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# THE WRITER

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(and plot drools)

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## FEATURES

12

### **Working out**

Writing exercises help strengthen your craft.

BY JENNIFER L. BLANCK AND  
MICHAEL KLEIN

18

### **Tear off the labels**

Authors speak out about writing great genre fiction (even if you never set out to write a genre book in the first place).

BY JACK SMITH

24

### **Learning as you laugh**

Graphic nonfiction books convey facts in full color.

BY MELISSA HART

28

### **Game day**

8 pro tips for success in the tabletop game-writing industry.

BY RYAN G. VAN CLEAVE

34

### **Story rules, plot drools**

The three crucial storytelling elements every novel needs to succeed.

BY PHILIP MARTIN



# WORKING OUT

Writing exercises help  
strengthen your craft.

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**W**riting exercises inspire, educate, build self-awareness, jump-start a person's writing, and help writers hone their craft. They are all, at their core, about writing, but some of the best exercises take a writer someplace new.

"A good exercise should push you up against a limit or take you to a place you've not been before and are uncomfortable with. And then afterwards, you can go there, and it becomes comfortable," says fiction writer David Gould.

Gould is also an assistant organizer of Virginia's Arlington Writers Group (AWG). We also belong to the all-genre AWG that started in 2006 and meets in person every Wednesday for two hours. The group alternates each week between critiques and other planned activities, which range from craft discussions to author talks, social events, and writing exercises. After more than 600 meetings, AWG has refined a set of exercises that are effective for maintaining momentum and helping writers of all levels strengthen their craft. Here are some of our favorites.

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# GROUP WORK

**Beginning, Middle, and End**  
Beginning, Middle, and End is an exercise designed for groups – ideally groups of three. Writers choose individual prompts, take a pad of paper, and write the beginning of a story – and *only* the beginning. After 15 minutes, everyone stops, and passes the pad to someone else. Writers now have 20 minutes to read the opening they've been given and write the next part of that story (the middle). When time is up, the pads are passed again, and within 30 minutes, writers supply the ending of the new story they've been given.

AWG members then read the stories aloud. The results are entertaining, and writers of the first sections typically report that the story did not end up where they expected.

Writing under this tight time pressure can be liberating; there's no time to overthink. The exercise also challenges a writer to explore different paths and voices for stories, and maybe even write in a new genre.

You may have decided to turn your prompt into a dramatic coming-of-age story, but one of your partners may have gotten the same

prompt and gone the sci-fi adventure route. If you are writing her middle, you can't ignore what she's done and keep telling your story – you need to respect her choices and help tell the next part of *her* story.

And when you are writing the last installment of the story, two other writers have started you on the journey – now it is up to you to tie it all up. “The exercise forces you to get into someone else's head. It makes you approach scenes in a way you wouldn't normally. It's helped me as a novelist,” says Gould.

## **Flaming Fragment**

AWG, like many writing groups, has a policy of not rewriting members' work that is presented for feedback. It's a good policy. You can tell the writer what works or what doesn't and why, but saying, “you should have character X do such and such” is generally bad form. But during a Flaming Fragment session, all bets are off.

This is really a brainstorming exercise where writers present any kind of idea they are hung up on. It could be an entire novel that

needs a better ending or an isolated detail such as a character name, a profession that would make for an engaging protagonist, or an interesting world to explore. Writers are given 60 seconds to share their fragment with the group, and then the group pitches ideas – trying to “fan the fragment into flames.” The amount of time dedicated to each depends on the number of fragments you have, but AWG attempts to give at least 10-12 minutes per author.

Marichka Melnyk, a writer and radio producer in Toronto and former AWG member, conceived of the exercise. “I have a tendency to idly come up with scenes or scenarios, or see a real-life exchange between people and start to imagine the backstory. Or I meet an interesting person and begin to spin them into a character with no particular story in which to place them,” says Melnyk.

She felt like her creative energy was being wasted and found she wasn't alone. “Others were also collecting these fragments, and we were inspiring each other anyway, so we formalized it with the Flaming Fragment session.”

# FLEXING INDIVIDUAL MUSCLES

The remaining exercises are focused on the individual. While better in a group environment – for both learning and fun – the exercises can be conducted on your own.

## Written Prompts

These prompts provide launch pads for the writer. They can be a phrase, rhyme, or maxim meant to get creative juices flowing, or they can be much more prescriptive. For example, writers are given a sentence that must be the first line of their piece (or the last line). One AWG favorite entails putting a dozen random nouns and six verbs on slips of paper in a hat. Members draw three and are randomly assigned a genre. Then the writing begins.

## Visual Cues

While AWG often uses written prompts to stimulate ideas, inspiration can come from many other places. Photographs, graphic designs, and other visuals are great sources. Visual Cues treat photo prompts just like written prompts. Multiple copies of five or six images are pulled from stock photo websites, and writers take 30 or 45 minutes to tell a picture's story. What happened right before it was snapped? Or what followed? Sharing the pieces

aloud is illuminating when you hear how differently people see the photos.

One memorable AWG meeting featured a picture of a beautiful house on a cliff with a staircase leading down to clear blue water. One writer used the setting for a love story. Another led readers down the stairs to join someone dumping a body into the ocean.

## Inspiration Field Trips

AWG has also taken field trips to area museums and art galleries and tasked writers with finding one piece to inspire a story. Afterward, writers are asked to share a 150- to 200-word piece within one week of the visit. In more than a few cases, members reported expanding the exercise into a new project.

## Non-Visual Description

When establishing a setting, many people rely solely on one sense: Sight. To challenge this, AWG uses an exercise that goes beyond visual cues. Non-visual Description tests writers' abilities to establish a setting using senses other than sight. Think about entering a bakery or sitting in a noisy bar. Visual cues probably aren't the first things you notice.

"By nature, we are a visually oriented species and, as

writers, our first impulse when creating a scene is to paint a picture. But if you are working to evoke an emotional response in the reader – and you should be working very hard at that – then you must include the other senses," says fiction writer and AWG assistant organizer Dale Waters. "Smells are known to be the strongest trigger for feelings of nostalgia. Likewise, an unexpected sound – a human scream in the night or the howl of an unnamed beast in the forest – can create a terror response far beyond simple visual description."

This exercise gets writers to close their eyes and hear, smell, feel, and taste a scene and can be adapted in a variety of ways. Writers can select from any of the senses or be assigned one to focus on. After writing for 30 minutes, stories are swapped for small group exchanges or read aloud for group discussion.

## Overheard Conversations and Missed Connections

While some exercises focus on creating a realistic scene, others rely on the fact that great stories hide in plain sight. In fact, journalists and memoirists will tell you real life is quite often much stranger than fiction and can be hum-

bling to even the most imaginative writers.

For Overheard Conversation, AWG members share snippets of real dialogue they overheard on the bus, at lunch, or walking down the street and challenge each other to tell the story behind the conversation.

AWG also uses missed connections or personals from different publications that serve up wild glimpses into actual lives. Glimpses that need to be explored – stories that *need* to be told: "Tall, Dark, and Silent. I stood in front of you on the train this morning. You were holding some brick samples on your lap. We made eye contact a few times and you smiled. I wanted to say something but I couldn't without removing my costume. Email me..."

How can you not tell this story? And whose story do you want to tell? The brick carrier's? The costumed traveler's? Your own story as an observer of this scene?

Both of these exercises entail 30 minutes of writing and lots of sharing. Like other prompt-based exercises, the assignments get people writing without spending too much time on plot development and creating character arcs. They're intended to be fun and jump start creativity.

# NO PAIN, NO GAIN

## Two-Sided Argument

There are also stories from our own lives that serve as inspiration. Two-Sided Argument challenges writers to honestly depict an actual personal conflict from two different perspectives. First the writer takes 30 minutes to tell the story of a dispute from her own perspective. Then she writes the same story from the opposing person's perspective – taking 30 minutes to get into that person's head.

For AWG assistant organizer and essayist Colleen Moore, this exercise made a difference for her as a writer and a person. She wrote about a decades-old fight with her then-new stepsister, painting her in the worst possible light. Then Moore wrote from her stepsister's perspective. It was a viewpoint Moore the Person had never considered, but Moore the Writer was forced to.

She came to realizations about her stepsister and the situation that influenced how Moore interacts with her now. "It completely changed our relationship," says Moore.

As a writer, the exercise helped with her personal essays. "It makes an essay resonate with people when you're willing to go deep into yourself," she says. The experience also made her think about how to fully flesh out believable antagonists with their own stories and motivations.

## Point-of-View Exercise

This is another opportunity for writers to consider different perspectives – this time by writing the same scene in two different basic narrator points of view (POV). The exercise begins by telling people to write a scene or a story from a prompt or theme. No other guidance is necessary. In fact, you don't want to tell people what's coming next, because you don't want people to write with a specific goal in mind.

Everyone is given 30 minutes. Next, the task is to write the same story again using a different narrator POV. So if a person wrote in third person, the next version could be in first or second person. Only 15-20 minutes are given for the rewrite. Afterward, the

group discusses how their stories changed, reading samples of sections. The exercise demonstrates the power of different perspectives and challenges writers to try a POV they might not usually use.

When AWG first conducted the exercise, one new member hated the idea. When asked to write in a different POV, she thought it wasn't worth her time. But she did it anyway. During the discussion, she admitted her surprise; the change to first person made a powerful difference in her story. She planned to rewrite other stories to see if they might benefit from a new POV, too.

## Gender Switch

Another exercise that uses a similar structure and offers a different perspective is Gender Switch. After writing a story, everyone is instructed to rewrite it by changing the genders of the main characters or everyone in the story. This offers a new way of approaching a story and can challenge writers' abilities to write multidimensional characters. It can also reveal if a writer defaults to stereotypes.

# Writing exercises foster your ability to be creative, write quickly, self-reflect, and try new perspectives.

## SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF

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Then there are exercises that compel people to focus on a single message and be concise. This is never easy, as immortalized by 17th-century inventor, mathematician, physicist, and writer Blaise Pascal: “I have made this letter longer than usual, only because I have not had the time to make it shorter.”

### Plot Summary

Whether it’s a short story, personal essay, or novel, Plot Summary forces writers to find the central idea of a piece. This exercise is particularly helpful when developing materials writers will use in pitching, such as synopses and query letters.

First, writers are given 30 minutes to summarize a piece they’re working on in 200 words. Next, they work for another 20 minutes to pare the description down to 100 words. Finally, they have 20 minutes to shorten it to no more than 50 words. All three can be read aloud

for comparison and critique. If writers find this exercise too challenging, it could indicate a greater problem in the story itself.

### Six-Word Whatever

Last, but not least, is Six-Word Whatever. Writers are often advised to strip out adverbs, but what if they have to remove everything but six words and still tell a compelling and complete story? While the true origin of the Six-Word Novel may not be as romantic as Ernest Hemmingway winning a bar bet with his famous version – “For Sale, Baby Shoes, Never Worn.” – the exercise is an effective one.

AWG has featured Six-Word Science Fiction, Six-Word Romance, and Six-Word Memoir. This is more challenging than it may seem. While the first successful result can take some time, it usually leads to many variations. Giving writers 30 or 40 minutes to

pen several versions and asking them to read their top three always makes for fun sessions.

Writing exercises foster your ability to be creative, write quickly, self-reflect, and try new perspectives. Whether in a group or on your own, try these exercises to give your writing the workout it needs. **W**

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Michael Klein is a founding member of the Arlington Writers Group and has led it for more than 10 years. He has penned and ghost-written hundreds of articles and speeches and is interested in hearing about your writing exercise experiences @mkleinwrites on Twitter.