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Planet

CHAOS

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The Royal Society of Literature is the UK's charity for the advancement of literature

# YOUR WRITING GUIDE

This resource will support your reflective and creative journey as you explore questions of climate justice. We want you to create a piece of written work as part of the 'Get Creative for Climate Justice' project, which is jointly run by us (the Royal Society of Literature, or RSL), CAFOD, Christian Aid and Oxfam with the support of the Climate Coalition.

The RSL got involved with the project because, as a charity that supports writers and champions writing of all kinds, we want young people to consider the power of words. We believe that writing – and writers – can change minds, and can even change the world.

We want you to capture some of that power and to use your imaginations, and your writing skills, as part of the global campaign for climate justice.

Through getting involved in Get Creative for Climate Justice, we hope you'll feel inspired by the writers we feature as part of this campaign, and also feel empowered to speak boldly through your writing. We want you to send a loud and clear message to MPs and our government.

The work you create will be presented in your school and also shown to local elected representatives – the people who make the laws in your community, and who can take action locally based on what you write.

We will also take some of your work to a special exhibition at Westminster – the seat of power in the UK – so that MPs can read your ideas and, we hope, consider taking them on. The exhibition, which will be held at the start of 2025, will be a call to action for our politicians: your work will have real impact.

So be persuasive! Be angry, if you want to be. Be brave. And be creative.

We can't wait to read your poems, stories and letters.



KAREN MCCARTHY WOOLF, HANNAH LOWE AND MONIQUE ROFFEY

## WRITE A POEM, A SHORT STORY OR A LETTER

We asked three brilliant writers who are part of the RSL Fellowship – which means they've been nominated by other excellent writers for this special recognition of their talent – to help direct you in this project. Each of them is a passionate campaigner

for climate justice. And each of them has taken a different writing style – poetry, fiction or letter-writing – and set a provocation (either asking a question or suggesting an idea) to help get you started.

Karen McCarthy Woolf talks you through what you'll need to know to write an eco poem. Monique Roffey will help you begin a short story. Hannah Lowe guides you through the process of writing an impactful letter. Go online and watch them talk it all through: [rsliterature.org/climate-justice](https://rsliterature.org/climate-justice).

There is a lot to think about. Which means there will also be lots to write about. It might be that you've already thought about – or written about! – the impact of climate crisis. But have you considered how you can also write in a way that brings about change or helps prevent these problems getting worse? That's what the Get Creative For Climate Justice campaign is all about. Over to you.

'Poets and philosophers are the unacknowledged legislators of the world'

- Percy Bysshe Shelley,  
*A Defence of Poetry*  
(1821 – published 1840)

# Activity one: write an eco poem

Writing a poem might not seem like a political act. But choosing to write a poem can be deeply political: as Karen McCarthy Woolf says, poetry is an 'activism of the heart'. Poems connect with readers in different ways to prose, and poets use their words to persuade, to explain, to provoke and to inspire. Poetry connects people to their feelings.

But what is an eco poem? Simply put, it is a poem with a strong ecological emphasis or message. Many poets across history have written about the beauty, menace and wonder of nature, but an eco poet does more than that: they bring the politics of nature directly into their poetry.

Juliana Spahr is an eco poet. She was suspicious of traditional nature poetry which emphasised the beauty of the natural world because 'it tended to show the beautiful bird but not so often the bulldozer off to the side that was destroying the bird's habitat'. In writing your poem, we want you to consider both the bird *and* the bulldozer. We want you to look around at the big picture, and write in a way that will connect with your reader's heart... and persuade them to make change.

*Preparation task one: Think of something from the natural world – a tree, an animal, a river. Think of your favourite thing about being in nature, or being with non-humans – what have you picked, and why?*

*Preparation task two: watch the video provocation set by RSL Fellow Karen McCarthy Woolf. Take notes if you want to.*

*Preparation task three: think of interview questions – between 10 and 20 different questions – to ask your nature object. Be as imaginative as you can be. Consider Karen's prompts:*

- *how does your tree feel knowing that other trees are being chopped down for timber?*
- *how does your plant feel when a dog pees on its roots?*
- *how does your river feel when sewage is dispensed into it?*
- *how does your sea feel when you swim in it?*

*When you're ready, write down all the answers to your questions.*

You're ready to write your eco-poem. This can be as short or as long as you like, but we recommend at least two verses of between six and eight lines. Remember as you write that it's important to think about the world from a perspective that's very different to your own. You don't need your poem to rhyme perfectly, or even to rhyme at all: what's important is to make that connection with your reader, with their heart as well as their mind. Make your writing a work of politics as well as poetry.



Born in London to English and Jamaican parents, Karen McCarthy Woolf is the author of two poetry collections and the editor of seven literary anthologies. Shortlisted for the Forward Felix Dennis and Jerwood Prizes, her debut *An Aviary of Small Birds* tells the story of losing a son in childbirth and was an *Observer* Book of the Year. Her latest, *Seasonal Disturbances*, explores gentrification, the city and the sacred, and was a winner in the inaugural Laurel Prize for ecological poetry.

Her poems have been translated into many languages, produced as animated and choreographed short films, exhibited by *Poems on the Underground* and dropped from a helicopter over the Houses of Parliament in a poetry 'bombing'.

Karen also writes for radio: recent highlights include a reversioning of *Homer's Book of the Dead* in which Odysseus is reimagined as a London cab driver for BBC Radio 4's *Book of the Week*.





# Activity two: write a short story

All of us know what a story is. All of us have heard or read or told stories: at home, at school, with our friends and our families. Stories are what connect us as human beings: they're how we first learn to communicate, and they're what we read and write most often – whether they're real-life stories or fiction.

Many stories, and especially action stories, only ever have one hero: often it is a man, and often this one man saves the entire community from peril. This kind of story is called the 'hero's quest'. But we want you to think about other kinds of (short) stories: new kinds. Stories of engagement, stories about community. For this task, we want your story to put *people* at its centre – rather than a single person – as well as nature itself. We want you to make everyone the hero.

Monique Roffey wants your story to help draw attention to some hard facts: 2023 was the hottest year since global temperatures were first recorded in 1850. The planet is burning because we have been burning fossil fuels. Our planet needs help urgently. We must transition to renewable energies like solar and wind, and we must stop extracting fossil fuels. We need to use less energy. In short, we need to take action.

*Preparation task one: your story will star a community of heroes as the main characters. Write a list of who they might be – think about Monique's suggestions:*

- teenage activist
- scientist
- inventor
- a river
- a mum or dad or carer

*Preparation task two: think of a scenario where a group of people – they can be people you know or you can make them up – come together during a very hot summer to tackle an emergency. What is the emergency? Is it saving a tree or a river or an animal? How will your heroes go about it? Think about all of their different characteristics, and how they might respond individually to the emergency. Make plenty of notes.*

When you're ready, start writing your short story. You're free to write as much or as little as you like, but we'd like you to get down at least two sides of A4 (so, around 800 words). And remember, as Monique's prompt sets out: we want you to start your story with the words 'That day...'

**Monique Roffey is an award-winning British-Trinidadian writer, lecturer and environmental activist. She has published eight books (a memoir and seven novels), some short fiction, many essays and some literary journalism. Her most recent novel, *The Mermaid of Black Conch*, won the Costa Book of the Year Award 2020 and was shortlisted for the Goldsmiths Prize, the Rathbones/Folio Award and the Republic of Consciousness Award. Her other novels have been shortlisted for The Orange Prize, Costa Novel Award, Encore and Orion Awards. Monique is Professor of Contemporary Fiction at Manchester Metropolitan University.**



# Activity three: write a letter

Writing a letter is a direct way of letting a decision maker (such as a Councillor, MP or Minister) know how you feel about a particular issue. Setting out your ideas in a letter, and asking for a specific action to be taken, can be a direct route to making change – particularly if you coordinate your efforts with others as part of a campaign.

Throughout the centuries, people have written letters to one another: from ancient India and Egypt, through to the great civilisations of Rome, Greece and China, the more recent prolific letter-writers of Victorian Britain, up to the present day of letter-writing campaigners such as Amnesty International who hold human rights violators to account.

Writing a letter can make a difference. Your letter could bring about real change. Think about what you want to say to our parliamentarians – the people who make the laws we live by – and be imaginative and courageous in what you write down.

*Preparation task one: think about when you*

*might write a letter. To whom? Why? What would you want the outcome to be? And why would you choose to communicate via a letter rather than any other method?*

*Preparation task two: watch the video provocation set by RSL Fellow Hannah Lowe. Take notes if you want to.*

*Preparation task three: read Franny Choi's poem, right. Think about what it*

Then, write your letter. Think about the prompts that Hannah has set you:

- imagine yourself as a future figure writing back to someone in the present
- what does the world look like in 80 or 100 years' time?
- how have humans managed to survive?
- what is the same?
- what is different? what has disappeared?
- are we still on this planet or are we somewhere else?
- are some species extinct? Which ones?



Hannah Lowe was born in Ilford, London to an English mother and Jamaican-Chinese father. She has lived in London, Brighton and Santa Cruz, California.

She has worked as a school teacher and a university lecturer in Creative Writing. Her first book *Chick* won many awards including the 2015 Michael Murphy Memorial Prize, and her most recent book *The Kids* was the Poetry Book Society Choice for Autumn 2021. She writes poems that have been described as 'shimmering with sleight of hand, inventiveness and insight'.

- what do we eat and drink?
- be brave: use new language, invent new terms

Your letter doesn't have to be directly addressed to one of today's politicians – although it can be – but it should send a message to them through the themes and ideas you express in it. You can write as much as you like, but we recommend at least one side of A4 paper: around 400 words.

DEADLINE FOR SCHOOLS TO SUBMIT WORK – 29  
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## DISPATCHES FROM A FUTURE GREAT-GREAT-GRANDDAUGHTER

Dear Improbable You,

What was it like to live so gridded? So trackchanges?  
So carceral, somnambulant, asphyxiating at split screens  
while Nation glowered with rot? What was it like  
to slouch numb-faced here and watch your image  
get dirty with Algorithm elsewhere, shuffle into destiny's schlep?  
Did your pulse come haptic? Did you pay money for food?  
Did you dial three numbers and salute genocidaires  
with crestwhitened incisors when they knocked? Did you pray  
ever? Hope, any? Or did you take a number,  
snatch what scraps you could, and pet your children?  
Everything was happening, and you were alive.  
You were alive then. What did you do?

:::

Great-Great-Grandmother, I'm writing to you  
under chartreuse skies, after the Great Verticality,  
and after the Multiwars and their Various Rebrandings,  
and after Tipping Points #1-379,  
and after, finally, the Very Long, Very Slow Dispersal of Things.

I wonder if you can imagine it: the tall tall oceans,  
the smell of sick-gas (weirdly sweet) and sani-spray  
(like if toothpaste were a vegetable), the rhythm of jumpdancers  
on the boardwalks, water swinging in barrels, grass-fed grass.

There are twelve different siren patterns, one for each kind of crisis:  
two honks for fire; three short trills for a runaway brain;  
a Loneliness Emergency is a low swoop followed by a chirp;  
and so on. There are crises every day, and there's also bread  
bubbling on the counter, pickled beans, a cat who comes home.

What I want you to know is that we're okay. Hurting  
but okay. We're surviving, though it's true,  
we don't know what that means, exactly.

:::

Some rituals I do to imagine what you knew about freedom:  
move my fingers over glass, swipe like a question;

swallow a bullet and stay silent until it passes;

touch my lips to silicone, sand, silicone, sand;

walk into the ocean and let the waves kick me over,

then dry in the sun and lick the salt from my forearms;

sit facing a friend and hold our palms together without touching;

take turns completing the phrase, It could have been that... ;

draw my face from memory;

ask a friend to bind me with rope until I can't move, tense up until  
I cry;

then laugh until the ties loosen; until everything loosens;

:::

Dear Great-Great-Grandsomeone,

Under a graphless sky, I'm writing to say: thank you for healing  
what you could; for passing down what you couldn't.

I'm plentituding what I can; what I can't, I let tunnel me  
like roughage, like a "bullet," like a slur I won't daycare.

What you gave me isn't wisdom, and I have no wisdom in return,  
just handfuls of livestock: Everyday, a sky is.

Miles are. We sing, entangled, and the root-world answers,  
and together we're making. Something of it. Something

of all those questions you left.

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*Extract from The World Keeps Ending, and the World Goes On  
by Franny Choi.*