

# Creative Process in Writing Short Stories by Female Domestic Workers

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**Abstract:** As one of the creative works, writing a short story requires imaginative ability, which often associated with a certain level of creativity and intellectual capacity as well as enough time to complete the work. However, the publication of short stories by some Indonesian female migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, since 2005, demand more explanation. This research is intended to explain the creative process of writing literary fiction of Indonesian female domestic workers, who did not possess a high education level, and must write under constant obstructions from their employees as well as limited time available for them to write. This research was conducted in Hong Kong, using qualitative research with case study methods. The resources the researcher were including video, photo and text documents, archive notes, in-depth interview, direct observations, and engaged observations. This research establishes eight episodes of the creative process for the female-domestic-worker writers from beginning to the end. High education and flexible time are not absolute pre-requisites. Anyone could write a short story, including a marginalized person, as long as he or she has strong determination and passion for overcoming the challenges in their creative journey.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In 2005, the Indonesian literary community was surprised by the publication of short stories collection, written by several female Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong. The renowned literary writer Taufiq Ismail called their work as, "A breakthrough in Indonesian literary" (Nadia ed. 2005). Two thousand Indonesian migrant workers attended the book launching in support of their colleagues. Later on, more and more publications of short stories came out from the Indonesian migrant workers community in Hong Kong and other countries, from female and male writers.

The surprise came from the fact that most of the Indonesian domestic workers only graduated from elementary school. Short stories written by them challenged the long-held assumption that the creative process in writing literary fiction required high academic education. Many great Indonesian literary writers have their degrees from various educational backgrounds. A lot have even master or doctoral degrees (Rampan ed. 2000).

This view was supported among others by Antoniou and Moriarty (2008), who emphasized the importance of reading and learning the experience of other writers. To get the idea for writing, or to overcome writer's block, Antoniou suggested the writers watch movies, read, exploring the current cultural climate and keep challenging their ideas and belief. Another study by Doyle (1998), suggested that the creative process in the writing of literary fiction required the writer to have enough time and opportunity "for a particular way of being a withdrawal from the hurly-burly of everyday life."

In general, the creative process of the Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong who published their short stories could be explained with the creative process theory by Sadler-Smith (2015) which added an element to the earlier theory by Wallas (1926) as well as the theory from Rhodes (1961). However, a closer look at their creative process in writing literary fiction, in particular, found an unexplainable process. The research by Doyle mapped out the creative process model of writing literary fiction. The model was established from the interviews of

five professional writers, with some of them were teachers of writing, and all of them were free to manage their own time to finish their fiction works.

The case in this research was different. The migrant-domestic-worker writers neither had a high educational degree nor the free time to follow the creative process as described in the studies by Doyle. Despite their shortcomings, they successfully managed to write short stories. This research wanted to fill in the unexplainable creative process of the female-domestic-worker's writers.

## 2 METHODS

The design of this research is qualitative approach, i.e., a process to learn and understand based on the methodology to investigate social phenomena and human problems. With this approach, the researcher developed an elaborate description, studying the words, detailed reports from the respondents, and conducting a study within a real environment.

To support this, the researcher took the case study method. Case study research as an empirical study to investigate a contemporary phenomenon in real life, in which the boundaries between the event and the context was not clear yet. In general, the case study method was personal research method and a review about unique personal experience (Crozier, Denzin & Lincoln 1994).

The reasons for using a case study method for this research:

- 1.1. Literary fiction in the format of short stories written and published by a group of Indonesian domestic workers was a new phenomenon, which challenged the common belief in literary writing; hence their creative process was essential to be studied upon
- 1.2. The aspect and context about the creative process in fiction writing, in this case, short stories, from Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong, in real life, was still unknown to many people.
- 1.3. This research was intended to reveal a few research questions like 'what,' 'why' and 'how' really was the phenomenon of the subject being studied.
- 1.4. This research took many sources and data gathering techniques in the effort to answer the research questions.

To identify their creative process in writing of their literary works, I went to Hong Kong a few times to interview them. They had worked in Hong Kong from 2003-2015.

I selected five out of them based on the following criteria:

1. their short stories had been published as books
2. their readers appreciated them, and fellow writers acknowledged them
3. their works had won competition(s)
4. they inspired and drove other Indonesian domestic workers to write

The selected respondents were:

- a) **Bayu Insani**: finished elementary school, married, left her kids in Indonesia. Her short story which was reviewed for this research is *Curhat Buat Nanda* (Sharing for Nanda) (Insani 2011)
- b) **Ida Raihan**: did not finish the elementary school, not married. Her short story which was reviewed for this research is *Lorong MTR* (MTR's Alley) (Raihan 2010)
- c) **Jaladara**: finished the senior high school, not married. Her short story which was reviewed for this research is *Surat Berdarah untuk Presiden* (Blood Letter for Mr. President] (Jaladara in Senja 2010)
- d) **Susie Utomo**: finished the senior high school, married, left her kids in Indonesia. Her short story which was reviewed for this research is *Penjajah Di Rumahku* (Invaders in My Home) (Utomo, 2010).
- e) **Syifa Aulia**: finished the senior high school, left her kids in Indonesia. Her short story which was reviewed for this research is *Yani Gugat* (Yani Sues) (Syifa 2006).

## 3 LITERATURE REVIEW

This study intersected two major topics, i.e., creative process and literature, especially from female domestic workers. In working-class literature, studies done by Coiner (1995), Lauter (2014) laid down the foundation for further studies especially for working-class women's literature. In Indonesia, the working-class literary was spearheaded by writers like Wowok Hesti Prabowo, who published *Djournal Sastra Boemipoetra* (Journal of Native's Literary) every five years and Wiji Tukul, a labor activist who disappeared following a riot in 1998.

As we are embracing the age of migration, migrant workers are an integral part of that phenomenon (Castles, Miller & Haas 2014). Consequently, we also see the rise the migrant literature, as shown, among others by Frank S. (2008), Jin (2008) and Lennon & Nilsson (2017). However, none of them able to explain the creative process of the migrant workers to produce literary works such as short

stories. The researcher argues that understanding this creative process is essential for the theoretical development in literary study, in particular, the migrant worker literature study. Practically, understanding this creative process would open the opportunity to replicate the process for other migrant domestic workers in similar situations, as part of their capacity development. Study from Dustmann (1994) found that writing and speaking fluency among migrant workers could increase their earning position.

Eneste (2009) suggested that the creative process about why and how the writers create their works need to be disclosed for the public, especially those who want to write and those who have been involved in the writing industry. Eneste wrote four volumes of books "*Proses Kreatif Mengapadan Bagaimana Saya Mengarang*" (Creative Process: Why and How Do I Write), which documented testimonies from the Indonesian master story writers like Budi Darma, Putu Wijaya, Danarto, Seno Gumira Ajidarma, Afrizal Malna and Ayu Utami. Eneste's books revealed the creative process of those masters was started from the reasons and drives to write, the obstacles and challenges in the writing process as well as activities before, during and after writing.

Sugihastuti (2000) argued the research about the creative process of literary writing from someone or group of people could be useful to understand their writing works and also the background as well as the intention of the writer(s). Understanding this is important because, through their works, the writers talk about the problems in society. However, Ratna (2011) argued they do not reveal the reality itself but their interpretation of the reality, both as an individual member of the society and as the creative process to give meaning to the problems of the constructed society. Wallas, as quoted in Glaveanu et.al (2013) explained the four steps of the general creative process, i.e., preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification, while Rhodes (1961) defined that creativity should always consist of 4P (person, process, press, dan product).

Amabile (2012) found that motivation, creative thinking skills, and expertise are essential and determinant factors in any creative process. However, Duckworth (2007) showed that motivation alone is not enough. Her research suggested that passion and perseverance are the two main factors to overcome any shortcomings and to achieve success in the long term. She called those factors as 'Grit'.

Doyle (1998) proposed a model to explain the creative process of fiction writing. By interviewing professional writers, Doyle found the episodes in the process of writing a short story, which was seed

incident, writing realm, interruptions, fiction world, revisioning, and completion, and sharing of work. However, as the subjects of Doyle's research were highly educated, award-winning writers, with some of them were teachers in writing, her model could not explain the creative process of writing short stories of female domestic workers.

These workers stayed in their employer's house; hence they were made to work almost 24 hours per day, six days a week, with practically continuous various house works, which left them with virtually no time to write. Their formal education was limited, as most of them were only got elementary or junior high school education. However, with such limited time, constant obstruction, and limited reference to literary works, these female domestic workers have been able to write and publish their short stories since 2005. There were more than 50 Indonesian domestic workers who wrote short stories. Some of them were very productive and gained fame among Indonesian migrant workers. A few journalists and writers from Hong Kong had put their attention to them and their works.

This research maps out the creative process of fiction writing by these female domestic workers, start from their profile, their motivation, and how they managed to find ways to keep writing despite the almost impossible obstacles.

## 4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All of these female Indonesian workers had some characteristics in common: honest, open mind, persistent, never give up, kind, like to help others, like to share, imaginative, like to learn, critical, and dare to step out from the comfort zone. All of them joined Forum Lingkar Pena Hong Kong to learn how to write and later on, became part of the organization. They also won writing competitions and had their works published as an anthology or on their name. Four of five writers used an alias name, except Ida Raihan who chose to use her real name.

The respondents maintained their perseverance to write for a few good reasons: they wanted to share the stories about their works, their employers, their community, their dreams as well as to express their longing for their home village. They also wrote to escape from their harsh reality. They collected the facts of the story (i.e., background, characters, and flow) from facts and realities faced by themselves or told by their friends. They put up imaginative elements and changed the angle to create the fictionalized version of those facts of life.

They mainly took Hong Kong as the background for their stories, from the shelters for troubled migrant workers to Hong Kong courtrooms, and sometimes they made their home village as the background to enrich their story. Main characters were most likely Indonesian female domestic workers from their networks. Due to the limitation of time and literary references, they tend to keep their main characters as domestic workers, which they knew very well, to represent their sorrows, hopes, happiness, and other feelings. Supporting roles were taken from their employers, their spouses, and children in Indonesia, fellow domestic workers, and also the Hong Kong law enforcement officers and judges.

The flow of their stories followed the conventional approach: introduction, problem, conflict, climax, finishing. The way they developed the flow, however, was quite different from one to another. Some respondents developed the flow before started writing, but others changed the flow in the middle of the writing process.

As a short story required tight and dense flow, all respondents usually developed only one conflict to the climax of the story. Their flow was often 'forward flow' in which they started by introducing the main character(s) and her problem(s), then move forward to the conflict, climax, and ending. From the five stories from five respondents, only one was finished with a happy ending. The rest was ended tragically or with deep sorrow. This kind of ending was designed to open the eyes of the readers about the hard reality they were facing in their daily lives.

The creative process in the writing of literary works by these Indonesian migrant domestic workers could be explained in general by the theory from Sadler-Smith (2015), who expanded the earlier theory from Wallas. Smith argued that new developments from recent creativity research, including neuroscience and intuition, should be added to Wallas' four-stage model of the creative process.

From the earlier model from Wallas, i.e., Preparation, Incubation, Illumination, Verification, Sadler-Smith suggested adding one more process between Incubation and Illumination, which is Intimation. Intimation process, according to Sadler-Smith, was needed to deliver a more authentic representation of Wallas' explanation of creativity. The five-stage creative process then became: Preparation, Incubation, Intimation, Illumination, Verification. Concerning short story as literary work, Stanton (1966) categorized the intrinsic or essential elements to build up literary works as a theme, facts of the story, and literary device. The theme was the main idea, the essence of the message they wanted to

convey, to share his/ her thought, feeling, or opinion about life, hence the readers could relate to it.

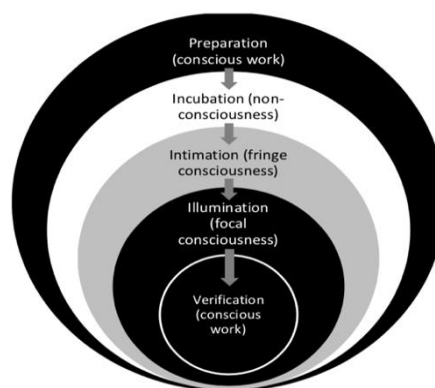


Figure 1: The Five Stage Creativity Process (Sadler Smith, 2015)

Facts of the story were the notes of the imaginary events, which consisted of character, flow, and background. Overall, it was called a factual structure. The literary device helped the writer to integrate the theme with the facts, by using a title, conflict, point of view, symbolism, irony, and the likes. In short, the literary device could work as the method to choose and arrange the details of the story.

For the creative process in writing literary fiction in particular, Doyle (1998) did an interesting study by interviewing five professional writers and dissected their creative process from a psychological point of view. Doyle found that all of those writers had similar patterns in their respective creative process in writing fiction:



Figure 2: The Creative Process in the Writing of Literary Fiction

- a. **Seed incident:** the events which began the story, which was intriguing, puzzling or haunting them beyond the narrative logic of their daily life
- b. **Writingrealm:** conditions that were constructed to allow their creative work to happen. They were not always to be a place, but rather occa-

- sions for a particular way of being, a withdrawal from the everyday life
- c. **Fictionworld:** the imaginative experience in which the characters and the events unfolded in the mind of the author and expressed in words. During this experience, the author should be able to find the viewpoint and the narrative voice to maintain the existence of his/her characters and events. In search of the narrative voice, the author might find him/her alternated between reflective thought in the writing realm and non-reflective thought in the fiction world.
  - d. **Interruptions:** during his/ her works, the author might be impacted by their personal and professional worlds. Their works could be accelerated if they got a positive impact, such as approval from the book editor or other positive experience or delayed even changed its course because of negative experiences like sickness or rejection.
  - e. **Revisioning:** this is the stage when the author shared his/her work to close friends or colleagues to get feedback revised his/her writings, from which the author could get the benefit of getting other perspectives and changed his/her work.
  - f. **Completion and the Sharing of Work:** completion meant the creative episode was over, and the author got the sense to finish his/ her work.

Albeit the closest to explain the creative process in writing the literature fiction, Doyle's model inherently assumed fiction writers should have a particular high education level and freedom to manage their own time to finish their creative works.

Hence, the model is not enough to explain the creative process from persons who do not have the required high education level and freedom to control their time. This research finds that the creative character and the passion of the person are more fundamental to determine whether someone could start and finish his/ her creative journey or not, regardless of the limitation of the education level and the limited time available for them.

**Creativity:** Although they had limited formal education, the respondents possessed the creative traits as suggested by Munandar (2009): had big sense of curiosity, ask a lot of questions, have a lot of ideas, freedom of expression, sense of beauty, standout in art sense, self-expression, not easily influenced by others, high sense of humor, active imagination, originality, independent, explore new things, elaborative. This research also found that

their creativity level improved over time, as they wrote more and got more feedback from their surroundings.

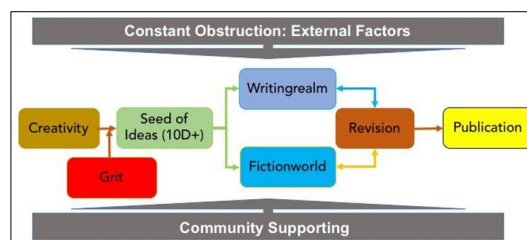


Figure 3: The Creative Process in the Writing of Literary Fiction of Indonesian Migrant Domestic Workers

**Passion and Perseverance (Grit):** The respondents also showed a big passion for sharing their stories through writing and perseverance to overcome the shortcomings and boredom during their creative journeys. As female domestic workers could work up to almost 24 hours per day, six days per week, and whose lives were almost entirely dependent on their employers' policy, these writers had to push themselves hard to finish each story.

This research finds eight reasons which motivated them to keep on writing, despite all the problematic challenges: (1) to speak out about misery or injustice around them, (2) to deliver reasonable, moral values, (3) to entertain the readers, (4) to proof to their own self, (5) to get more revenue, (6) to be known or recognized by the community, (7) to fulfill the dream, (8) as a way to escape from the reality, especially when it got bitter (escapism).

**Constant Obstruction: Time, External Factors:** During my research, the female migrant domestic workers were still not protected by the Labour Law that existed at that time. Their employers could get them to work up to 20 hours per day, six days a week, with only a few short-time breaks in between, and at any time, could call them to do various works. This combination of long working hours and 'sudden call' tendency made them very difficult to manage their own time, including their time, not to mention to allocate time to write. Without any chance to make a time plan, they wrote at any time available for them, no matter how sudden, or they had no chance but to take up their resting time.

As female workers who stayed in the house and strangers in a foreign country, their life was practically dependent on their employers. They had only a small chance to manage their own private life, as the rest should be under the permission of the employ-

ers, including what they could and could not do in the house. The respondents told that writing was not part of the approved activities by most employers. An employer tore down the paper with a handwritten story when it was found. Another employer forbade a domestic worker to use electricity and Wi-Fi to write. For them, writing should belong to the intellectuals, not to migrant female domestic workers.

Constant working demand and sometimes harassment made writing was a strenuous activity to do by the female domestic workers. Their challenges were as follow:

1. They were always undermined, considered as not smart enough to write by their employers as well as by the general public
2. They were vulnerable to unpleasant sayings or actions, including the threat of physical abuse; hence, they were afraid of their employers. Most of the employers forbade them to write
3. Their employers forbade them to write because it was not part of their job, and it was perceived as not suitable for blue-collar workers like them.
4. Their employers didn't allow them to use their laptop to save electricity bill in the house
5. Their employers refused to allow them to use home facilities for writing

**Ideation:** In this research, the respondents followed the 10Di+ method (Rosa 2003) to take inspirations from their daily life, from their own experience (what they saw, heard, tasted), from their friends' stories, and reading, watching or strolling while watching their employers' children or old persons.

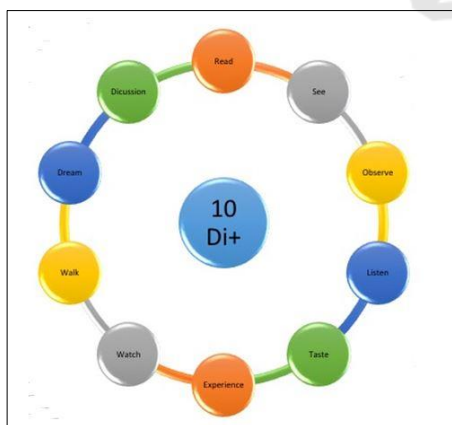


Figure 4. The Creative Process in the Writing of Literary Fiction of Indonesian Migrant Domestic Workers

After the ideation process, they usually: (1) took a rest, as their writing time was part of their break time, (2) wrote while doing other activities like writing on a piece of paper while cooking, wrote while

waiting for the children of the employers and other empty times, (3) adjusted with situation dynamics. For them, writing is not about mood, but about using the available time and situation, the best they could, (4) wrote in discreet when they didn't have any more choice.

**Writing process:** Doyle identified two alternating conditions in which the authors used their creativity to write, i.e., writing realm and fiction world. During the process, the authors went back and forth between reflective and non-reflective thought, got unfolded by the characters and events and might develop a different point of view. However, the process might take months or even years to get completed. The authors in this study did not have the time and the resources to go through the same process. They hardly could control their writing time as their schedule was controlled by external factors, their primary job as a domestic worker and the approval –or in many cases the ignorance— from their employers. Hence, they wrote as soon as they had time, during waiting times, cutting down their sleep time or even using their toilet time.

Due to these limitations, as well as the limited access to literary references, the fiction works from the female-domestic-workers writers whom the researcher interviewed, tend not too imaginative. Their characters and story plots were usually mirroring their own lives.

Four out of five had been more productive when they got a new contract with better, more supportive employers. Hence, the following factors played as a supporting role for their creativity and productivity:

1. The employers appreciated the domestic helper as a professional service and treated them equally
2. The employers paid them at least at the minimum wage level as stipulated by the Hong Kong labor law.
3. The employers gave them a day off once a week and every public holiday.
4. The employers supported their efforts for capacity development, allowed them to write after the working hours and even encouraged one of them to take a college degree
5. Hong Kong had a particular creative atmosphere, allowed the respondents to get inspiration and ideas.
6. The public library was free and comfortable enough for the respondents to pursue their thirst for knowledge, as well as free Wi-Fi access in public areas
7. The presence of a writing community like Forum Lingkar Pena significantly helped them to devel-

op their writing skills and to get community recognition, which was essential to boost their spirit and to hone their craft.

However, the researcher find that over the years, some of the writers have developed more imaginative writing ability, especially those who keep writing and publishing their stories as magazine or newspaper articles, or books. The researcher believe the continuous act of writing and publishing fictional stories have helped them to broaden their imagination as well as sharpen their writing skills. Externally, the support and acknowledgment from their friends, fellow writers, media, and other concerned individuals and groups, also have been helping them to keep pushing up their ability for imaginative writing.

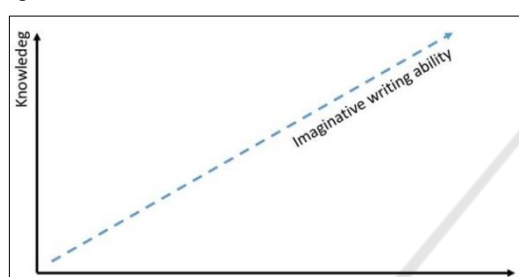


Figure 5. Imagination as the Function of Knowledge and Time

**Revision:** the authors in Doyle's study and the authors in this study did send their draft of works to their close circle to get feedback and then revised their writings. However, due to the different characters of each respective social circle, the researcher could safely assume that the quality of the input was not equal.

As professional writers, Doyle's respondents had their circles comprised of fellow professional writers, teachers in writing, and other intellectuals. Such circles could be expected to provide more scholarly feedback, with references to broad literary works. The respondents in this research had a different social circle with female domestic workers as the primary members. With their limited education and also probably unrelated interest, the researcher could tell that the feedback would be mostly based on personal likes or dislikes, which hardly could be explained.

**Publication:** the authors in this study completed their work as soon as possible with minor revisions because they did not have the time and resources to rewrite.

The publication of the short stories by the Indonesian domestic workers brought a new perspective

for Indonesian literary study. Female domestic workers always took the central role, and their problems became the point of conflict in their stories. Non-female domestic workers could not match the originality of the idea and the way the stories were told.

Digital communication technology also plays an essential role in the creative process of all writers. The technology enables them to search for almost any information they needed for free and almost instantly. Social media also provided them the opportunity to share their works and got feedback from the readers; hence, they could make adjustments and corrections as needed. They also had blogs where they put their stories online, searchable, and readable from around the world.

Two short stories, i.e. '*Surat Berdara-hUntuk Presiden*' (Bloody Letter for President) by Jaladara and '*Penjajah di Rumahku*' (Invaders in My House) by Susie Utomo were nationally published, discussed in international literary events such as Ubud Writers and Readers Festival 2011 and Hong Kong Literary Festival 2013 and were translated into English and German.

## 5 CONCLUSION

This research explains the model to understand the creative process of literary writing of female migrant domestic workers or group of people whose main features are limited formal education, limited time available, and facing constant obstruction. The researcher finds that the Indonesian female domestic workers were creative persons, albeit the limitation of their formal education. It is also shown that over the years, creative writing ability might develop, and the researcher believes it will keep getting better as long as they keep on writing fiction. Passion and perseverance were the two main factors for them to be able to write and publish their fiction works despite constant obstructions, in terms of the limited time available and practically constant demand from the employers.

They got the seeds of ideas to write from the facts and stories around them by using the 10di+ process, which interlinked from one to another. They constructed their fiction world as close as possible to their reality because they neither had the luxury of time nor the broad literature reference to develop a more profound, more sophisticated imaginary fiction world. Writing fiction allowed them to speak out about their despair, sorrow, happiness, and other feelings from them and other female domestic work-

ers. Hence writing fiction became their social responsibility. The fiction world also served as their imaginary escape from their harsh reality.

From the academic perspective, studying the creative process of literary writing from the female-domestic-workers writers will add substantial insight into the migrant worker literary study, to understand more about their views, thoughts, and feelings about their world and toward others. It will also provide essential material for the discourse of literary beyond the ivory tower.

From the practical point of view, understanding their creative process allows government and other stakeholders to design literacy programs to empower migrant workers, especially female workers. Other studies have shown that better literacy skills would empower migrant workers and enable them to improve their living standards and move up on the vertical social ladder to get better jobs.

These findings open up the possibility to replicate the creative process as well as the environment to encourage more migrant workers to express their thinking and feeling through writing fiction. Countries that have a similar working climate with Hong Kong, like Taiwan and Singapore, could have more significant opportunities to succeed.

The researcher also concludes that at the individual level, literary writing could be done by anybody, regardless of the formal educational background and the time available. As long as someone has the passion and perseverance, he or she could improve his or her expertise and develop his or her creative skills. Indeed, writing a short story requires a creative process, which may differ from one person to another, but the process is learnable and doable.

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