity, a mere hobby that contributes nothing to the economic bottom line. Another misreading is that writing is cathartic, a thinly disguised therapy for middle-aged women who want to reclaim their sacred selves. Inherent in this dismissal, which often sinks into offensive derision, is the insinuation that creative writing is all about Feelings and Emotions (for the record, writing itself is a method of thinking, and thinking is hard work).

Teaching writing is also hard work – at the zoo as much as in the classroom. Teaching memoir, for instance, requires empathy; teaching correct apostrophe placement requires the patience of a saint and the precision of a surgeon. But it is vital labour. Teaching students to write and read – or more often to rewrite and reread – is essential for success in all disciplines, from international relations to neuroscience.

For this reason, the most infuriating question of all, “Can creative writing be taught?”, is pointless. Creative writing *is* being taught. And, at my university, as elsewhere, it is more popular than ever.

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