

Creative Writing Exercises

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- 1) The Catalogue: List nouns only. Then take a few, chosen at random, and begin to write. This exercise reminds us that nouns construct our consciousness/concerns, our very world.
- 2) The Translation: Take an (English) translation of a foreign-language poem and rewrite it in your own words. The purpose here is to develop an acquaintance with structure (form) and to think afresh about syntax and grammatical order. (One doesn't always have to construct Subject-Verb-Object relations in a sentence/phrase/line. Great power can be achieved by wrenching syntactical/grammatical order.)
- 3) The Trancelation: Looking at a text of foreign words, try to read them as if they were English. Then, use this "other" diction to write a completely different poem—your own.
- 4) The Walk: Outdoors, walk with a notebook and pen, recording impressions of everything noticed, while also letting various memories and insights come to mind. The purpose is to encourage spontaneous composition.
- 5) The Transcription: Watch or listen to any programming either broadcast or Internet-available, and write down salient points and images as they seem important. Later, rewrite in your own terms. The purpose is to encourage spontaneous composition.
- 6) The "I": Write a poem in which the use of the individual signifier is rendered vital due to context. The purpose is to signify how important "I" can be—and not only in an egotistical sense! (*The John Fraser* [1928-], in a Dalhousie U seminar in the 1990s, pointed out how we overly naturalize "I," forgetting, generally, that it can generate terrific, unique power in the right contexts.)
- 7) Freefall: (I learned this approach at the Banff Centre for Fine Arts, way back in 1983.) Begin by writing general observation, such as the weather or surroundings, etc., then, as soon as a "repressed" memory (happy or sad) comes to mind, narrate that memory in prose. The point of this exercise is to increase courage in looking inside oneself, confronting one's own demons (and angels—to be positive), en route to making art.
- 8) The Tall Tale: Rewrite in poetry a story important to one's culture, ethnicity, nationality, or gender/sex, "Race." (One might also use a piece of personally relevant scripture—or a joke!)
- 9) The Diary: Following the example of the Japanese poet Basho, write prose passages about significant events of the day or on the journey, then pen a few haiku to sum up philosophically the point of the reminiscence.
- 10) The Monosyllable: Write a passage or poem utilizing, as much as possible, monosyllables, which will give the piece great clarity and concreteness. The purpose is to remind us of the

dual-sided nature of English: One-part Anglo-Saxon grunt—and one-part Greco-Roman aria.

- 11) The Lifer: Following the example of Italian-Canadian poet Mary di Michele's "Life Sentences," write up to 100 haikus, each one pinpointing a crucial memory or event in one's life. The purpose of this exercise is to encourage concision and fidelity to "luminous details" (Pound).
- 12) The Eavesdrop: As surreptitiously as possible (!), write down phrases of overheard, everyday speech. The point here is to recognize that "poetry" happens everywhere, all the time, and that one should be awake to its occurrence. Also, this exercise is helpful in learning how to construct dialogue.
- 13) The Collage: Following the example of Pound's *Pisan Cantos* (writ April-August 1945), write lines and images as they come up in your consciousness, partly observations, partly impressions, partly memories, partly rhetorical or political statements. Foreign phrases and even "anti-poetic" asides are welcome. The purpose here is write meditatively, letting whatever happens happen. (Yes, it is akin to Freefall and "The Walk.")
- 14) The Play: Write 2 or more pages of dialogue employing at least 2 characters. The purpose is to encourage attending to dialogue but also understanding a (or the) poem as always being a little theatre (or cinema), with always at least one speaker seeking some sort of emotional satisfaction (love, revenge, etc.).
- 15) Formalism: Write a poem in couplets, quatrains; or try one's hand at sestinas, etc. Form is a matter of "constraint": The point of the constraint is to so pressure a poet's talent so much that it morphs into genius.
- 16) The Ghazal: Using two-line stanzas, compose poems where it is mood that connects the stanzas, not anything "rational." The point here is to find different ways to evoke the central emotion being expressed. (And feel free to pronounce it as "gazelle," not "guzzle": We're Canucks, not Persians, and we don't need to follow the original form.)
- 17) The Song: Write songs—with rhyme and meter! The point here is to remind ourselves that poetry is cadence; a musicality resident in the words and their arrangement.
- 18) The Handlist: Using Richard A. Lanham's *Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, read through and try to write your own versions of the exemplary rhetorical devices ("tricks"—says Irving Layton) or tropes that he catalogues. (My former student at Duke University, Evie Shockley, really took to this particular exercise, and is now a major African-American poet.) The point is to become aware of how syntax and specific forms of imagery add "oomph" to narrative or argument or explication. (Keep in mind that the classic English poets—Shakespeare, Milton, etc.—all studied "Rhetoric" and all shamelessly.)
- 19) Bless or Curse: Write a poem of damnation or of blessing.
- 20) Take a magazine or newspaper article/story and rewrite it from a point of polar difference.

21) The Dictionary: Take any number of abstract nouns (Love, Introspection, English) and define them in resolutely concrete (sensual) terms. Example: Political Science: Venom distilled from lemon. (This exercise can also be worked in the reverse. Example: Milk: Stellar dairy.)