

Creative Writing Prompts:

Exercises for Poetry, Fiction, Nonfiction and Drama

Poetry

Exercise #1

1. Choose a contemporary poem from our anthology.
2. Rewrite the poem, changing the point of view.
3. Rewrite again, changing the person. (E.g. if it's in the first person, put it in the second.)
4. Write the poem backwards, putting the last line first.
5. Translate the poem.
6. Revise as you see fit, but maintain the original number of lines.

[Adapted from *Metro...*]

Exercise #2 (Modified Acrostic)

Write the letters of your name in a mixed order, vertically down a page. These letters will serve as the first in each line. Use as much of your first and last name as it takes to hit eight lines.

Line #1: Use six letters and a color to describe yourself.

Line #2: Write a reoccurring dream you've had or have.

Line #3: List several things, beginning with the same initial letter, that can be found in your room.

Line #4: Include something you regularly say.

Line #5: Describe yourself (use physical attributes).

Line #6: Describe yourself (use habits).

Line #7: Write something people can't tell by looking at you.

Line #8: End with a truth, insight, or something you believe.

Re-order the lines to spell out your name in the correct order. Revise.

[Adapted from *Metro...*]

Exercise #3

1. Construct a poem by blacking out (with marker) words in a newspaper, magazine, or printed excerpt of some sort.

Alternatively, cut out words or phrases and place them in a bag. Draw from the bag, and record each word in the order it was drawn.

2. Revise.

3. Turn in original + revised version.

[Adapted from *Poets & Writers*; pw.org]

Exercise #4

Option 1: Write a poem about yourself in which nothing is true.

Option 2: Write a poem about something that happened to someone you know. Write about it as if it had happened to you.

Option 3: Write a poem in the form of a letter to your future self.

[Source: *Creative Writing Now*; creative-writing-now.com.]

Exercise #5

Paul Valéry wrote that, “The opening line of a poem is like finding a fruit on the ground, a piece of fallen fruit you have never seen before, and the poet’s task is to create the tree from which such a fruit would fall.”

1. Find a spot on campus where people regularly hold conversations, and listen for a first line. Record anything of interest.
2. After 20 minutes of listening, head to the library and flip open books, reading only one line per book, until something strikes you. Record it.
3. Pay attention to how the lines on your list might inform each other.
4. Choose one line, and invent the tree from which such fruit would fall.

Exercise #6

From Anne Sexton's "The Truth the Dead Know":

And what of the dead? They lie without shoes
in the stone boats. They are more like stone
than the sea would be if it stopped.

1. Imitate Sexton's simile:

"They are more like [stone]/than [the sea] would be if [it stopped]," according to this formula:

[word 1] is more like [word 2] than [word 3] would be if [something happened].

Exercise # 7

From Mary Ruefle's *Madness Rack and Honey*:

If you read through the collected shorter poems of Whitman—especially those brief lyrics in say, *Drum-Taps* or *Sands at Seventy*—you'll notice that often Whitman will follow a poem in which he is not present with a poem on the same subject in which he *is* present. Call it a compulsion, it's a delightful pattern as he rewrites his every impulse with himself at the center.

1. Write two 8-15 line poems on the social, political and/or physical landscape of your home town; one in which you are present and the other in which you are not.

[Adapted from Rebecca Muntean]

Exercise #8

1. Write a love poem, OR
2. write an anti-love poem.

The catch:

You must adopt the persona of a public figure.

This poem must contain 10 syllables per line, and 10 total lines.

One sentence must stretch out over 5 lines.

[Adapted from Robert Lee Brewer]

Exercise #9

1. Make a list of guidelines for writing poetry. [Note: Writers should do this before moving on to the next step.]
2. Write a poem explicitly arguing against as at least three of your guidelines.
3. Implicitly, show how these rules may be successfully broken by breaking them in your poem.

[Inspired by Judson Mitcham]

Exercise #10

1. Think of a historical event that you want to know more about.
2. Research the event for 30 minutes via Google.
3. Write a poem incorporating your research and at least one autobiographical detail.

[Source: Laura Newbern]

Fiction

Exercise #1

Under what circumstances would...

someone love a dirty city?

a gift be regarded as a threat?

theft be morally correct?

someone dread the arrival of Spring?

a party be the most lonely occurrence one could imagine?

[source: *Metro...*]

Exercise #2

Write...

- a one page novel
- a lyric memo
- an interpretative essay on a work of literature or philosophy that doesn't exist.
- a recipe using the convention of adventure tales
- surrealistic directions to your house
- a fairy tale without magic

[Source: *Metro...*]

Exercise #3

Write a two-page argument between two characters. Try not to take either character's side.

Exercise #4

Write a one-page conversation that takes place between two characters, using only body language.

[Source: Aimee Lewis]

Exercise #5

Think of your arch nemesis in high school—or, if you didn't have one, think of someone who was bullied or somehow misunderstood. **DO NOT USE REAL NAMES.**

Write a brief account of your typical day as this person. (A bullet point list will do.)

Write an experience that stands out from the typical day, while remaining “in character.” Write in first-person.

Exercise #6

Have a character stumble across an object that is weirdly out of place. Perhaps a wedding ring is dangling from a tree branch, or a family photo album is found in a handbag at a thrift store. Write the scene into your story. Does the character

recognize the item? Does he or she keep it, or try to find the owner? Consider the relationship between your character and the object and how that might inform the plot.

[Source: *Poets & Writers*; pw.org]

Exercise #7

1. Before your story began, your character was making a list. (What was it? A grocery list? A hit list? Pros and cons of staying in a relationship?) Write the list out.
2. While making this list, your character had a change of heart. Something about the list prompted your character to do something else entirely. (What did your character decide, and why?) Perhaps he/she just thought: “Why am I making this list, when I could be...”
3. Annnnd, action! Begin your story, but DO NOT mention the action of writing the list, ever.

Exercise #8

Briefly answer these questions and hypothetical situations as a means of getting to know your central character.

1. A place where your character is living or visiting begins to burn. The character only has a few moments to escape. What does he/she grab before getting out of the fire, and why?

2. The character enters a room in which you're sitting, sits down near you, and places his or her left hand on the table or desk beside you. Look at that hand, and describe it in as much detail as possible.
3. You have an opportunity to go through the wallet or pocketbook of your character. What's in there? If there's lipstick, what color is it? What kind? If there's money, how much exactly? How's it all organized? If there are receipts, for what?
4. Describe one scar—it can be a very tiny one—on your character's body, and how it was acquired.
5. Your character laughs at something. What is it? Exactly why does your character think this thing—joke, sight, event, whatever—is funny?
6. "France." Your character hears that word. What comes to mind? Be as specific as you can.
7. How does your character sneeze?

[Adapted from *Metro...*]

Exercise #9

Borrow a character from a novel you enjoyed, and imagine the character encountering a close family member of yours.

Where might this happen? What would they think of each other? How would they talk to one another?

This encounter should inspire some action, large or small, that is *out of character* for one or both of them.

Exercise #10

1. Think of a writer whose style is recognizable to you.
2. Emulating that style, tell a story you know well. Think of a story from your own childhood, or one that your family revisits at holidays.
3. Stay true to the story for the first paragraph; afterwards, allow the style to lead you to new possibilities.

Nonfiction

Exercise #1

1. Open a dictionary to a random page. Jot down a word and definition that stick out to you.

Do this 3x.

2. Begin with the word that is *least evocative* to you. Explore it in personal terms. What does the word mean *to you*? Have you had any experiences (however tangential) with either the word or the thing itself?
3. When you have exhausted one word, move on to the next, with the theme of the first in mind. Can you relate the new word to your experience of the first? Or, can you find a new experience that takes into consideration the first *and* the new word?

4. Do this once more. You should have three distinct sections after the first draft, but you may find it necessary to combine the sections, and even throw out the words, in revision.

Exercise #2

1. Go somewhere with a view—preferably somewhere NOT on campus. My best recommendations would be a museum or anywhere outdoors.

2. Allow yourself to walk around and observe for at least fifteen minutes before starting to write.

3. In the spirit of a two-year old, start asking why. Make a list of “Why” questions.

These can be lofty and philosophical or something you can answer on Google. (A mix would be ideal!)

4. When you get back to your writing space, answer your questions with personal experiences and/or Google. Do this until something hooks you, and let it pull you into the essay.

Exercise #3

[group activity]

1. Write down something from your life you’d like to write about, and which no one in the class knows about you, i.e. “I studied abroad in Australia,” or “I used to pull my hair out.” (Whatever it is, be able to own up to it!)

2. Toss your topic into a hat. Collect someone else's.
3. With the bit of information you have, answer, kindly and with sincerity, as the one telling it:
 - a. Why do I want to write about this?
 - b. What do I expect my audience to gain?
 - c. How will my essay likely end?
4. Read aloud. Pay attention to how your topic is perceived. How can you add to, enhance, or correct your reader's interpretation?

Exercise #4

1. Think of an unpopular or unexpected decision that you made. Write the scene that best exemplifies this decision.
2. Write a list of things that may have happened if you hadn't made the decision.
3. Write a list of things that have happened because you had.
4. Write a scene/synopsis of a movie or book that reflects your actions.
5. Write an essay comparing your reality, your missed reality, and the reality of the movie or book.

Exercise #5

Think of a person about whom you have strong feelings.

1. Think of this person as a landscape. What would it look like?

2. Think of this person as a kind of fruit, a metal, a wood, a time of day, a time period in history, an article of clothing, etc. Invent other options for comparison, if you wish.
3. Think of this person in his/her favorite location. Describe it. Make him/her speak. Bring someone into the scene and have them talk together.
4. What would this person like to say but never says? What does this person dream about?
5. Reflect on an experience that you shared, considering your thoughts at the time and your thoughts now.

[adapted from *Metro...*]

Exercise #6

1. Write an essay from the perspective of your “other” or “shadow,” however you wish to define that entity.
2. Write an essay that compares and contrasts selected writings by Freud and Jung, with regard to their concepts of divided, competing or multiple personality elements.

[source: *Metro...*]

Exercise #7

To make meaning out of our stories, we need to add some context. Our stories don't exist in isolation, and often there are outside elements that shape our stories. These elements can be threads we pull through a larger work.

On a separate page, or beneath your paragraph(s) begin to answer the following questions (or the ones that appeal to you). If any question is distracting you from the story you are telling, cross it out and move on.

1. What time period did this story/event take place? List a few details that you associate with this time. (Eventually, some of these details may enter your story through description, especially if you don't want to explicitly tell the reader what year/time period it is).
2. What historical events (big or small) were happening at this time?
3. What was the political situation at this time?
4. Who, if anyone, outside of the story (or family if you're writing a family story), would know about this event/story? How may their perspective differ? (Could you eventually interview them?)
5. What is a song/prayer/other text you can associate to this story/event (maybe in theme, maybe from the time period)?
6. If you had to describe this story/event in one word, what would it be? (This word could help provide you with a theme to link stories.)

[Source: Jessica K Luthé]

Exercise #8

Last Wednesday, a full lunar eclipse occurred in the early hours of the morning. Its red hue has earned the lunar event the title of a "blood moon." It is part of a rare

series of eclipses known as a “tetrad,” when the moon is completely covered by the earth’s shadow for four eclipses in a row. Some people believe it to be a sign of things to come, while others see it as simply a unique, astronomical event. Write about what eclipses, blood moons, and other unusual celestial events make you think about.

[Source: Poets & Writers; pw.org]

Exercise #9

1. Research an event that occurred locally.
2. *After researching*, visit the place at which the event occurred.
3. Write what you see. Record how your expectations were, and were not, met.

Example: The Nation of Nuwaubia in Eatonton, GA

Exercise #10

1. Make a list of your areas of expertise. These may include such things as skateboarding, fly fishing, gymnastics, gardening, farming, jazz, origami, etc.
2. Choose one, and gather objects associated with your area of expertise—books, pay stubs, worksheets, photographs, souvenirs, *anything*. Such objects have a certain physical weight to them, a heft to remind you of what you know.
3. Make a list of words that are specific to your chosen topic. Write!

[source: *Metro...*]

Drama

Exercise #1

Adapt a piece of fiction into a scene.

[Source: John Sirmans]

Exercise #2

Take a character and write a letter from their perspective. Perhaps the character is writing to one of their parents, or to a loved one, or a best friend trying to explain something they've done. It can have something directly to do with the story, or maybe an event that happened in the past, or maybe it's a secret that the character is revealing for the first time. Or you could write a set of letters between two characters that show the development of their relationship. Or you could write a letter for a character to someone who's not in the play, someone who left the character, or who's recently died.

Think about what paper the character might use. Stationery? A napkin? What does the letter say about the character? Is it filled with lies? Is it neatly printed or scrawled? What gets scratched out? Does the character like or dislike the person they're writing to? Is that clear or hidden?

What's the style of the letter? Is it poorly written? A lot of spelling mistakes? What is the character's grammar like? Their vocabulary? Their language?

[Source: theatrefolk.com]

Exercise #3

Write a monologue from the perspective of someone who has a scar, or is looking at someone with a scar, or from the scar itself

[Source: theatrefolk.com]

Exercise #4

1. The scene takes place in an empty classroom. Two characters enter. "I have to talk to you right now" is the first line spoken by one of the characters. Write ten more lines of dialogue between the two characters. This could also be a monologue.

2. The scene takes place at the mall. Two characters enter. "We are in big trouble" is the first line spoken by one of the characters. Write ten more lines of dialogue between the two characters.

[Source: theatrefolk.com]

1. Write a monologue where the first line is 'I remember when...' and uses the past tense. Have a character talk about a childhood memory that has significant impact on how they are today

2. Re-write the monologue, taking out all mentions of 'remembering.' Just tell the story.
3. Re-write the monologue in the present tense.
4. Read aloud the first version and then the third. Discuss the differences.

[Source: theatrefolk.com]