

Where to Look:

a Prompt Arts Guide



Nicholas Christiaan

Introduction

If you ask people when they last wrote a story, you often get a similar response. Well, let me see – it was a while ago, probably when I was still at school. When you ask them why they stopped, they will say they don't know. Prod them some more, and they might claim they don't have any time in their busy lives, and really the inclination passed long ago, and they were never any good at writing anyway.

Those same people may think nothing of spending an idle moment doing a crossword or Sudoku. Why do these time-killers remain so popular? Well, they have a sense of completion about them – you are filling in a puzzle, solving a mystery, using your mental dexterity. Thrilling, isn't it?

What puzzles mostly don't contain is an element of creativity. You are essentially dancing to someone else's tune, and every completed task will yield the same result as everyone else. Nothing is *yours*. But what if you could fill dead time by creating something interesting? What if you could complete an exercise in a limited time-frame and come up with something genuinely unique?

Well, this book is here to show you how. Here are forty exercises that you can complete pretty much anywhere. They are designed to provide a solution to the blank page. These are exercises that demonstrate just how much material is all around us; you just need to know where to look. Of course, the best way to use this book is to complete the exercises, but there should be just enough of Prompt Arts' . . . well, if it's not too grand a word, *philosophy*, to guide you beyond the exercises themselves.

It is important to remember that with this book in one hand you will not be creating a seminal *meisterwerk* with the other. It is certainly not going to teach you to write. Well, who can? But you will improve just by writing, and these exercises should be seen as the literary equivalent of a warm-up – as tuning your instrument. For the most part, all you need is a pen, a blank sheet of paper and a nice, comfortable place to sit.

Having warmed you up, our other hope is that, by engaging with this book, you will begin to see the whole world as one big writing prompt. Which, of course, it is.

How to Use this Book

Although the exercises in this book have been grouped into several sections, there is no need to complete them in order. The earlier exercises deal with character and the later ones narrative, but there is no harm in dipping into them at random.

Equally, don't just try an exercise once and then tick it off. Like Yoga, you will benefit from repeating and repeating them, refining them until you have built them into your muscle memory, and then refining them some more. You may even find you can build variations on these exercises yourself – experiment.

Although there is no set formula for engaging with this book, here are some suggestions:

- Keep a file. The earlier exercises deal with character and building 'surplus material', so file away what you produce and you can use it later.
- Or . . . throw it away. It is useful practice to regularly destroy work. It stops you becoming too attached to it. It is for this reason that at Life Writing sessions we have *The Shredder*.
- When an exercise asks you to come up with a word or a phrase, do stick to it. At most you are looking for three words. Can you explore the essence of something in a word or a quick burst of phrase? Can you define a banana in three words or less?
- Try to keep within the time restrictions. None of these exercises are designed to be completed in more than an hour. Try to get out of the habit of thinking that everything you write is going to expand in scope and increase in length and become a big piece. Your ambition will corrupt the exercise. These are warm-ups. Of course there are all manner of ideas in your responses that you can come back and explore at a later date, but for now file them – or let them sit in the back of your head, but resist the temptation.

That's it. It doesn't do to be too proscriptive. Have fun, and don't worry if ideas don't come quickly because they *will* come.

GATHERING MATERIAL

Sniper

Find a café in a town centre with a large window and a good view of the street. Get yourself a coffee and take up residence by the window. You'll need a decent view of the street, so you might need to choose your café carefully.

Now you're ready to start *shooting*. As each person walks past write down a word, or at most a three-word phrase, to describe them. These can be either a summation of their physical appearance, or their attitude, or the effect they have on you, or perhaps just the first word that pops into your head.

The sniper works best if they are ruthlessly instantaneous with the pen and utterly instinctual. First thought = only thought. You are a sniper going about your business. Of course, here the metaphor falls down a little because precision shooting with a gun probably does not rely much on instinct; but where it does hold is the sense that you are hidden from view and aiming to take down your prey with words. The kill is in your instantaneous summation, and you will be successful if you are *accurate*.

Do this for however long it takes to fill a page. Remember, these should only be very short descriptions. For example:

arrogant	completely alive
forgot her birthday	great arse
nervous	likes a smoke
vindictive	death

and so on.

Spend about fifteen minutes grouping these attributes or summations into (loosely) positive (+) and negative (-). Develop a new set of characters by giving each one three positives and two negatives.

The early exercises in this book are designed to give you surplus material for use in some of the later work, so at this point you can file your results for later if you want.

You may wish to respond immediately. Write for forty minutes.



Personality Rolls

For this you will need a novel and a dice.

Pick whatever novel is to hand. The scope and quality of the novel really doesn't matter – we're only going to strip it for parts. Flick through and find the names of two characters. Don't take too long choosing, it doesn't really matter, just pick the first two names you see.

Having established your two names, you are now going to write a brief dialogue between the two of them. You can set it out with discourse markers (“”, she said, etc.) or in play script, if you like.

Your two characters should each embody one characteristic from the following list:

fear	fun
malice	tact
honour	failure
triviality	vanity

There is an extended list of abstract nouns in Appendix 5.

For each character, roll the dice. If you picked *fun* and *malice*, for example, and then rolled 2 and 5, your challenge would be to come up with dialogue reflective of these numbers – i.e. someone with a *certain* amount of fun conversing with someone with quite a lot of malice. The lower the number you roll, the more subtle is the personality trait. A high number and your character is really in your face. Roll a 6 and you may have to unleash a monster!

It's rather like filling in one of those online questionnaires about a hotel visit. Did you find the service friendly? Well, 6 is extremely friendly and 1 is actively unfriendly. Except, as we're writers at work, in this case 6 would be excessively friendly – concierge vaulting the reception desk and sticking his tongue down your throat friendly.

With confidence you could introduce further characters, and even experiment with increasing and decreasing characteristics with the roll of a dice. How to reduce someone's quota of fear from 6 to 1? Well, perhaps your other character had told a joke that blew away all the tension in the room.

This is an effective warm-up exercise, but it can develop the way you write about character or even initiate a character for a longer work. For later exercises come back and revisit these characters, placing them in different scenarios.



Scent and the Sentence

For me it is the smell of the polish used on lift doors. Whenever I pass through a building that gives off that extremely pungent, bitter odour I am immediately transported back to school. It isn't just memories that appear, but feelings that have somehow been locked up through time and are suddenly given permission to make a comeback.

We are going to try and experiment with smells. Every household has a range of items that can be utilised.

Cleaning: washing up liquid, floor-cleaning fluid, boot polish, metal polish

Fragrance: deodorant, perfume, shampoo, incense, face cream

Food and drink: cooked food, cheese, vegetables, spirits, coffee

General household: books, stationary, bedsheets, clothes (washed), clothes (unwashed)

Work your way methodically through the variety of smells, and for each one write as many descriptive words as you can. In a second table try to fix on a memory the particular smell conjures up.

Play around with the smells – a whiff of perfume followed by a sniff of an unscrewed Bailey's bottle might transport you to a cocktail party in the 1980s, for example; boot polish and dirty clothes, a camping trip. Once you have the hang of it, increase the unlikelihood of the combinations, and look for mysterious alchemies like damp and caviar, or sex and cordite.

Once you have recorded your findings, you can file them for later use or start immediately. You have effectively created your own prompt: reach for a smell combination and write about it. If a particular time and place emerges, start a narrative there and see where it goes. Try not to write for more than forty minutes first time around.

The Dossier

Pick **three** people you know reasonably well. The ideal candidates are people you deal with regularly but who you are not friends with, and certainly not related to. For example, the vet, a colleague at work, the person behind the counter at the local café, someone who lives on your street.

You must now write a paragraph for each one as if you were compiling a report on them for a third party. Try to write about not only their physical characteristics, but also little details and habits you have noticed. It is as if you are building a picture of them that a secret agent would easily identify.

Here is my report on an acquaintance:

He must be 60, but has a youthful energy and a full head of hair that falls messily over his forehead. His slim build adds to the effect. He is about 5' 9". He is prone to wearing open-necked shirts, jumpers and slacks, all of which give the impression of an off-duty executive. Of the 1950s. He is often lost in thought, a quizzical look etched on his face, his eyes impenetrable behind thick glasses. He walks quickly, but with a slight stoop, like a man with plenty of places to go, plenty of things to do. He speaks rapidly in educated English, in long wisps of thought that prod gently. He doesn't ask many questions.

Do not include anything that would identify the person, but consider them with more attention to detail than you ever have. This in itself is a useful exercise. Don't worry about style – what is most important is information.

You can stop the exercise now and file these character descriptions, or continue.

Think of a place you know reasonably well. This might be a park, a café, a school, anything you are familiar with, but nothing too close to home – certainly not your own home!

Here is a café I sometimes visit:

Mismatched tables and chairs were artfully placed together and on one wall photographs of patrons hung in black and white portraits. The other side of the café

was filled with various shapes of mirrors. A nervous waiter potted, attending to both the customers.

Now invent names for your three characters and write them at the top of each paragraph. Describing your location, walk your first character into your scene. After a while, find a pretext to introduce the second character. Is there tension? Do they get on? Eventually bring in the third, with possibly a hint of conflict. Gradually a small world will start to emerge.

The Usual Suspects

The final scene from the 1995 movie *The Usual Suspects* has rapidly become one of the most admired in film history. It contains several textbook lessons in how to tell a story. Oh, just a warning at this point, the following exercise includes several “spoilers”. If you haven't already seen this movie and want to, don't read on.

As we reach the climax of the action, here is what the attentive viewer should already know:

The crippled Verbal Kint has been picked up after a boat fire in San Pedro harbour. Many people have died but Kint survives, and the only other survivor relates that Keyser Soze, the criminal mastermind, is in fact responsible. Kint is nevertheless brought in for questioning and gives the following story, told in flashback to Customs Officer Kujan, in exchange for immunity. His tale takes up the majority of the film.

Six weeks earlier, Kint and a gang of four, including Dean Keaton, committed a robbery and attempted to sell their loot to a fence named Redfoot, who in turn suggests a further job, the robbing of a jewel smuggler. It transpires that this job has in fact been commissioned by a crooked lawyer called Kobayashi, who, it turns out, works for Keyser Soze. Kobayashi blackmails the gang into robbing a ship coming into San Pedro harbour.

Soze always works through an intermediary and has, as a result, attained near-mythical status. Unfortunately, the job goes wrong, and the gang members are killed one by one, perhaps by Soze trying to protect his identity, and the ship is set ablaze.

Kint implies that Keaton is in fact Keyser Soze, and by the final scene Kujan has come to the same conclusion. Kint has his immunity, and is released from custody.

Kujan has his resolution, and the case is solved. Or is it? In a moment of realisation, masterfully shot, the horrified Customs Officer now sees that Kint has invented the whole story, plucking names from the notice board on the office wall describing faces from posters; even Kobayashi himself is in fact merely the brand of porcelain on the mug he has been holding in his hand the whole time.

'The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist.'

Now, your job is to create a story using *only* elements you find in the room you are currently in. Don't feel you need to move to a special, 'inspirational' room – just sit where you are.

You might include a tale set around Lake Evian, a story involving the detectives Villeroy and Boch, and a character called Cling, inspired by the manufacturer of board rubbers.

Or a story involving a ginger cat from a missing poster, a monologue set in a telephone box, suggested by a fridge magnet, and an entire plotline in debt to the building fire regulations.

The main thing is that it becomes apparent that stories and plots don't have to be the result of a lightning bolt of inspiration, or long hours of fine-tuning. By merely transcribing what we see around us we can often tell tales that are vibrant and colourful.

Write for twenty minutes.

Using Social Media

A thirty-minute character exercise.

The internet has opened up more possibilities than ever before for writers to crib their work. We now have cut. We now have paste. The evidence for these borrowings is everywhere, from the same quotations rehashed to statistics as standard if they're published on Wikipedia.

Where research once meant arduous days at libraries, now quickly-cobbled-together work is ubiquitous, from bloggers to columnists to novelists. Our use of the internet is reflexive – it is the go-to source of everyday knowledge.

Where the internet has been a godsend is in the pursuit of characters. They are all over it: over-opinionated bloggers or social media addicts who share every waking action with their followers.

Using these source materials, as with all of these exercises, requires some discretion. Any writer worth their salt knows how quickly they will lose friends if they divulge too much information, even if their characters see the light of day under pseudonyms. This is equally important when writing about someone you don't know. Always protect your sources.

For this exercise you are going to construct a character entirely from social media. You can either invent a name – take the first name from one author on your shelf and a last name from another, or use any one the many online name generators, or even the name of your character from an earlier exercise.

Once you have your name put it into Google. You might have to mix and match, but try and take down details of whatever you find – the high school of one, the opinions of another, the latest tweet of a third. You are trying to knit together an invented person from the shared online characteristics of real people. It is what novelists have been doing for years: combining characteristics from people they know in the form of fictional characters.

Do any of the combinations fit naturally? At Prompt Arts we learned fairly early on that putting certain random elements together to make a prompt can present difficulties – *Ann Boleyn hanging on to the undercarriage of a plane* was our famous

example. Unnatural as it was for a prompt, it was not impossible as a piece of writing.

Bury any real identity by mixing; make sure nothing can be traced, and write your narrative in thirty minutes. Or take someone real, and once you've written your piece, destroy it.

Using the Vicissitudes of Your Mood

Sitting where you are, write down adjectives to describe your mood. Be honest. Perhaps divide them into words or phrases that depict your mood as you start this exercise, and those that describe the feeling that has enveloped you in recent weeks. Of course, this is all too simple – moods don't fit into ready-made boxes, and I'm sure your spirits have felt decidedly contradictory, even during the course of a single day. Just do your best. If you settle on a particular word, grab a thesaurus and see if the synonyms for it describe your mood more accurately. Perhaps discover a new word.

Now think about which dominate and try to put them in an order of precedence. So far, so *self-help* manual.

Next, read this piece of philosophy from Joyce Carol Oates:

One must be pitiless about this matter of 'mood'. In a sense the writing will create the mood. If art is, as I believe it to be, a genuinely transcendental function – a means by which we rise out of limited, parochial states of mind – then it should not matter very much what state of mind or emotion we are in.

Create a table with the mood in a first box and examples of situations this mood has effected in a second:

Listlessness	Flicked through 108 channels – why is there nothing on? I mean, given the odds you would have thought that professional television makers between them would have managed to produce something watchable. Music. Oh, I thought I liked that song, let’s try this instead.
Prolivity	The washing machine cycle finishes in 10 minutes but I’ve got to be out the door in 15, so do remember to hang the clothes out to dry because I won’t have time before tomorrow evening. Book the taxi for tomorrow night now – there’s bound to be a wait if you leave it to the last minute. Someone left an answer-phone message, I’ll check that at 2:00.
Inspid self-congratulation	You go! You went to yoga every night this week. Do you know what? I’m proud of you.

You don’t have to use the table yet – you can file it away for use in a later exercise. Or, for thirty minutes write a piece using the abstract concepts of your initial list. Try to divorce these feelings from the act of writing the piece – your piece should only address the moods abstractly, perhaps in a character, but no attempt should be made to use the mood you are currently in to inform the piece. It should be writing from the outside.

Travelling without Moving

For this you need a map or a series of maps. It really doesn't matter what the map is of. It could be an urban or rural setting; it might be somewhere you've been and liked, or somewhere you've never heard of. The internet can be your friend here. All that matters is that this map will be a playground for the next exercise.

You can use either the first or third person – if you're stuck for a name, pick a random name from a book on the shelf or take a character from an earlier exercise.

Place your character on the map. He or she is walking down the street at the beginning of the greatest novel ever written! Describe what they see either side of them. Use the features outlined in the map – a good one will list shops, religious buildings, roundabouts, sporting stadia, etc.

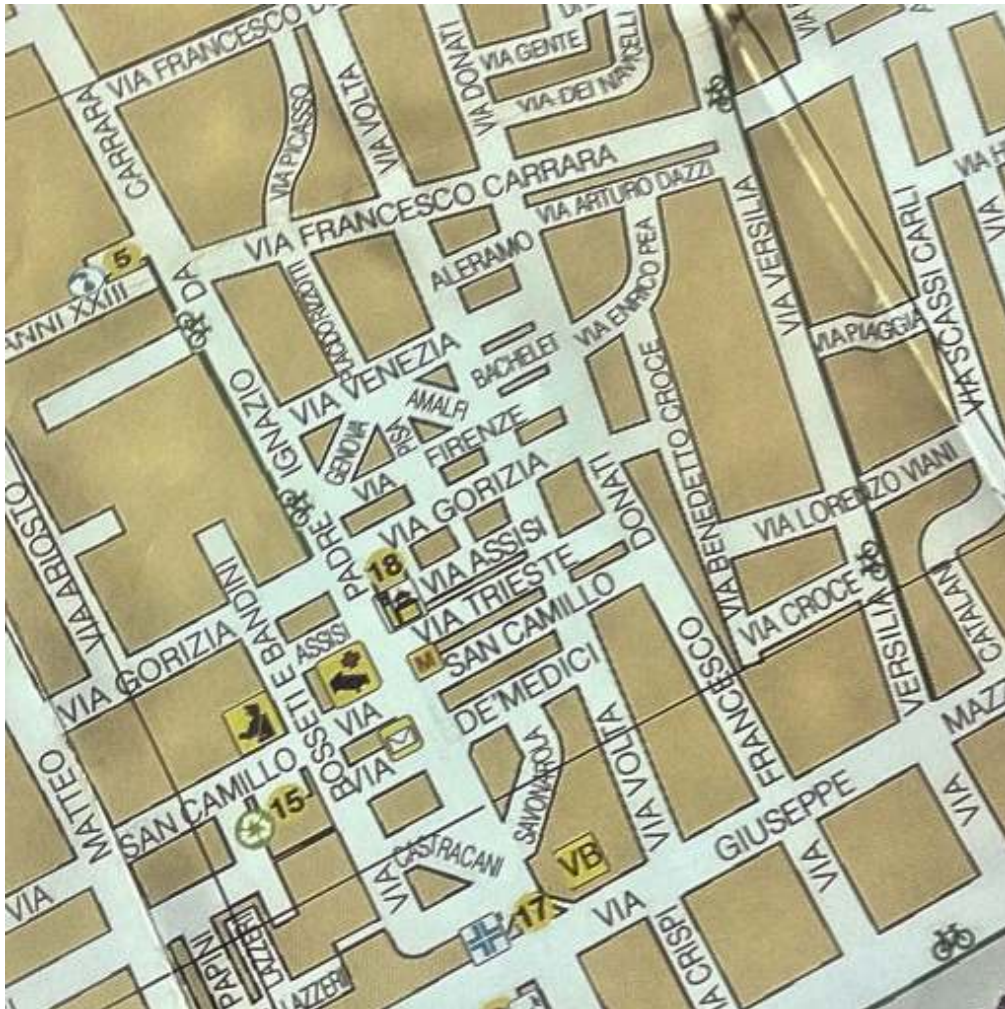
If you want, fill in local colour as you go (you might have to use your imagination a bit if it is somewhere you've never been). Your character is on a journey. It may only be a journey to the shops to buy some milk, or the journey might have weightier implications. Of course, it could even be a journey that starts out with the intention of buying some milk and then gets side-tracked. The key thing is that the map is a guide for both you and your character.

Turn left or right at the end of the street. Where are you heading? Is there a square that seems to be calling you? A park? A church or shopping centre?

After a while, start to craft some inner life. What is your character thinking? Does a particular landmark spark a turn in their interior monologue? Do the walk and the inner journey coincide?

Try to limit yourself to less than an hour of writing, but in due course, as an extension of this exercise, experiment with Google Earth or any of the open world games on the market that allow you to build and inhabit new worlds. Many of the most popular novels we read as a child, from the Boy's Own worlds of Robert Louis Stevenson adventures to *The Lord of the Rings*, started with a map. Start your adventure the same way.

This exercise gets you moving and allows you to practise blending an inner world and an outer one. If you're good enough, you can travel without leaving your desk.



Nice Day

In England the weather is a topic of daily conversation precisely because it is so changeable. These changes rarely spell disaster, as they do in less fortunate countries, and so, like football, they are a safe topic, employing an extensive range of platitudes and clichés and allowing people who may not have anything in common to negotiate awkward silences.

It is rare that anyone really examines the weather in detail in everyday life. Novelists have their *pathetic fallacy* of course: the establishing shot of many a chapter opening is what the sun was up to that day, or just how quickly the wind would chase the clouds across the sky.

This exercise rests on noticing and recording subtle differences in daily or weekly temperatures and the processes of the seasons. Schools will often have pupils

fashioning equipment to measure rainfall, and then recording the findings. This exercise is similar, in that you are required to diligently record abstract words or phrases that are called to mind by the weather.

You certainly don't want to be aiming at anything more than three words. In the **first column** record your description and in the **second column** your reaction to the weather in abstract phrases that describe mood. Use metaphor and simile. Think for the exact right word. For example:

<p>Light-ish blue sky, the clouds are barely moving, some puffy and thick, others wispy. It is cold – temperature 7 degrees Celsius.</p>	<p>A sense of abandonment – yes, it's desolate and cold, but something in its coldness said spring was around the corner. It didn't feel dry but full of potential, as if any minute you might come across an early clump of daffodils.</p>
<p>Torrential rain but hot and sticky. Cannot see the sky. 30 degrees Celsius.</p>	<p>That sense in which he had felt led by the unrelenting heat meant that when the rain did finally come the release was immeasurable.</p>
<p>Early morning. Dark shadows and dew on the grass, but temperature rising rapidly – 5 degrees in 30 minutes. No clouds on the horizon.</p>	<p>Today was the day they would leave and she was up early, knowing it was only with the sun's gentle and gradual warming that she would have the courage to face the day.</p>

Keep adding columns as the days develop, or map the changes over a week or month. You should end up with a database of abstractions. The two columns together should give you enough prompts for future endeavours because often, as you will discover from novels, whole days of incident are first prompted by the writer foreshadowing them in the initial description of the weather.

Use the changes as the basis of characters, relationships, lives, days, poems – the changes and arcs that constitute narrative. File the results.

The Road Less Travelled

It is important to remember that this is not a self-help book. I've tried to compile exercises that are challenging and enjoyable to complete, but taken together they are *only* prompts to get work started. Of course writing can be immensely therapeutic, and the opportunity to get thoughts and feelings down on paper, or read by others, is almost always healthy in the long run. Having said that, I'm primarily concerned with producing fiction rather than producing gentle therapies.

Many of us spend far too long coaxing our inner selves into narratives. Magazines and reality TV have taught us to look for the narratives behind everything, from weddings to losing weight. Novels and films have given us templates for narrative arcs that may conceivably describe things as banal as a bad day at the office, or as wonderful as a holiday or honeymoon – or longer periods, like a whole career. We have all passively modelled these narratives: the ups and downs, the conflicts and resolutions. Often it is only on reflection that we can clearly see where our lives took a turn in the road . . .

Enough of this self-help philosophising!

This next exercise will open up the book of prompts you have been carrying around with you for the last x number of years: your memories.

Spend five or ten minutes writing down comments people have made to you over the course of your long life. Of course, by their nature these can only be things that you have remembered, because we all have them – lines that just stick in the head.

Here are a few ideas, but your own results will be unique: . . .

“I’m actually quite shocked you’ve said that.”

“You could kiss me if you want.”

“Your father has died.”

There are a few different ways you can use this *product*. Once you have a handful, try to divorce them from the context in which they were said. File them for later use. As lines on their own they will probably not have the same power they had in their

original context, but they will make decent material placed at appropriate junctures in a short story. Write for thirty minutes.

The more interesting method, and one for those more adept, is to try and recall the emotion of the moment, the effect the line had on you, and the context in which it was said. You can separate the phrase and the accompanying emotion into tables and cut them up to create your own prompts.

Either way, the effect will be of pulling a string from your memory and using it to create anew. The product may even be the most personal of any of your responses to the exercises in this book.

IN THE FIELD

Coffee Date

As this book progresses, you will be placed in everyday situations and asked to approach them differently. You will begin to see the potential for fiction. The first of these field exercises takes place in a café.

Take your computer or pen and plenty of paper and find a moderately busy café. Place yourself so that you are not too far from the main cluster of clientele, and get to work.

First, write down any abstract words or phrases you hear that interest you. The aim of the first exercise is to transcribe fragments. For example: “9 tomorrow”, “amazing”, “knackered”.

Now lock into a conversation. The aim now is to transcribe. It doesn't matter how banal the conversation may appear to be – your role is not to judge or to edit, it is simply to listen and write, almost like a court stenographer. You will have to work quickly, so don't worry about formatting, just write as you hear.

Now fix onto a character in the café – someone who has piqued your interest thus far. Describe them as would a serious novelist, paying attention not just to their appearance but to how they come across: their seating position, the sound of their breath, any mannerisms. What makes them interesting?

If you haven't already done so, give your character a name. Take them out of the café by describing their movements as they walk down the street. Now you are back to fiction, inventing a whole series of actions for them and placing them in hypothetical situations.

Think of a colour. Pay the bill and leave the café. For the next fifteen minutes make a mental note of everything you see in that colour. When you get home, immediately go to your desk. Pick the most interesting thing you saw and write about it. Your writing should be impressionistic.

Now write up your transcriptions from the café. Choose a format: you could write out your notes in play form, giving names for each new speaker and bracketing the

pauses, or write a third-person novel extract. Can you shape the conversation? Can you discover hidden dynamics?

Finally, take your list of abstract words or phrases. Underline any that interest you and then place these at the top of a fresh piece of paper. Write, letting the phrase be used as a first word or a title. See where it takes you.

Go There

In Nabokov's *Glory*, a depressed Martin Edelweiss suddenly re-experiences a childhood memory while gazing idly through the window of a train. His first experience of it had been travelling through France:

At that moment, in response to his recollections, Martin saw through the window what he had seen as a child – a necklace of lights, far away, among dark hills. Someone seemed to pour them from one hand into the other, and pocket them. While he looked the train began to slow down, and Martin told himself that if it stopped, he would get off and go in search of those lights.

Anyone who was sensitive as a child found places in which their imaginations ran wild; 95 per cent of it must have been pure imagination, but the façade prompted thoughts, feelings, and, perhaps in idle moments, epic tales.

The façade may have been a house, an office block, a factory, a wood – just something on which you could press your imagination. Often we lose these instincts as we get older; rational explanations – it's just the office of a multinational where people work long hours and drink coffee out of Styrofoam cups – begin to take over, and places lose their . . . drama. For this exercise you must rediscover it.

Think of somewhere local that has always intrigued you. It might be a gate into a hidden garden, a strange, twisted tree, an abandoned cycle track – anything. *Go there.*

Stand and let the feelings rush over you. Feel at one with the moment; note the responses of your five senses. Experience the thrill of reacting emotionally to the place, really indulge it. Take a photo if you want. Really, think of it like being on

holiday: you want to remember how you feel forever. Of course, the feelings you encounter may not always be positive; they may not always be particularly strong. Work with what you have.

In Nabokov's story the train does stop and Martin gets off. Similarly, when you get to your desk write down your impressions, first in note form and then in longer, more polished prose. Try to channel the child within – twining bits of knowledge with utter fabrication and bits of imagination. Good luck! Limit yourself to no more than an hour.



Marketing

This exercise works best if you are in a public place like a bar or a café, but there should also be enough material at home if you examine the junk that comes through the average letterbox.

Wherever you're sitting, look around and pick up a leaflet or a postcard advertising a show, an exhibition, or a service. In many ways it doesn't matter whether the leaflet is dominated by images or if it is text-based; sometimes this exercise works best through random chance – simply use whatever comes to hand.

Utilising only the natural contours of the printed page, use the leaflet as a prompt in the standard way. If you have picked up an advertisement for a farm show, then you don't need me to tell you that your piece might involve a squabble between two farmers over a pig. Or not. A Book Club notice might lead you to someone being savagely beaten with a Jonathan Franzen novel.

The crucial part of this exercise is that you *write your piece on the leaflet itself*, writing around the typeface or image. You are aiming for something mid-way between an art-piece and a short story – a piece of creativity entirely contained within the leaflet.

At certain points in this book you will be asked to keep material for future use, possibly in conjunction with later exercises. This is really good practice. It means you don't become too attached to your work and you remain open to revising or adapting it.

It is also good practice to destroy work occasionally – even good work. These exercises are often just that: exercises. They should improve your skills merely through the act of completion. After all, you haven't kept every crossword you've done or every Sudoku you have finished.

With this exercise, you also have the option of hanging your work on the wall, or if you're in a public place slotting it back on the rack with the other leaflets.

Sex Story

This is the most dangerous exercise in this book.

You will be working with combustible material here, so handle with extreme caution. Whether the exercise even works for you entirely depends on the richness (or perhaps weirdness) of your inner life, so if you're not willing to explore something new, or you struggle to be open-minded, move on to the next exercise!

Think of a sexual fantasy you have been living with for some time. It could be something you have detailed in your head, or just thoughts and feelings that have vaguely entered your subconscious. It might be a fantasy directed at another person, perhaps someone you don't know very well.

The fantasy doesn't have to be explicit – it certainly doesn't really have to be sexual – but there has to be a level of tension, a genuine sense of the unstated.

Having said that, it might be a situation you want to try, but only in the privacy of your own head. Spend five minutes jotting down notes. Enjoy yourself. When you have formulated your fantasy think of a few names, invented almost at random. It is very important you don't use your own name.

Having done this, write the scene. Use any form you like: prose, poetry, playscript – it might be hard to render it in haiku! Work hard on the sensual detail – the idea is for this secret fantasy to come to life on the page. Take a risk, cheat on your partner.

When you are at last happy that your hidden desires have been fulfilled, you must destroy the manuscript. The disposal method is up to you – a ceremonial burning, the shredder; but make sure there is no trace of it alive. Or leave it in a café and hang the consequences.

This is very good general practice – good writing does not have to be permanent. As with many of the exercises in this book, the process is often more important than the result. Ideas, techniques, graft and craft – these are all things that are at work when you are actually writing, not waiting to write.

So, just have fun in the moment.



Street Scene



We all know the concept of *still life* in painting. We remember having to sketch a fruit bowl in school art classes; we've seen colourful nineteenth-century street scenes in art galleries. Still life can pull off the deft trick of depicting events that have "stopped", but seem somehow still in motion.

In the twentieth century, *Life* magazine produced photographic images that became iconic either because of the political impact of the events they depicted or how they seemed to sum up a peculiar emotion: think of the group of young people celebrating on the crumbling Berlin Wall, or the Vietnamese girl running past US soldiers mid-scream.

With the advent of cameras on mobile phones, it is entirely possible to build up your own archive of stock photos. Street scenes give you characters; they give you situations. They freeze the movements of everyday people in aspic, and allow you to create in your own time. Why is that person smiling? Where is she going? What has she done?

The above image was taken in Istanbul.

- How does the man in the apron on the right feel about the street being dug up?

- What is the relationship between the two men in the background, the one with his arms around the other?
- The team of workers: Is there a good working relationship?

Develop an archive of scenes. Pick out a photo at random for a thirty-minute exercise, or swap them with a collaborator. Having no knowledge of the context of an image will yield surprising results. Display your results, with the picture followed by 500 words of text.

Do's and Don'ts

This is another exercise in which you can use anything to hand. There are variations that work well in a public place like a train, a bus or the ubiquitous café; but equally there is enough source material in the average home to provide good-quality prompts.

If you are in public, scan the room for a notice. Our communal spaces are so full of them that we rarely bat an eyelid, never mind read them. Everyone recognises the obvious: *Fire Exit* or *No Smoking*; but we are equally used to seeing safety notices dotted around communal buildings and on public transport warning us to *Mind your Head*. Many institutions have rules to obey, or else admonishments for bad behaviour: *Do not place your feet on the seats*, *No heavy petting*, *Only two schoolchildren allowed in this shop at one time*.

What you're looking for is anything that suggests a course of action, or anything that outlines the consequences of *not* following a course of action. Of course, many of these notices have been put there to avoid a costly law suit rather than for the good of humanity, but it is often the case that a notice will go up precisely because there has been a disastrous occasion on which someone once did something unwise: *Do not place your drinks on this radiator*, *Do not park in front of the gate*, etc. You therefore know this is precisely what someone once did.

You might have to get up to have a look around, but zone in on a *sign*. Sitting where you are, write a short piece in which the action evolves from the course of action suggested in the notice. This could be by either following the instructions or not

following them, or it could simply be loosely related to the notice. The essential element in the piece, however, is the hazards of daily life – DEUS EX MACHINA.

Perhaps two people meet while one has his/her feet up on the seat, or a customer has a bad reaction to nuts. Use the lift in case of fire, always run down the school corridor.

The *at home* variation of this exercise is just as easy to find. Take a bank statement or official letter and work your way through the small print. Highlight an interesting line (this will be hard in the case of small print); you're looking for a line that gives you room for plot:

We may decide not to process payments to or from a limited number of countries or allow you to make card payments there. We will tell you which countries if you ask us or if you try to make a payment there.

(From Halifax MasterCard terms & conditions.)

The above of course lends itself to being in a strange country without funds.

In carrying out this exercise, the usual time limits apply.

See Appendix 8 for more signs.

Recreation

Social media have altered our perception of everyday events. Whereas once the rudeness of staff at a railway station or a cat chasing a dog down the street might have been related as an anecdote to family and close friends, now your audience is limited only to the number of followers you have, or the number of followers your followers have.

One's tolerance for these workaday titbits might vary, but what is certainly true is that seemingly small events can often be lent a new perspective by good writing. Some people might say that they want to write but have nothing to say. Everyone has something to say because everyone comes from a unique perspective, and this informs everything their eye turns to. As the Indian saying goes, There are 360 different ways to look at an elephant.

Think of an incident you have witnessed or something that has happened to you recently. Don't go too far back – you are aiming for clarity and detail in the memory. As an example, I will recall a small accident that happened while I was drinking alone in a pub:

It was before Christmas and the tables were laid out for dinner. The atmosphere was festive and cosy, with twinkling lights, decorations hung over the portraits on the wall and candles on every table. It was very busy, with waiters taking orders and rushing back to the kitchen. Food was hurried out from the serving hatch and people milled about waiting for a spare table.

There was a middle-aged couple at the table next to me. Their food was being served by a somewhat nervous and clumsy waitress, who in the process of saying “enjoy your meal” managed to knock over the candle, which set light to the napkin. The waitress, in her panic, picked up the woman’s water glass and threw water over the napkin, but missed. It ended up soaking the woman.

Diverting incidents like this happen to everyone. You just have to notice them. Choose an episode and describe it in detail. Pay special attention to what the characters may have been thinking. Were there any subtexts at play?

Work on extending the incident any way you want, but fill it out with rich textures. This piece could be a one-off account or you could use it in a longer piece of writing in future. Destroy it or file it.

Shall I compare thee . . . ?

Find a tree. Describe it in one paragraph, as if to someone who cannot see it. This is a skill in itself, and might take a bit of practice. Give as much practical information as you can, but try to resist metaphor. Describe it in a utilitarian way: it is 10 metres tall, its trunk is a dark, mottled brown; there’s a squirrel living in it.

Now pick out one word that describes each of the constituent parts of the tree:

- trunk
- leaves
- branches

Again, keep these words practical: “knotty”, “rough”, “speckled”.

Get figurative. Use abstract terms to describe the tree. Play with its form and its sense. You’re like an old hippie from 1967 receiving hidden messages from trees. Think of the tree as human – personify it. Is it willowy, slim? Does it stand crucified? Is it rigid or supple?

Write these terms in list form. This is another list that you can file and use for other exercises. You should end up with a group of semi-poetic abstract terms. Don’t be tempted to do anything with them immediately. Often material produced on one day is reborn on the day you rediscover it – perhaps at some point you will have completely forgotten you ever described a tree like this, and the words will just be abstractions you can use for unrelated projects.

But if you want to get to work immediately, think of a man’s or a woman’s name. Apply the characteristics you have ascribed to the tree and write a long paragraph describing your character as they would appear to a lover. Limit your time to roughly forty minutes.



Using Place to Prompt and Plot Action

When Vincent Van Gogh discovered the south of France he was delighted with the bright light and colours. Rather than buying a second home and living out his days writing letters to the *Times*, Vincent was inspired, and every day he would pick up his easel and paint the countryside around the town of Arles.

This exercise draws on some of the similarities between painting and writing. It is often useful to think of what you're doing as working within the Arts, with a capital A. Whereas a painter has only canvas, you have only the blank page, on which words must convey the full measure of a scene.

Look for a place. Think of yourself as an artist looking for an appropriate scene to paint. You could spend a morning scouting locations, or else visit a place that has always intrigued you, perhaps similar to the place in the earlier exercise *Go There*. Give some consideration to how easy it will be to write at this location, because you are going to write for thirty minutes. Get used to working in trying conditions – it may start to rain. Take too many notes and someone might ask you what you're doing.

Once you are in the location you will have ideas. Hopefully lots of ideas. Again, always keep in mind our analogy – you are an artist who has set up their easel and you are going to paint the scene. How much of an Impressionist you are is entirely up to you. You might want to jot down a few impressions here and there around the page *à la* Jackson Pollock. Would Andy Warhol just write about the tinned goods aisle of the supermarket?

Try to generate characters in front of your eyes. Imagine them leaning across a railing, or arguing around a table. Remember at all the times the metaphor of the painter – paint your action onto the scene with words as if you're painting ghosts. There is a theory that high emotion leaves a psychic imprint on a place which replays itself every now and again – hence ghostly sightings.

With that in mind, play with your place and imprint a scene upon it.

Watching Animals

Humans have always anthropomorphised and personified animals. The Disney Corporation have turned it into a billion-dollar business. The usual form is to keep just enough dog, cat or rabbit in there for the viewer to identify, and then add a wise-cracking persona steeped in American Judeo-Christian values. We all know Bugs Bunny is a smartass, but only Ariel Dorfmann wrote *How to Read Donald Duck*.

In an idle moment, watch an animal closely. The ideal target is a household pet, but this could just as easily apply to a flock of pigeons or a fox after midnight. Seagulls and crows are intelligent birds with, according to some writers, a rich variety of complex emotions. Even ants and their relentless working corporations are fascinating, and on a hot day in the sun dropping a few crumbs and watching them go to work gives you enough metaphors for the human condition to fill a small notebook.

Watch, take notes. Listen.

There are two contexts in which you can observe their behaviour. The first is as part of the behaviours of a particular species. The second, as poets and writers and cartoonists traditionally have, as analogies for human behaviour.

Really take your time. Zone in on a particular pigeon and watch how it goes about its business. Does it co-operate with the rest of the flock? Where does it stand in the pecking order? Build up a character file for each animal, still using animal modes of behaviour.

Then begin your personification. Carefully adapt each character file to a human equivalent: a dog that was always scratching might be a man named Josh who absentmindedly plays with his hair a lot. Often the subtler the idea, the better.

Spend some time concocting a scene between your animal/human hybrids.

For an extended exercise, buy a ticket to the zoo and spend an afternoon taking notes at the monkey enclosure.

PERCEPTION CHANGE

The Method Method

The next few exercises are experiments. We're going to alter the way you write. These aren't designed to be long-term solutions, just a way of producing new material by rearranging, slightly, the way you think about writing.

Often, changing the way you do things can yield positive results very quickly. However, there really is no substitute for just writing. No amount of gimmicks should ever get in the way of the one job you have, which is to write. There's a very wise saying that we used to advertise the early sessions of Life Writing: Don't be a writer. Be writing.

While it might be fun to see how other people worked (the *Paris Review* "Art of Fiction" interview series is very good for this; Hemingway is said to have stood up to write), or manufacture the perfect literary office from which to work, sometimes these things can divert us from the task. Often they are in fact carefully manufactured to delay the task. And the task is to write.

That said, by way of experiment play around with the exercises on the next few pages.

Take a short piece you have been working on but haven't finished. You might like to continue working on one of the stories started on a previous exercise.

Now think of yourself as like an actor trained by Lee Strasberg or Uta Hagen. You abide by the *Method* – the rigorous drama training that sees personal experience as the crucial driver behind great acting. Remember Marlon Brando mumbling or Dustin Hoffman in the dentist's chair? There was a whole theory behind that!

While it should be obvious that a working knowledge of your subject is essential for uncovering the truth of it, this exercise will have you pursuing real experience.

The trick is to allow the content to be matched by the position in which you write it. So, for example, a piece exploring the by-play of politics could be attempted in the public gallery of a senate building. Loneliness, in a bar alone on Saturday night, or on the moors in the rain.

Experiment. Place yourself in positions that are uncomfortable. You may find that this in fact makes them conducive to producing a certain kind of material. Get metaphorical. If you are writing about someone's life spiralling down the drain, lock yourself in a public toilet for thirty minutes.

The time constraint on this depends on the situation. But remember, live it – write it. You are a transmitter.

Mindlessness

Sit in total silence staring at the wall.

Try not to think. Don't meditate, don't feel anything, and don't be aware. Try to shut everything off. You no longer exist – in fact you're not aware of ever existing.

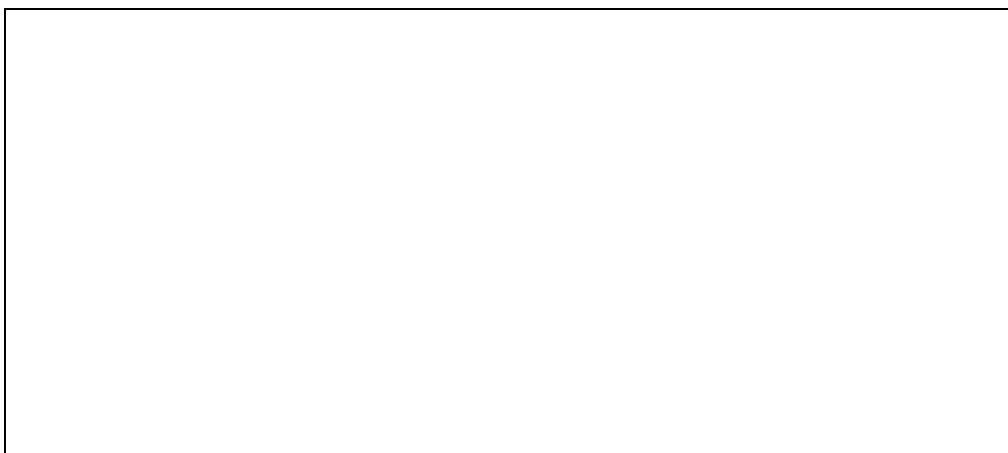
Do this for five minutes.

Now start writing for fifteen minutes.

This is a very useful twenty-minute exercise, and it will certainly take some practice. It is an attempt to use the qualities of nothing as a prompt, and as such is no different from the other prompts in this book, in that it reacts to the world around us – or in this case the lack of a world around us.

Of course, it is impossible to reach a state in which nothing infiltrates – no sounds, imagination or thought. But if you practise this five-minute state of mindlessness enough, you may reach surprising results during the fifteen-minute writing exercise.

What do you write about? Well, whatever comes out of nothing. That's the art!



Part-Time Writer

This exercise works especially well if you have a job.

Although many creative people carry notebooks, there are those who don't on the basis that their memory will retain any genuinely good idea and forget those that only seemed good at the moment of inspiration. As a piece of free advice between you and me, maintain a healthy scepticism of inspiration.

While you're going about your morning tasks, think of an opening line to a story. It could be something that has been rattling around your head for a while, or something someone has just said to you, or even something that just pops into your head.

DO NOT WRITE IT DOWN.

A little later, think of a second line. Remember it in conjunction with the first line. Over the course of the day keep adding to your piece, but at no point write anything down. As the story unfolds you must merely remember each sentence in order.

At the end of the day, you may successfully have composed a paragraph or two in your head. You will have been distracted all day at work and probably have achieved only half the things you were supposed to (all of which you'll have to explain to the boss), but the writing will have progressed.

The act of remembering limbers up your imagination. It's possibly why actors are very good at coming up with narrative – their technique teaches them to treat lines less as something to remember than as something to live. A good actor will always know what the next line is, because the next line makes perfect logical or emotional sense.

As soon as you get home, move to your desk and write the material you've been carrying around with you all day. Unburden yourself on paper. Continue the story, and write for another thirty minutes.

Being Maya Angelou

In an interview with the *Paris Review*, Maya Angelou once described her writing routine:

I rent a hotel room. I leave my home at six, and try to be at work by six-thirty. To write, I lie across a made up bed, so that this elbow is absolutely encrusted at the end, just so rough with callouses. On the bed is a bottle of sherry, a dictionary, Roget's Thesaurus, yellow pads, an ashtray, and a Bible.

I never allow the hotel people to change the bed, because I never sleep there. I stay until twelve-thirty or one-thirty in the afternoon, and then I go home and try to breathe; I look at the work around five; I have an orderly dinner – proper, quiet, lovely dinner.

This is a variation on an old trick: live like a famous writer. Try to think like you are a published author with a book deadline; that you are a Nobel laureate with a weighty literary history behind you, or a run of plays at the Royal Court.

At the very least, work on the muscle memory – after all, it's all a load of crap: you can't say that this person is better than that person, and if you could, who cares? Henry Miller said that there were some writers he liked and some he didn't, and Hemingway's work was only fit for blocking up his cistern. If pretending your work has global implications for a day gets stuff down on paper, then go for it.

This is the *only* exercise in this book that has its own ambition. You are required to pretend to be Maya Angelou for a day.

BUILDING NARRATIVES

Jailbait

For us there is only one season, the season of sorrow. The very sun and moon seem taken from us. Outside, the day may be blue and gold, but the light that creeps down through the thickly-muffled glass of the small iron-barred window beneath which one sits is grey and niggard. It is always twilight in one's cell, as it is always twilight in one's heart. And in the sphere of thought, no less than in the sphere of time, motion is no more. The thing that you personally have long ago forgotten, or can easily forget, is happening to me now, and will happen to me again to-morrow. Remember this, and you will be able to understand a little of why I am writing, and in this manner writing. . . .

Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*

The satisfying part of starting a story from the back, as it were, is seeing fate's hand leading us inexorably towards what we know must happen. Languishing in a jail cell, the prisoner is free to reflect on what brought them there. Prison establishes a fixed point at which the action stopped, and gives the narrator an almost limitless time to reflect. Marcel Proust, although he had committed no crime, knew this only too well, voluntarily holing himself up in his apartment for a decade to write his great reflective work.

A piece that commences when the action is already complete allows the reader to become complicit in the building of the jigsaw, piecing together twines of plot or revelling in the cautionary aspect of demise.

For this exercise, imagine you are in a jail cell. Write either an exculpation or a confession. Express pride in your actions or remorse, as you see fit. Perhaps describe the conditions under which you are being held.

It is crucial that you write in the first person. This is *your* version of events. The police, the judge, even the press have put forward theirs. Now it's your turn. From the crime list in Appendix 1 on page, pick a crime. Your first-person character has committed, or not committed, but been convicted of this act and received punishment accordingly.

Your job is to tell the tale. Remember to include details of motivation and planning. Did the crime go faultlessly, or did something go wrong? Were you let down along the way? Were you double-crossed? Misunderstood?

Your account should take as long as you need to put your side of the story across. Like Oscar Wilde, languishing in Reading Gaol, you have all the time in the world to have your say . . .



I Have Something to Tell You

“Is this a good time?” “You need to sit down . . .” “We need to talk.”

Drama, be it high-quality theatre or low-rent TV, has an unsubtle way of letting the audience know that a character is going to receive news. Usually solemn news is accompanied by equally solemn facial expressions: “Look, there’s been an accident.” In TV and film, if the incident about to be discussed has already been shown, there is often a cut-away at this point so that the reaction remains unstated. Alternatively, the actor is given full range to “react”.

Write a piece of dialogue. Express it as a play-script between two characters. If you want you can take any of the characters you have designed in an earlier exercise out of the file. You can either place them in a context that seems appropriate to the news they’re getting, or, if you feel like a challenge, make it incongruous: a wife announces she wants a divorce while in a kayak travelling down the Zambezi River.

Try and keep your nerve, and write until the (bitter) end. Most novels, plays and films will cut away at some point, long before the point where the characters have nothing more to say than: “Well, thanks for telling me, goodbye . . .” Those are the rules of good drama, but this is an exercise in action/reaction. Try and place yourself in the shoes of both characters.

Here are the prompts. You will find more in the Appendix 9.

- You have a disease (doctor); or, You’ve got a disease, I gave it to you.
- I need the money back you borrowed from me.
- I’m not your real father/mother.
- I want you to marry me. I want you to divorce me. I want you to remarry me.
- You have got the job.
- You have been fired.
- The painting you are showing me is worth £15 million.

Write for as long as it takes for the scene to conclude – this should never be more than about thirty minutes.

The Treasure Trove

There is no better time to be a collector of ephemera. While there are plenty of junk shops and flea markets still around, the Internet has made dealing in collectables a lot easier. Whatever you're looking for, it is often simply a case of typing it into a search engine.

Of course, random objects make excellent prompts. The author Lynne Reid Banks's son Omri was about to throw out a shabby bathroom cupboard until his mother told him about its magical properties. And, with a bit of polishing, *The Indian in the Cupboard* was born. Omri even became the central character.

Here are some ways of making the most out of random objects:

Postcards

There are millions out there for next to nothing. The most obvious use would be to provide a setting, be it Niagara Falls or Piccadilly Circus, but look beyond this and attempt to write a postcard home. To a family friend, or a lover? If postcards seem a little recherché, set it in a particular time period.

Often you will find fully written and stamped postcards. These are fantastic set-ups (in fact Annie Proulx based a whole novel around postcards home), and can be used as openers to short stories or character pieces: What is the relationship between the writer and the recipient? What clues are there to the writer's character?

Photographs

Work your way through your own collection. Are there any that tell a story without words? Yourself in younger days? Write something short and shot through with memory. Use the photo to boost a few autobiographical paragraphs. Place it in the third person and change the names if you like, or save up the fragments of writing for a longer piece at a later date.

There are also many old photographs doing the rounds, and a collection provides wonderful boosts to creativity, especially when you don't know any of the "characters". Why does this particular photograph "matter"?

Objects

A vase, a model ship, a He-Man figure: pretty much any object can be used as the basis of a short-story – at least, as evidenced by some titles from recent American short stories:

“Red Moccasins”	Susan Power
“The Rug”	Meg Mullins
“Coins”	Mona Simpson
“The Shell Collector”	Anthony Doerr

Think about the symbolism of each object. Was it a gift? Does it represent something within a relationship (rings, a second-hand watch)? Why did someone give it away? With an antique, perhaps chart the object’s ownership over the years: How many times has it changed hands?

Remember: the prompts in this book are designed for you to write your responses in less than an hour. So, grab a prompt from the treasure trove and start writing. For more objects, see Appendix 2.



True Crimes

Although the most popular genre of literature in the UK is crime fiction, there is certainly a market in crime non-fiction, and very few modern serial killers have killed for too long before a book is dedicated to their exploits. Of course, most of these are brash and prurient, but some of the greatest writers of the twentieth century have tried their hand at the genre, often with spectacular results – you might think of Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* or *The Executioner’s Song* by Norman Mailer.

So, what’s the attraction for these award-winning writers? According to Mailer, it was that, with true crime, his imagination was less inclined to take a wrong turn. He often found when writing fiction that an idea that appealed to him for a brief moment was one that he committed to for the rest of the book. With non-fiction, the danger of taking the wrong fork in the road was minimised.

Non-fiction leaves you only shaping a narrative, not inventing one.

Leaf through the newspaper. On any given day there will be a report on a crime that has just been committed, or a court case involving a crime. This exercise works best if you have a lot of information to work with, so choose long, exploratory reports with plenty of detail and interesting “characters”.

Jot down the details of the case. Make a careful note of quotations that demonstrate the feelings of the people involved: Did a witness say how intimidated they were by the jewellery thieves? Did a man shout out defiantly while on trial? Build up a character sheet on a few of the characters involved.

Your job is to write out the crime as non-fiction. Write it as you might a novel or a short story (you can choose first or third person). You will have to add detail yourself – if the weather is not mentioned in the article, take some license: “It was a blisteringly hot day in central Bedford.” Steal the crime. Make it yours.

Remember: there is a whole world of material in newspapers. If you get particularly taken with this exercise, download court files – or even visit court yourself, taking notes from the viewing gallery.

As I Lay Dying

Start at the end. A good narrative certainly does not have to be linear – often a story benefits from jumping around in time, and many a novel or movie will begin with the action concluded or a character lying on their deathbed.

Many last words have become infamous. Oscar Wilde was said to have declared: “Either this wallpaper goes or I do” just before he breathed his last. Start to consider the impact of a character’s last message. The Italian painter Raphael was reported as saying simply “Happy”. What could he have been referring to? Was it a reflection of his own state, or perhaps a suggestion to those in the room? Vladimir Nabokov was similarly enigmatic: “A certain butterfly is already on the wing.” Could this be decoded? There is a list of famous last words in Appendix 3.

Unpack a character from their last words. You may wish to take a character from an earlier exercise, or start afresh. If there is a phrase or a poetic pearl that has been clinking around your head for a while, write it down. Pick one with a certain weight. How about “Oh, what it means to be innocent”? Or choose an abstract word that you like the sound of and write it down. What was Charles Foster Kane’s *Rosebud*? It is important to try to think of the phrase first without giving any thought to what you’re going to do with it.

Now plot a character’s life from birth to death, ending with their last words. To begin with, plot the events of this life in note form, giving dates and events. This can be filed for later use, if you wish.

You might choose to write it as an obituary, or in the style of a reflective piece written by a friend. Don’t make it too long – it’s just an exercise. The important thing is that, in a relatively short space of time, you have produced an arc of a whole life. But remember: like a good obituary, this piece is not about death, it’s about life.

As an extension, learn to use cemeteries as prompts. Graves are alive with information, from names for characters to enigmatic aphorisms.

Mining Your Dreams

There has long been a certain surplus value in dreams. The product of our long, sleeping unconscious has been famously used by painters and filmmakers, successfully and unsuccessfully trying to mimic our dream state.

It is difficult to use our dreams well. There are few things duller than having to listen to a person's interminable rendition of a recent dream. Tedious too are the various symbolist associations: water and sex, eggs and fragility . . . Yawn . . .

Dreams can be used to good effect in their literal sense. Anglo-Japanese writer Kazuo Ishiguro has a tendency to allow his stories to deviate from their clear linear narratives in ever more dreamlike directions, and there are dream qualities in much poetry.

Our dreams often start out bearing a decent resemblance to our lives. The characters we know so well are drawn painstakingly; houses and streets from our childhood are represented faithfully. Only in dreams, though, is there a tendency to fuck up these beautifully evocative images. The associations come quicker as the dream develops; there are jarring juxtapositions, often random acts of pointless violence or sex. Dreams can be fun, and they can be traumatic. But they are often forgotten in an instant.

Keeping a dream diary is an act of discipline. It goes without saying that you need to keep a notebook and pen by the bed and write down your dream immediately. Often the dream is fading from memory during the act of writing it down. Of course there are some dreams you remember forever.

Keep a dream diary for some time. After a while – a week or two – you will have forgotten most of what you wrote, and so reading the diary again is a lovely act of self-discovery. The diary also provides you with a mini treasure trove of material.

Let your unconscious guide you. Pick a dream that seems to be about something in your own life. It could be a decision you have to make, or a trauma – the death of a friend, or the breakup of a relationship. Leave out the details of the dream, but in one sitting write out your thoughts and feelings.

Pick a dream and use it as the basis of a surrealist short story. Take the narrative elements of the dream and weave them into a structure for your story. Play your

hand carefully, beginning the story in a pleasingly plausible fashion, and then descend into a surrealist, dreamlike spiral. This is particularly effective for nightmares.

Take down an off-the-peg character from an earlier exercise. Let them loose in your dreams. Have him/her wander freely through different dreams (often months apart). How do they cope? What do they find?

Theme and Variations

This is a concise exercise in surrealism. Like everything in that playful tradition, it takes reality and twists it to produce new material that ultimately comments on our everyday, commonplace values.

You are going to be using material from the day's news. This exercise works best with broadcast news rather than print journalism, as often the actual delivery of a news line will make it stand out. TV and radio news stations are increasingly fashioning sentences into bizarre cadences, emphasising certain words like someone struggling to speak a second language.

Listen or watch the news. Pick a "story". It doesn't have to be the biggest news item, just one that piques your interest. From memory, write down the essentials of the piece, remembering to include the odd line from the journalist. Try and remain faithful to the spirit of the original. You should end up with a paragraph.

Now find an alternative way to tell the story. Just play around with it – for example, rearranging the order in which it was told, or starting with a quotation. Don't feel you need to stray too far from the original, just simply retell it in an alternative paragraph.

Now condense the story into a moral. Try and make it something really trite and banal like *Even a stopped clock is correct twice a day*. Give it the moral quality of one of Aesop's Fables. Place your little aphorism at the end of the two paragraphs.

Now rewrite your *second* paragraph. With each new paragraph you are producing variations on the theme of the opening paragraph. You should be getting further and further away from the original, but some elements of it will always remain. At the end of this paragraph include another moral, but this time make the moral

precisely the *opposite* of the previous one. You should find this moral ambiguity fairly easy – play around with it: Is there an alternative lesson in your new story?

Now write another variation. Continue producing variations on the theme until no vestiges of the story remain, and you will have nicely replicated the hysteria of social media and parodied the absurdity of the world we live in.

ENGAGING WITH THE CANON

Using the Novel

Oulipo is an organisation founded by the French author Raymond Queneau. It specialises in the techniques of what he termed *constrained literature*. These techniques would often involve setting themselves bizarre literary challenges, such as writing a novel without using the letter *e* or S+7, the aim of which was to substitute every noun in a piece of writing with the seventh noun that followed it in the dictionary. The most famous work of Oulipo was Queneau's own *Exercises in Style*, in which he demonstrated various versions of the same short story parodying a variety of forms, such as *blurb* or *logical analysis*.

Despite its roots in surrealism, Oulipo is, at the very least, a useful way of generating material, often using an original text as an opportunity to generate a new one. The next exercise is essentially Oulipian.

Take a long passage from literature – it doesn't really matter what the book is. A nineteenth-century text or a novel by a master of the long sentence, like William Faulkner or Proust, is especially effective for this exercise. Try to avoid sentences in which the metaphor is key. They are a killer to change. What you are going to do is translate from one scheme of writing to another.

Here is an example, taken from William Maxwell's *Time Will Darken It*:

In order to pay off an old debt that someone else had contracted, Austin King had said yes when he knew he ought to have said no, and now at 5 o'clock of a July afternoon he saw the grinning face of trouble everywhere he turned.

This could be transliterated as:

Andy Keen knew he'd been duped. Trouble had a way of finding him, and certainly, as he took a long look in the mirror late on Tuesday evening, he could see it in his own eyes. It frightened him.

Use the original novel as a scaffold – borrow as much as you need, and when you feel your writing has got off the ground leave the other writer behind. You have created your own prompt – a first-line prompt. This is a great exercise in generating material from absolutely nothing, and can be used with pretty much any novel that has been written moderately well.

By way of practice, there are some sample sentences in Appendix 4.

A variation on this exercise is to use the Google Translate function to render an obscure foreign writer into English. The translation should leave only a few traces of the author's original, which you can then obscure further by following the techniques outlined above. Use this translated material as the source for your own work.

Annotations

In Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, the narrator gives a wretched poem by a minor poet a thorough annotation. These marginalia *are* the novel, and tell the reader as much about the academic who wrote them as they do about the poem. But Nabokov goes further, making the analysis of the poem a kind of detective story in which the different strands of verse, properly elucidated, help the reader discover the hidden meaning behind the poem – and therein lies the real story.

Find a poem you like with plenty of 'content'. Precisely what content means will be different for different people. Try to imagine a poem that an A-Level English teacher might like to get their claws into and expand and discuss. It doesn't have to be a famous poem – it doesn't even have to be a very good poem; and it certainly doesn't have to be one you know well.

Here is an example of one poem you might choose:

Dream Deferred

by Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

Like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore –

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over –

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Annotate the poem in any way you like. Just pick a phrase and muse on it. Take a word and write a similar word next to it. Using the words associatively, try to come up with lists of words that develop one to another:

crust – bread – dough – soft – velvet

Or, if you want, rearrange the lines on the page. This poem is a series of questions. Answer one of them.

Or pluck a word and develop it into a new sentence:

– syrupy sweet a cornet solo, the band were hot that night

– his wounds festered; for years Christmas was a torture for him

Is it possible to make *new* connections between the words and phrases in a poem? Surely, if the poet has already accomplished several links in subject and theme, there are bound to be more.

As with some earlier exercises, try to write your piece on the same paper as the poem. Create annotations that look good on the page – in terms of both their aesthetic and their content. There are further poems for you to try in Appendix 10.

Contagious Fiction

Find a description of a place from a novel.

The following is an example of a meaty piece of the right length and quality. It is from *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck:

A few miles south of Soledad, the Salinas River drops in close to the hillside bank and runs deep and green. The water is warm too, for it has slipped twinkling over the yellow sands in the sunlight before reaching the narrow pool. On one side of the river the golden foothill slopes curve up to the strong and rocky Gabilan Mountains, but on the valley side the water is lined with trees – willows fresh and green with every spring, carrying in their lower leaf junctures the debris of the winter's flooding; and sycamores with mottled, white, recumbent limbs and branches that arch over the pool. On the sandy bank under the trees the leaves lie deep and so crisp that a lizard makes a great skittering if he runs among them. Rabbits come out of the brush to sit on the sand in the evening, and the damp flats are covered with the night tracks of 'coons, and with the spread pads of dogs from the ranches, and with the split-wedge tracks of deer that come to drink in the dark.

There is a path through the willows and among the sycamores, a path beaten hard by boys coming down from the ranches to swim in the deep pool, and beaten hard by tramps who come wearily down from the highway in the evening to jungle-up near water. In front of the low horizontal limb of a giant sycamore there is an ash pile made by many fires; the limb is worn smooth by men who have sat on it.

Using the specific description, imagine the scene in three dimensions in your head. Really work with the text to develop a sense of it – this will only improve your work.

Place yourself under the hypnosis of the text: the willows bending down to the river bank, the depth of the pool. Swim down and try and touch the bottom.

Divorce the scene from any knowledge you have of the novel or of John Steinbeck. The idea is to achieve complete dislocation of scene and context. The idea is to make the place yours.

Still in your furtive imagination, place a character (human or animal) in the situation. Play around with them; perhaps add another. When you have finally made the scene yours, write for thirty minutes. You have found another use for other people's good writing – a jumping-off point for your own imagination.

Second-Unit Writing

In cinema and television, the **second-unit camera** is a separate team that films additional sequences. These sequences are often shot at the same time as the main unit, to save both time and money.

Like cinema, novels contain hundreds of references to drama that is only mentioned in passing, but that has a crucial role to play in the plot. Much of ancient Greek theatre was derived from explanations of action that the audience was asked to believe had taken place elsewhere.

These digressive plot points are crucial to an understanding of the main thrust of the novel, but are often barely fleshed out. It seems enough to say: "He did this, and then she did that." We're going to have a go at some second-unit writing.

Take a novel that you know well, or one that you admire – now might be the time to reach for that 600-page Penguin Classic that you've never quite managed to get round to reading. Scan through the book until you come to a passage in which events are mentioned in passing. This might be something that happened many years ago; it could be action described by a returning character, or even events only alluded to in the briefest terms.

The following is an example from *The Money Master* by Gilbert Parker:

Ever since Zoe's mother had vanished – alone – seven years before from the Manor Cartier, or rather from his office at Vilray, M. Fille had been as

much like a maiden aunt or a very elder brother to the Spanische's daughter as a man could be. Of M. Fille's influence over his daughter and her love of his companionship, Jean Jacques had no jealousy whatever. Very often indeed, when he felt incompetent to do for his child all that he wished – philosophers are often stupid in human affairs – he thought it was a blessing Zoe had a friend like M. Fille. **Since the terrible day when he found that his wife had gone from him** – not with the master-carpenter who only made his exit from Laplatte some years afterwards – he had had no desire to have a woman at the Manor to fill her place, even as housekeeper.

Parker has offered us the outline of several plot points, highlighted in bold. This was, until now, surplus material. Your job is to write it.

Write a long paragraph describing Madame Fille's departure. You do not need to know anything of the book – you are just using this random clip to generate new material. Have fun and take this **mere aside** anywhere you wish.



Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

This is another exercise that uses existing novels as a way of kick-starting new work. Using the work of others as inspiration is nothing to hide or underplay. There is an argument that any novel you read is a collaboration between writer and reader. There is only so much a writer can put into their work. Often, what is left out, the reader puts in. Think about it. How much of a scene or a character can a novelist really describe? When we read and see the action with our mind's eye we, the reader, are filling in the blanks, fleshing out the material in our own unique way.

Take a sentence from a favourite novel. The sentence can almost be chosen at random, but it helps if it stands alone – if it is not too reliant on the previous or next sentence for the meaning to be understood.

Here is one from *Kafka on the Shore*, by Haruki Murakami:

It was already pretty late in the afternoon, and they had to find a place to stay for the night.

Use this sentence as the basis of your own by changing the core details. So, for example:

Now it was early morning and the day stretched ahead of them. There'd be plenty of time to find a bed for the night later but first . . .

But first what?

Go back to the Murakami book and find another juicy sentence:

The two of them scrambled over the low hedge into the woods.

Now tack your new sentence on to the end of the previous one:

There'd be plenty of time to find a bed for the night later but first they somehow had to navigate the steep privet hedge that stood sentry, blocking their view of the woods.

Think of these little prompts as a series of “pushes”. You may only need a few of them to get going, but pretty soon you will have started something only lightly based on another work.

Sitting an Exam on This Book

This exercise will give you the opportunity to look in detail at your own work, as well as develop your powers of insight.

When any kind of creative artist is starting out, they may struggle to assess their own work critically. Of course, the opinion of others is invaluable (choose carefully – there are many “experts” out there); but what takes a while to develop is one’s own critical facility: *How do I know it’s any good?* It is entirely possible to get too close to the work and lose your ability to judge it objectively.

So, to fix this, today, Prompt Arts is making you sit an exam.

Take a piece of work you have produced in response to one of the exercises in this book. You will have carefully filed some and destroyed others, so pick a piece that you are happy with.

For the next thirty minutes you are going to answer questions on the subject of your piece. It is very much in the style of the reading comprehensions you were forced to do at school. Obviously these questions are generic, so please find an appropriate way of applying them to your piece.

Question 1. Describe the character of ——— (4 marks)

Question 2. What is the mood of this piece? Does it change at all, or is it consistent? (2 marks)

Question 3. Pick an interesting word the author uses in the text and describe why that particular word is so well chosen. (3 marks)

Question 4. How effective is the setting? Does the author fully explore their chosen location? (2 marks)

Question 5. Choose three language devices and explain how they are effective. (3 marks)

Question 6. Extend the piece for another two paragraphs. Marks will be awarded for a tone appropriate to the original. (6 marks)

Total marks: 20.

Answer in full sentences. Marks will be taken away for bad spelling and grammar.

After you have finished, take a break and then mark your own work.

COLLABORATIONS

Literary Transcriptions

It's been said that collaborating is something people did with the Nazis. In writing, however, it can sometimes yield surprising results.

There are some who feel we are moving inexorably towards a world in which all writing will first be spoken and then transcribed by computers. Ours is not to judge, and certainly mobile technology is allowing more and more opportunities for dictation. Rather than search for a pen, many people reach for their phone and record their "note".

In an earlier age it was not computers but women who provided this role; in fact, Dostoyevsky went on to marry his secretary. Henry James came to rely on a "transcriptionist" after he became physically unable to use a pen for long periods. He wanted a "typist without a mind" to become part of his "machinery".

Using any of the single-player prompts in the first part of this book, compile a story with the aid of a transcriptionist. Try and develop a working method with your partner; after a while you may find that you start to respond to *their* response. Do they have a visceral reaction to what you're writing? How does the atmosphere in the room change? How is their reaction reflected back to you as the writer?

Milton sometimes claimed he was taking direct dictation from God, so watch out for your own process. Does the fact that you are searching for the words out-loud alter their effect?

Experiment by swapping writer and secretary on the same story, or alternate whose work is being transcribed. Allow the room to become a hotbed of industry, and your partner part of your machinery.

Up- and Down-Levelling; or, Crappy and Derivative

Find a story written by a child, or perhaps a children's book written by an adult.

There are samples in Appendix 7.

Translate the piece into an adult version, remaining faithful to the general theme.

When the work is done another person can retranslate it back to a kid's version. You can continue to up- and down-level ad nauseam.

Eventually a novel will be produced in collaboration which looks at events from both children's and adults' perspectives, rather like *Paddy Cark Ha Ha Ha*.

Similarly, find a piece of bad fiction. This isn't as easy as it sounds; most writing contains in it some merit *somewhere* – an interesting plot development or a good line.

Read a sample chapter and make notes on what makes it so bad. Attempt to write, using the original as a template, something equally bad.

Consider the ways in which the plot doesn't really hang together, its characterisation is dull, and the plot is mediocre.

About thirty minutes in the company of bad fiction ought to do.

Neurolinguistic Programming

At its heart, *Pride and Prejudice* is very simple: Mr Darcy has too much *pride* and Elizabeth Bennet an oversupply of *prejudice*. Much of Jane Austen's achievement is how well she stage manages the meeting of these two malignant abstract nouns.

Of course, both characters are a little more complicated than such an analysis suggests. But occasionally it is a useful exercise to think of characters as merely personifications of certain emotions: it's a traditional acting exercise.

The trick is to create characters who subtly exhibit certain characteristics but don't hit you over the head with a sledgehammer in asserting them.

This exercise can be played as a game (or challenge) between two people. Pick an abstract noun from the list in Appendix 5. Write a long paragraph in which your

character demonstrates a certain characteristic but, importantly, DON'T state it. For example, were you to choose *anger*, you should not write, *a surge of anger went through her body*.

When you feel you have written a decent character description, swap papers and the other person has to guess which abstract noun you have described.

As a further challenge, can you depict a certain abstract noun based *only* on your character's actions?

Try to avoid clichés such as tiredness and yawns, or your character putting their head in their hands to suggest despair.

This is the kind of parlour game they played at salons in all the great houses. So if you feel like it, follow the exercise with a piano recital.

APPENDICES

The following appendices contain no real information you couldn't glean yourself with a bit of research. These lists are included merely as guides to the kind of useful material that exists out there, but also to allow you to flick easily between the exercises and potential prompt material.

Appendix 1: List of Crimes

Arson	Extortion	Prostitution
Aggravated Assault/ Battery	Forgery	Public Intoxication
Bribery	Fraud	Pyramid Schemes
Child Abandonment	Harassment	Racketeering/RICO
Child Abuse	Hate Crime	Rape
Computer Crime	Homicide	Robbery
Credit/Debit Card Fraud	Indecent Exposure	Securities Fraud
Criminal Contempt of Court	Insurance Fraud	Sexual Assault
Cyber Bullying	Kidnapping	Shoplifting
Disorderly Conduct	Manslaughter: Involuntary	Solicitation
Disturbing the Peace	Manslaughter: Voluntary	Stalking
Domestic Violence	MIP: A Minor in Possession	Statutory Rape
Drug Manufacturing and Cultivation	Money Laundering	Tax Evasion/Fraud
Drug Trafficking/ Distribution	Murder: First-Degree	Telemarketing Fraud
DUI/DWI	Perjury	Vandalism
Embezzlement	Probation Violation	Wire Fraud

Appendix 2: Treasure Trove

These items were fished out of the River Thames at Deptford Creek, cleaned, and lent to Prompt Arts for one of our Life Writing sessions by the Deptford Creek Centre:













Appendix 3: Last Words

“You be good. See you tomorrow. I love you.” Alex, African Grey Parrot spoken to his handler, Dr. Irene Pepperberg, when she put him in his cage for the night; he was found dead the next morning

“Don't ask me how I am! I understand nothing more.” Hans Christian Andersen

“I love you too, honey. Good luck with your show.” Desi Arnaz

“Am I dying, or is this my birthday?” Lady Nancy Astor

“I want nothing but death.” Jane Austen

“Damn it! How will I ever get out of this labyrinth?” Simon Bolívar

“I have tried so hard to do right.” Grover Cleveland, 22nd and 24th President of the United States.

“Where is my clock?” Salvador Dalí

“Suppose, suppose.” Wyatt Earp

“Nothing soothes pain like human touch.” Chess Grandmaster Bobby Fischer

“Don't be in such a hurry.” Billie Holiday

“Does nobody understand?” James Joyce

“I knew it! I knew it! Born in a hotel room, and goddamn it, dying in a hotel room!” Eugene O'Neill “But the peasants . . . how do the peasants die?” Leo Tolstoy

Appendix 4: Lines from Novels

I remember black-eyed Carmine coming to the Quonset hut door near Danang and calling softly, 'Lonnie, baby, come on out!

Norman Mailer, *Tough Guys Don't Dance*

Renton thinks the girl has taste, because she cold-shoulders the fat guy.

Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting*

She grabbed a silk Japanese thing off a hook on the door and slipped into it, folding one side into the other so as to hide a gigantic rip.

Zadie Smith, *N-W*

Oddly enough, the delusions which had enabled her to marry Victor had really started on that evening.

Edward St Aubyn, *Bad News*

Here I thought that I'd brilliantly disguised my true feelings about motherhood thus far, to the point of dereliction; so much lying in marriage is merely a matter of keeping quiet.

Lionel Shriver, *We Need To Talk About Kevin*

Karim remained standing, though every so often he moved about so that when he became still again he could plant his legs and fold his arms and show his strength anew.

Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*

In the early hours of the morning I get up to take a leak and as I stand in Clare's bathroom sleepily urinating by the illumination of the Tinkerbell nightlight I hear a girl's voice say "Clare?" and before I can figure out where this voice is coming from a door that I thought was a closet opens and I find myself standing stark naked in front of Alicia.

Audrey Niffenegger, *The Time Traveller's Wife*

For decades the house had been sheltered from light, and soon its dampness started to camp out in our clothes, in our beds, and in our bones and one lunchtime, five weeks after our arrival, my exasperated mother issued the ultimatum that we either move the house or we move the forest, and in a rare moment of purpose my father went out and bought himself an axe.

Sarah Winman, *When God Was A Rabbit*

He hadn't once ceased looking at Daisy, and I think he revalued everything in his house according to the measure of response it drew from her well-loved eyes.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

O his lost look in the desert town crossing the street alone, with his shoulders stooped, as they drove me away in the police car.

Elizabeth Smart, *By Grand central Station I Sat Down And Wept*

Appendix 5: Abstract Nouns

confidence

anger

mistrust

goodness

brilliance

sanity

determination

stupidity

integrity

wisdom

sympathy

adoration

wit

clarity

power

relief

dexterity

success

brutality

compassion

curiosity

grief

Appendix 6: Scenic Descriptions

From *Crime and Punishment*, by Fyodor Dostoyevsky

With a sinking heart and a nervous tremor, he went up to a huge house which on one side looked onto the canal, and on the other into the street. This house was let out in tiny tenements and was inhabited by working people of all kinds—tailors, locksmiths, cooks, Germans of sorts, girls picking up a living as best they could, petty clerks, etc. There was a continual coming and going through the two gates and in the two courtyards of the house. Three or four door-keepers were employed on the building. The young man was very glad to meet none of them, and at once slipped unnoticed through the door on the right, and up the staircase. It was a back staircase, dark and narrow, but he was familiar with it already, and knew his way, and he liked all these surroundings: in such darkness even the most inquisitive eyes were not to be dreaded.

From *The Island of Dr Moreau*, by H. G. Wells

It was low, and covered with thick vegetation,—chiefly a kind of palm, that was new to me. From one point a white thread of vapour rose slantingly to an immense height, and then frayed out like a down feather. We were now within the embrace of a broad bay flanked on either hand by a low promontory. The beach was of dull-grey sand, and sloped steeply up to a ridge, perhaps sixty or seventy feet above the sea-level, and irregularly set with trees and undergrowth. Half way up was a square enclosure of some greyish stone, which I found subsequently was built partly of coral and partly of pumiceous lava. Two thatched roofs peeped from within this enclosure. A man stood awaiting us at the water's edge.

From *The Tower of the Elephant*, by Robert E. Howard

Torches flared murkily on the revels in the Maul, where the thieves of the east held carnival by night.

In the Maul they could carouse and roar as they liked for honest people shunned the quarters, and watchmen, well paid with stained coins, did not interfere with their sport. Along the crooked, unpaved streets with their heaps of refuse and sloppy puddles, drunken roisterers staggered roaring. Steel glinted in the shadows where wolf preyed on wolf, and from the darkness rose the shrill laughter of women, and the sounds of scufflings and strugglings.

Torchlight licked luridly from broken windows and wide-thrown doors, and out of those doors, stale smells of wine and rank sweaty bodies, clamor of drinking-jacks and fists hammered on rough tables, snatches of obscene songs, rushed like a blow in the face.

Appendix 7: Children's Fiction

Sid Wasl had been stranded on the island of Firesze after a shipwreck. He just happened to have a six month supply of water but that didn't last the two years he was there. We found his passport in the water by the island. Sid had been an actor but he wasn't very good at it as he always got a bit carried away. One year at the Greenwich Panto, when he was asked to marry a beautiful girl he forgot he was on stage. On another occasion at a Les Miserables performance he forgot the lyrics and sung; 'Oh Oh Spaghettis'. He once had a singing act in the West End and tripped on stage. Even though I never knew Sid Wasl, I miss him.

When I arrived at our apartment I looked out of our window and saw the statuesque, sophisticated mountains. I also noticed the trees which stood like sleeping ogres and the mountains drenched with sunlight and the glamorous snow sprinkled on the tops of the mountains. The next day I saw a train it, looked rather slow but when I got on I thought this train is actually quite fun!!! But maybe the next time I go on it it might get a bit boring!!!

As we were walking the sun started to burn our feet. It was so painful. I ran into the sea with Katie trailing behind me speechless observing my every move intently. What bliss! Katie pretended to be a sleek, black and silver dolphin and I dive-bombed her from every single angle possible.

Unfortunately, a wave started brewing and it was pushing us away from each other. Katie was pushed out of my reach and was almost drowning as she struggled to get back. Without any thought or feeling in my body I plunged into the murky depths of the water and as fast as a bullet I swam towards Katie.

They locked me in and I couldn't breathe. I could see the girls laughing as the lights went off and I didn't know what to do. There was a slow fire that started from the

match the girls had lit and I felt like I should give up. The door. My heart beat like a thunderous drum. It was so cold. With all my strength I tried to open the door, and a tear rolled down my cheek.

Appendix 8: Notices and Small Print

GARBAGE PICKUP

Village of Deckerville garbage pickup is now on Wednesdays. Garbage must be curbside by 7:00 a.m. The trucks will be going through with a ONE time only per day pickup.

The Village of Deckerville is requesting village residents, when mowing, to please refrain from blowing clippings in the street as this caused issues with Village storm sewers –flooding!

Audrey Stolicker, Village Clerk
May 21, 2014





[Print](#)

SHIPPING & DELIVERY

We aim to deliver within 4 to 6 working days following confirmation of your order, but during busy periods it may take a little longer. In the Shopping Bag and Checkout sections you will always find up-to-date information about when your items are expected to arrive.

If your items have different delivery times you can choose to receive partial delivery or have everything delivered at the same time. Please remember that items ordered here in the UK shop can only be delivered to addresses within the UK and Northern Ireland.

Delivery

You will receive your items around one week after we have received your order, but during busy periods it may take a little longer. In the Shopping bag and Checkout sections you will always find up-to-date information about when your items are expected to arrive.

If your items have different delivery times you can choose to receive partial delivery or have everything delivered at the same time. Please remember that items ordered here in the UK shop can only be delivered to addresses within the UK and Northern Ireland.

Motorcycle Rental Agreement Terms and Conditions

1. **Definitions.** "Agreement" means all terms and conditions found in this form. "You" or "your" means the person identified as the renter on the reverse, any person signing this Agreement, any Authorized Driver and any person or organization to whom charges are billed by us at its or the renter's direction. All persons referred to as "you" or "your" are jointly and severally bound by this Agreement. "We", "our" or "us" means the independent business named on the reverse side of this Agreement. "Authorized Driver" means the renter, the renter's spouse, the renter's co-workers and employer if engaged in business activity with the renter, any person who operates the Vehicle during an emergency, any person who operates the Vehicle in a commercial parking establishment, and any additional driver listed by us on this Agreement, provided that each such person has a valid motorcycle driver's license and, is at least 25 years of age unless the age restriction is changed elsewhere in this Agreement. "Vehicle" means the motorcycle identified in this Agreement and any motorcycle we substitute for it, and all its tires, tools, accessories, equipment, keys and Vehicle documents. "CDW" means Collision Damage Waiver. "Physical Damage" means damage to, or loss of, the Vehicle caused by collision or upset; it does not include comprehensive damage, such as damage to, or loss of, the Vehicle due to theft, vandalism, act of nature, riot or civil disturbance, hail, flood or fire. "Loss of use" means the loss of our ability to use the Vehicle for any purpose due to damage to it during this rental. Loss of use is calculated by multiplying the number of days from the date the Vehicle is damaged until it is replaced or repaired, times the daily rental rate.
2. **Rental, Indemnity and Warranties.** This is a contract for the rental of the Vehicle. We may repossess the Vehicle at your expense without notice to you, if the Vehicle is abandoned or used in violation of law or this Agreement. You agree to indemnify us, defend us and hold us harmless from all claims, liability, costs and attorney fees we incur resulting from, or arising out of, this rental and your use of the Vehicle. We make no warranties, express, implied or apparent, regarding the Vehicle, no warranty of merchantability and no warranty that the Vehicle is fit for a particular purpose.
3. **Condition and Return of Vehicle.** You must return the Vehicle to our rental office or other location we specify, on the date and time specified in this Agreement, and in the same condition that you received it, except for ordinary wear. If the Vehicle is returned after closing hours, you remain responsible for the loss of, and any damage to, the Vehicle until we inspect it upon our next opening for business. Service to the Vehicle or replacement of parts or accessories during the rental must have our prior approval. You must check and maintain all fluid levels.
4. **Responsibility for Vehicle Damage or Loss; Reporting to Police.** You are responsible for all damage to the Vehicle, including the cost of repair, or the actual cash retail value of the Vehicle on the date of the loss if the Vehicle is not repairable or if we elect not to repair it, whether or not you are at fault. You are responsible for theft of the Vehicle, loss of use, diminished value of the Vehicle caused by damage to it or repair of it, and a reasonable charge to cover our administrative expenses connected with any damage claim, whether or not you are at fault. You must report accidents or incidents of theft and vandalism to us and the police as soon as you discover them.
5. **Collision Damage Waiver.** If you purchase CDW, we will waive our right to collect from you for a portion of Physical Damage to the Vehicle. CDW is not insurance. We will not waive this right if damage to the Vehicle: (a) is caused by anyone who is not an Authorized Driver, or by anyone whose motorcycle driving license is suspended in any jurisdiction; (b) is caused by anyone under the influence of prescription or non-prescription drugs or alcohol; (c) is caused by anyone who obtained the Vehicle or extended the rental period by giving us false, fraudulent or misleading information; (d) occurs while the Vehicle is used in furtherance of any illegal purpose or under any circumstance that would constitute a violation of law, other than a minor traffic violation; (e) occurs while pushing or towing anything, or in any race, speed test or contest, or while teaching anyone to drive a motorcycle; (f) occurs while carrying dangerous or hazardous items or illegal material in or on the Vehicle; (g) occurs outside the geographic limitations indicated on the reverse; (h) occurs as a result of driving the Vehicle on unpaved roads; (i) occurs and the odometer has been tampered with or disconnected; (j) occurs when the Vehicle's fluid levels are low, or it is otherwise reasonable to expect you to know that further operation would damage the Vehicle; (k) is a result of your willful, wanton or reckless act; (l) occurs and you fail to summon the police to any Vehicle accident involving personal injury or property damage.
6. **Insurance.** You are responsible for all damage or loss you cause to others. You agree to provide liability, collision and comprehensive insurance covering you, us, and the Vehicle. Your insurance is primary to any insurance that we may provide. If we are required by law to provide liability insurance, we will provide a liability insurance policy (the "Policy") that is excess to any other available and collectible insurance whether primary, excess or contingent. The Policy will provide liability coverage with limits no higher than the minimum financial amounts required the law of the state whose laws apply to the loss. You and we reject PIP, medical payments, no-fault and uninsured and under-insured motorist coverage, where permitted by law.
7. **Charges.** You will pay us, or the appropriate government authorities, on demand all charges due us under this Agreement, including: (a) time and mileage for the period during that you keep the Vehicle, or a mileage charged based on our experience if the odometer is tampered with or disconnected; (b) charges for additional drivers; (c) optional products and services you purchased; (d) fuel, if you return the Vehicle with less fuel than when rented; (e) applicable taxes; (f) all parking, traffic and toll fines, penalties, forfeitures, court costs, towing, storage and impound charges and other expenses involving the Vehicle assessed against us or the Vehicle, unless these expenses are our fault; (g) all expenses we incur in locating and recovering the Vehicle if you fail to return it or if we elect to repossess the Vehicle under the terms of this Agreement; (h) all costs, including pre- and post-judgment attorney fees, we incur collecting payment from you or otherwise enforcing our rights under this Agreement; (i) a 2% per month late payment fee, or the maximum amount allowed by law (if less than 2%), on all amounts past due; (j) \$50, plus \$5/mile for every mile between the renting location and the place where the Vehicle is returned or abandoned, plus any additional recovery expenses we incur; (k) \$25 or the maximum amount permitted by law, whichever is greater, if you pay us with a check returned unpaid for any reason; and (l) a reasonable fee not to exceed \$150 to clean the Vehicle if returned substantially less clean than when rented.
8. **Deposit.** We may use your deposit to pay any amounts owed to us under this Agreement.
9. **Your Property.** You release us, our agents and employees from all claims for loss of, or damage to, your personal property (including a motor vehicle of yours) or that of any other person, that we received, handled or stored, or that was left or carried in or on the Vehicle or in any service vehicle or in our offices, whether or not the loss or damage was caused by our negligence or was otherwise our responsibility.
10. **Breach of Agreement.** The acts listed in paragraph 5, above, are prohibited uses of the Vehicle and breaches of this Agreement. You waive all recourse against us for any criminal reports or prosecutions that we take against you that arise out of your breach of this Agreement.
11. **Modifications.** No term of this Agreement can be waived or modified except by a writing that we have signed. If you wish to extend the rental period, you must return the Vehicle to our rental office for inspection and written amendment by us of the due-in date. This Agreement constitutes the entire agreement between you and us. All prior representations and agreements between you and us regarding this rental are void.
12. **Miscellaneous.** A waiver by us of any breach of this Agreement is not a waiver of any additional breach or waiver of the performance of your obligations under this Agreement. Our acceptance of payment from you or our failure, refusal or neglect to exercise any of our rights under this Agreement does not constitute a waiver of any other provision of this Agreement. Unless prohibited by law, you release us from any liability for consequential, special or punitive damages in connection with this rental or the reservation of a vehicle. If any provision of this Agreement is deemed void or unenforceable, the remaining provisions are valid and enforceable.

The Real MBA Motorcycle Utah 022205

Appendix 9: I Have Something to Tell You . . .

The following sentences become increasingly abstract.

We wish to question you on suspicion of murder.

They say the asteroid is on a collision course.

I'm here to tell you what I really think of you.

Would you like to come in, maybe for a drink?

There was an announcement to say that the flight was delayed for up to an hour.

Do you work on Sundays?

Christmas is cancelled.

I'm sorry. Your credit card has been declined.

Tell me why you did it?

Your son has been in an accident.

It's a lovely day today.

It's been cancelled.

How are you doing?

Treat it like a gift.

Tell me why you did it?

I'm speechless.

Can you repeat the question?

I don't feel the same way.

Daddy's got to go away.

I don't believe anymore.

Surprise!

Try switching it off and back on again.

You have failed me.

That was beautiful.

How long do you want it?

I love you as well.

Give me it back!

It's stopped.

Try it again.

No.

Yes.

You.

Me.

1.

Appendix 10: Poems

From 'Two Years Later', by W. B. Yeats:

Has no one said those daring
Kind eyes should be more learn'd?
Or warned you how despairing
The moths are when they are burned?
I could have warned you; but you are young,
So we speak a different tongue.

O you will take whatever's offered
And dream that all the worlds' a friend.
Suffer as your mother suffered,
Be as broken in the end.
But I am old and you are young,
And I speak a barbarous tongue.

From 'The Mending Wall', by Robert Frost:

There is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.

From 'Songs of the Open Road', by Walt Whitman:

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.

Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I myself am good-fortune,
Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing,
Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms,
Strong and content I travel the open road.

From the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam

Awake! for Morning in the Bowl of Night
Has flung the Stone that puts the Stars to Flight":
And Lo! the Hunter of the East has caught
The Sultan's Turret in a Noose of Light.

Dreaming when Dawn's Left Hand was in the Sky
I heard a Voice within the Tavern cry,
"Awake, my Little ones, and fill the Cup
Before Life's Liquor in its Cup be dry."

And, as the Cock crew, those who stood before
The Tavern shouted – "Open then the Door!
You know how little while we have to stay,
And, once departed, may return no more."

Back Cover



Prompt Arts create and develop writing prompts, resources and events. Why not come to one of our Life Writing sessions? Unlike the traditional Life Drawing class, participants write in response to live models, sounds, objects, even smells. It may look like people taking an exam but it is really fun, sociable and challenging. Absolutely no experience of writing necessary and the atmosphere is completely non-judgmental. You can find details on our website at www.promptarts.com.

© Prompt Publishing