

Enhancing the Creativity of Soft Article Writing through Creative Writing

Sijia Liang

College of Literature and Journalism, Xiangtan University, Xiangtan City, Hunan Province, 411105, China

17775783389@163.com

Abstract. In the era of rapid development of new media, the cultural industry is flourishing as a whole. Soft article writing, as a category of creative text production, is characterized by its emphasis on creativity. The field of creative writing, which has already seen some development in China, may provide a means to enhance the creativity of soft article writing. This paper analyzes the feasibility of using creative writing to improve soft article writing and proposes practical suggestions accordingly, from clarifying teaching objectives to designing course content. Using creativity as a guiding thread, the goal is to build a bridge between creative writing and soft article writing.

Keywords: soft article writing, creative writing, new media, creativity

1. Feasibility of Enhancing Soft Article Writing with Creative Writing

The earlier definition of soft articles was provided by Wu Ye: "It is generally understood to refer to a series of promotional and explanatory articles that, through planning by a company, are published in newspapers, magazines, or on the internet to enhance the company's brand image and reputation and promote its marketing. These articles include specific news reports, in-depth features, paid short advertisements, case studies, etc., and soft articles are thus also called 'advertising literature.'" [1] However, with the passage of time, soft articles are no longer confined to corporate promotion and news reporting. [2] Nowadays, the definition of soft articles has become broader, referring to advertising copy that is subtly promoted through both traditional and new media. Compared to hard-hitting, overt advertisements, soft articles can attract attention in a more creative way, leaving a lasting impression on the audience without being intrusive. A well-written soft article achieves its promotional and marketing goals through an imperceptible approach. Therefore, enhancing creativity is an essential part of learning soft article writing, and creative writing can serve as a powerful tool to achieve this.

Initially, creative writing referred solely to literary writing and literary education. However, as time has passed, its meaning has evolved beyond these confines. In addition to the fields of literary creation and the cultural industry, creative writing has, in recent years, faced new opportunities for expansion and transformation. In 2012, Ge Hongbing suggested that with the surge of the creative economy and the new media era, the field of literature needs to undergo a social "shift" towards the cultural and creative industries, marking an opportunity for creative writing to become more mainstream. Liu Sai pointed out: "As a crucial component of the creative economy, whether in cultural creativity, film production, publishing, advertising media, cultural exhibitions, or digital games, music, animation, and performing arts, literature is the source of creativity, serving as the upstream foundation of the industrial chain, as well as the engine of cultural and social content creation." [3] As such, the development of creative writing will increasingly emphasize the integration of creativity with other industries, bringing the concept of cultural creativity—previously a relatively independent field—into the public eye with a more socially oriented approach. Shanghai University has pioneered an initiative to link creative writing with the cultural industry, placing importance on connecting creative writing with areas such as creative nations, creative cities, language education, and even community cultural development. Through this connection, the value and significance of creative writing can extend beyond academia and contribute to social services and dissemination. The rise of the cultural and creative industries, along with creative writing's growing focus on creativity and its social application, undoubtedly provides a significant boost to enhancing the creativity of soft article writing. While creative writing was not initially designed for soft articles, nor has it shifted exclusively towards them, it nonetheless addresses a key issue in soft article creation.

In summary, creative writing has developed into a relatively comprehensive discipline with a robust theoretical framework, and it has adapted to the evolving demands of the new media era. Its emphasis on creative expression aligns with the developmental trajectory of soft article advertising, making it worth exploring the integration of the two fields.

2. Practical Suggestions for Enhancing Soft Article Writing through Creative Writing

The theoretical foundation of the creative writing discipline and its talent development system is the belief that anyone can become a writer through acquired effort, and that literary creation is not the exclusive domain of the gifted. As a result, creative writing always emphasizes practice, advocating for progress through practical writing exercises. With this theory as support, it is clear that the ability to write effective soft articles can also be cultivated through training. As creative writing programs flourish at various universities, systematically and purposefully improving the creativity of soft article writing becomes possible. The following section outlines specific practical suggestions for using creative writing to innovate soft article writing models and enhance creativity.

2.1. Clarifying Teaching Objectives

2.1.1. Practicing Basic Copywriting Skills

Improving the creativity of soft article advertising is a gradual process. The first step in this process is to develop solid foundational writing skills, which involve the ability to accurately and fluently use language, construct complete storylines, and demonstrate various other basic writing abilities. The creativity of soft articles can be expressed in many ways, including through narrative, argumentation, or emotional expression, but all of these approaches rely on storytelling. The foundation of writing a good story is simply getting the story written first. Therefore, students should first learn how to use language appropriately, then construct fitting story contexts and fill them with engaging storylines. They should consciously practice until they develop strong and logical storylines or beautiful, compelling, and powerful language. These skills can all be honed within the context of creative writing instruction. Once learners have mastered these basic skills—like laying a foundation for a house—it will significantly reduce obstacles in further enhancing the creativity of their soft article writing.

2.1.2. Mastering New Media Skills

One scholar noted: "Writing in the new media era is characterized by flexible writing methods, abundant and easily accessible material, diverse writing platforms, and the freedom to write at any time or place. The needs of audiences for writing content are also more diversified, and media literacy-based writing skills are becoming increasingly important." [4] To meet the developmental needs of soft article advertising in the new media era, schools should prioritize ensuring that students are proficient in using new media. This includes using databases for research, and creating multimedia works that combine text with images, audio, and video. Such skills are highly beneficial for expanding the creative applications of soft article writing.

2.1.3. Developing Creative Thinking for Writing

Once solid writing skills and multimedia capabilities are mastered, creators can focus on enhancing the creativity of soft article writing. The key to improving creativity lies in cultivating creative thinking. Creative thinking refers to the ability and process of thinking and solving problems in a unique, novel, and inventive way. It involves discovering new perspectives, ideas, and solutions during the processes of cognition, perception, association, and thought. It emphasizes breaking away from traditional thought patterns, challenging conventional frameworks, and actively seeking new angles and innovative solutions. [5] Creative thinking is not merely a talent or special ability, but like the philosophy underpinning the creation of creative writing programs, it can be nurtured and developed. Through fostering observation skills, mental flexibility, and the accumulation of diverse knowledge and experience, individuals can continuously enhance their creative thinking abilities.

The most critical aspect of creative thinking in soft article writing is the ability to capture the audience's attention and make the content sufficiently engaging. Additionally, creativity must be applied across various writing genres, including narrative, argumentation, and emotional expression, and should integrate with various new media platforms. Finally, it is essential to understand the boundaries of creativity to avoid crossing ethical and legal lines.

2.2. Designing Soft Article Writing Courses

2.2.1. Drawing from the Creative Writing Course Model

A key feature of creative writing education is the workshop model, which is one of the strengths of creative writing courses. The creative writing workshop, developed in adherence to writing principles, emphasizes collective creation and revision as essential parts of the writing process. The workshop model was first introduced at the University of Iowa, and years of practice both in China and abroad have demonstrated its effectiveness as a teaching method. Workshop courses are typically led by a senior instructor, but unlike traditional lecture-based teaching, the instructor's role is more about guiding students through discussions and activities that engage them in the writing process. The essence of workshop-style teaching lies in the writing practice itself. In this model, students are divided into small groups of no more than 10 participants, with each group forming a workshop. Within the workshop, students present their work, provide feedback to each other—including praise and constructive criticism—and engage in a mode of teaching that integrates instruction, practice, and evaluation.

As outlined in the teaching objectives, honing solid basic copywriting skills for soft article writing requires training in both creative and revision techniques. Creative techniques include determining the format of the advertisement, understanding product information, identifying key selling points, integrating gathered material, drafting outlines, refining themes, establishing the main storyline, selecting the narrative perspective, designing the plot, inserting advertising information, and choosing and adapting rhetoric. At this stage, the workshop model can be highly effective. In addition to individual revisions and feedback from instructors, group discussions can be used to draw on collective wisdom, helping to continuously improve and refine each piece of work. [6]

Additionally, creative writing workshops should be organized by writers. However, the term "writer" should not be narrowly defined as novelists, poets, or those who solely engage in literary writing. In fact, Xu Daogun has long suggested that "writers should also include creative writing talents who have achieved significant accomplishments in any cultural industry, such as cultural creativity, film production, printing, advertising, publishing, and distribution." Soft article writing, which emerged only in modern times, is a new link in the cultural and creative industry chain. Therefore, having experienced pioneers in the field share their writing knowledge will help future writers overcome many challenges, which will be particularly beneficial for the development of soft article writing education. Currently, most creative writing courses in Chinese universities are taught by resident faculty who focus on literary writing, such as Yu Hua and Bi Feiyu at Beijing Normal University, Wang Anyi at Fudan University, and Jia Pingwa at Northwest University—all of whom are prominent literary figures in China. However, professionals specializing in creative advertising, particularly those involved in soft article writing, are underrepresented in creative writing courses. [] This can be attributed to several factors, including the relatively short history of the new media soft article advertising industry and the fact that many of the talents in this field are scattered across self-media platforms, lacking organizational structure. Nonetheless, with the refinement of creative writing courses and the rapid development of the new media soft article advertising industry, there will be increasing opportunities, both subjectively and objectively, to invite professionals from related fields to mentor students. These experts could fill the gaps in soft article writing courses and help enhance students' writing abilities.

Based on learning outcomes, the course should address the stylistic and content needs of the soft article industry, incorporating many practical projects that are closely aligned with market demands. It would be beneficial to connect with new media platforms, such as Tencent's "Guyu Plan" or Zhihu's "Story Contest," to provide students with hands-on opportunities.

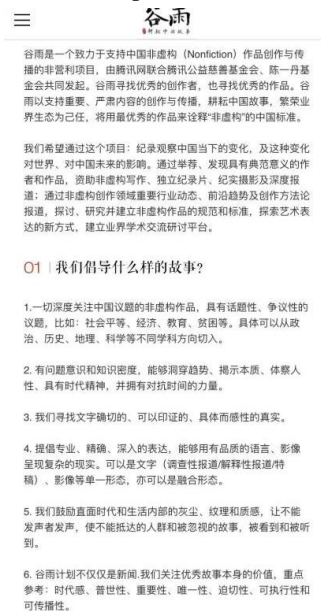


Figure 1. Excerpt from the Introduction to the "Guyu" Project

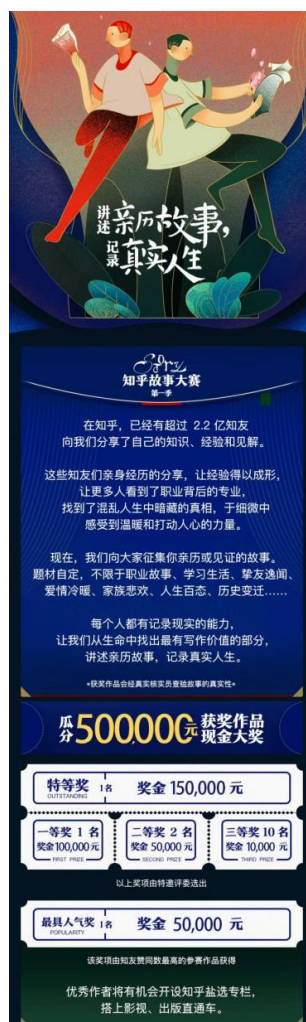


Figure 2. Excerpt from the Introduction to the "Story Contest" Project

Both of these projects can help improve students' storytelling abilities and can be integrated into the curriculum as practical training content. This will encourage students to challenge real market demands, actively refine their work to meet market requirements, and, through practice, identify problems and shortcomings. This process will drive students to actively learn and improve their writing skills and proficiency.

2.2.2. Innovating the Content of Creative Writing Courses

Once students have mastered the basic skills of soft article writing, the next step should be improving their ability to use new media technologies. Fortunately, courses that integrate new media with creative writing and related talent development models are already emerging. At this stage, it is essential to draw on the pioneering practices of creative writing instruction. For example, Stephanie Vanderslice, a creative writing professor at the University of Arkansas, incorporates digital skills into her teaching to cultivate her students' digital capabilities. She requires her students to reference Joshua Kim's "10 Digital Skills Every Graduate Needs" and learn the following skills: (1) Start a blog; (2) Purchase a recording device and learn how to use it; (3) Begin editing audio; (4) Publish an interview (or podcast) on their blog; (5) Learn how to take, crop, adjust, and enhance photos (and upload them to the blog); (6) Learn to use rapid authoring software to create effective voice-over presentations; (7) Tell a good story with images and sound; (8) Learn to shoot video; (9) Use iMovie, Windows Movie Maker, or Windows Storyteller to edit videos; (10) Post the video on their blog.[8] The skills described above provide a comprehensive overview and can be understood as the foundational competencies in new media. Only by mastering these basic skills and tools will students be able to excel in creating soft articles for new media platforms.

Once students are comfortable using these tools, incorporating creativity into their work requires familiarity with the characteristics of different new media platforms. In recent years, new media has introduced a wide range of mediums, and various social media platforms have flourished, each with its own emphasis on communication styles. To become a well-rounded soft article writer, one must study the specific characteristics of each platform. For example, on domestic social media platforms like Douyin and Kuaishou, the preferred content format is video, favoring short, quick, and direct messages. Xiaohongshu (Little Red

Book) prioritizes content with both text and images, where catchy titles are crucial for driving traffic. Zhihu, primarily text-based, attracts users with its witty and humorous writing style. Bilibili, another video-driven platform, differs from short-video platforms in that it offers a market for medium-length videos, typically under 30 minutes, which can cover more in-depth content.

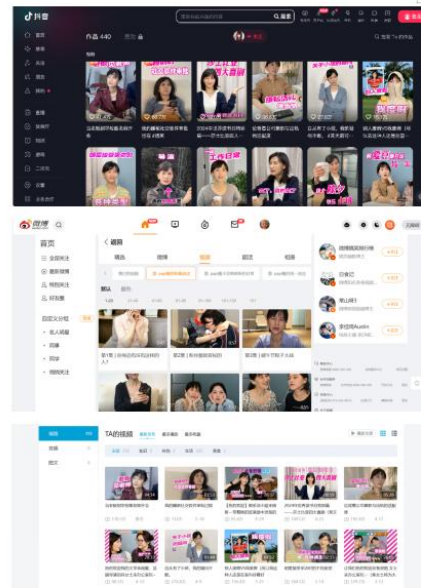


Figure 3. Papi Jiang's Accounts on Douyin, Weibo, and Bilibili

Here, we must mention a self-media influencer, Papi Jiang. She is an early adopter of multiple new media platforms and has managed to remain successful in a highly competitive environment. Part of Papi Jiang's success in the short-video domain can be attributed to the continuous creativity in her content output. Another contributing factor, as observed by analyzing her accounts, is her ability to adapt to different platforms. For instance, on Weibo, her original content consists of short videos with titles, posted in the form of short Weibo posts that users prefer. On Douyin, she segments longer content into shorter videos of about 1 minute, which aligns with the preferences of Douyin users. On Bilibili, where users prefer "longer short videos," her account compiles shorter videos from Douyin into a collection to meet the demands of that platform's audience. This seemingly minor adjustment in content distribution caters to the specific characteristics of each platform, making her content more likely to be accepted by different audiences. From this, we can draw the conclusion that while creative soft articles are certainly popular, the creativity of a creator's work can only be fully realized when they understand the operational models of different media platforms and find the platform that best suits them.

2.2.3. Conducting Creative Thinking Training

Creativity is a common feature of both soft article writing and creative writing, and creativity stems from thinking. To enhance the creativity of soft article writing, creative writing thinking training can be employed, which involves the following two steps:

First, tap into students' innate creative potential. To inspire students' creativity in teaching, the process can begin by encouraging students to explore their inner creative potential. Activities like "creativity tests" and "combination innovation" games and tools can attract students' attention. Students should be encouraged to ask more questions, share their views, and try new things, helping them develop the belief that "creativity can be acquired." This also enhances their confidence. To complement the collective teaching model of workshop-style instruction, interactive teaching methods like "inspiration questionnaires" and "collaborative creativity" can be used to foster group brainstorming and inspire creativity. During this stage, teachers should carefully plan progressive training sessions to reduce students' feelings of intimidation and stimulate their intrinsic motivation. Additionally, a relaxed and open atmosphere should be created to provide an environment where students feel comfortable expressing their ideas freely.

Second, open the door to imagination. The core of creative thinking lies in openness and flexibility, which can stimulate creativity and innovation. All of this is inseparable from a rich imagination. Activating imagination can be achieved by guiding students to think across disciplines, make associations, blur distinctions, and recombine ideas, thus linking seemingly unrelated concepts, perspectives, and knowledge points to generate innovative thoughts and solutions. For example, in the teaching process, methods from various disciplines such as psychology, education, advertising, and even philosophy can be integrated. Techniques like brainstorming, mind mapping, forced association, mandala thinking, and reverse thinking can be utilized to fully engage students' interest and enthusiasm, encouraging them to actively participate in training. [9] Take brainstorming, for example. A professor might start by asking students to think of 100 different uses for an object, such as a 1-yuan coin, and divide the students

into small groups to freely think and discuss the 100 possible uses for the coin. In this exercise, no idea, no matter how absurd it seems, should be dismissed. Brainstorming works by generating creative ideas through one idea triggering another, ultimately selecting the best solution to the problem.[10]



Figure 4. Multiple Uses of a Coin (Source: Wang Weishan, *Unveiling the Basics of Creative Teaching*)

Similar exercises help cultivate the ability to observe things from multiple perspectives, as well as the insight to understand the environment and objects. Such exercises also improve cognitive flexibility, replacing conventional thinking with creative thinking. When this kind of thinking is applied to soft article writing, it leads to more clever ideas that stand out and helps overcome the problem of soft articles being dull and unremarkable.

2.2.4. Establishing Professional Ethics in Soft Article Writing

For soft article copywriters, the principle of creativity first does not imply blindly pursuing novelty and uniqueness, nor does it justify using poor ideas or creativity that tests the boundaries of social morality. Good cultural creativity is the core of cultural products and represents their inner soul. While the concept of creativity-first in soft article writing adheres to the principle of placing creativity above all else, the extent of creativity must be carefully controlled. Creativity should not aim for vulgarity in the pursuit of novelty or differentiation simply to catch the consumer's eye. Take WeChat public accounts, for instance. While they have become a booming platform for soft article advertising, the content is often mixed, with quality ranging from high to low. Among the low-quality soft articles, there are clickbait titles that flirt with vulgarity and sexual innuendo. For example, GQ Lab's viral article "That Night, He Hurt Him" was custom-made for the MINI brand. Despite deviating from GQ's usual style, the article brought massive traffic to the brand—over 2 million views and a significant increase in ad click-through rates. It even won the title of "Most Influential Soft Article of 2018." [11] However, there is no denying that the title carries heavy sexual innuendo, which gave this viral article a vulgar label.



Figure 5. Excerpt from GQ Lab's "That Night, He Hurt Him"

Another example of a similar soft article is by the once-popular public account writer Mimon, who often used vulgar titles in her works. One such article, titled "What Kind of Man Do Women Really Want to Sleep With?", turned out to be an ad for Diaopai laundry detergent. [12] These soft articles, which rely on erotic elements, either directly or indirectly express sexual concepts.

While they may represent an unconventional form of creativity and successfully grab readers' attention, earning short-term traffic, they touch on ethical issues in advertising and damage the soft article industry's integrity, hindering its healthy and sustainable development.

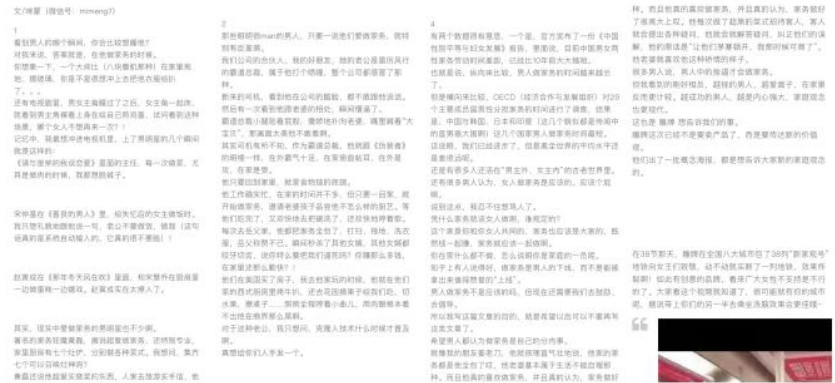


Figure 6. Excerpt from Mimom's "What Kind of Man Do Women Really Want to Sleep With?"

The examples above highlight some negative cases of soft article creativity. In reality, there are many more similar vulgar creative efforts, which not only lower the cultural standards of the audience but may also trigger a public trust crisis toward soft article advertising. As soft article creators in today's new media era—where information dissemination is simplified, but the communication environment is more complex—writers should maintain strong professional ethics. This includes learning and practicing the social responsibility and accountability that come with being a media professional. While striving to highlight the creativity of soft articles, it is essential to reject vulgar creativity.

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