

Pulling the Trigger: Ways to Ignite the Creative Writing Process

Most writers at some point will come face to face with their nemesis: the dreaded blank page. These exercises, which tap memory, observation, and imagination, aim to help you push past that daunting void and get the words flowing.

1. Go to a restaurant or coffee shop (or another busy place) and take notes about it, focusing on sensory details. What are you seeing/smelling/tasting/hearing/touching? Try to incorporate everything. Practice awareness of the world around you.
2. Find a random photo of a person in a magazine or newspaper. Imagine this person's life. Create a detailed inventory of what is in this person's bedroom, refrigerator, and medicine cabinet. Then, write a personal ad as if you were this person.
3. Troll newspapers, magazines, and Web sites for odd stories. Try writing a scene that involves some aspect of the person, place, or action, inventing the details as you go.
4. Go to the Personals sections of a newsweekly or Craigslist (the subhead "Missed Connections" is good). Write a scene or poem based on an encounter/potential encounter, making up the details you need.
5. (From *What If?* 267; full citation below): Try writing a story that takes place in a short unit of time – 60 seconds, an hour, a day. Make a list of things that can be done in a short period (e.g. washing a dog/car/hair, stealing something...). Limit the story's action to that time frame.
6. Start with a given first line. Here are a few to try (from *What If?* 21-24):
 Where were you last night? I met him/her on the stairs.
 The neighbors were at it again. I haven't been the same since _____
 The first time I (or Name) heard SPECIFIC SONG, I (Name) was down/up/over at PLACE and we were doing ACTION.
7. Start with a title. Try one of these (or make one up of your own): People I've Kissed. The House on Deacon Street. Sunday. The Road to Nowhere. Dinner. Things to Do in 60 Seconds or Less.
8. Watch a favorite film. Pay attention to notable scenes, or "moments of fire," within the film. Then re-create one of those scenes in writing.
9. Recall a building in which you once lived. Map out this building on a sheet of paper. Consider all of the rooms and spaces and think about the "hot spot" – the room that stands out the most to you. Describe that room and/or write a scene that takes place there.
10. Get some color-coded index cards or scraps of paper. On one color, write a random selection of characters (e.g. butcher, baker, candlestick maker). On another color, write a random selection of incidents (e.g. hits dog with car, bakes bread for dying friend, sets fire to trashcan.) Mix up the cards and pick a few at random. Then choose which combination appeals the most. Start a scene or poem using those two (or three) elements.

Recommended Resources

- Bernays, Anne, and Pamela Painter. *What If? Writing Exercises for Fiction Writers*. College Edition. New York: Pearson Longman, 2004.
- Kowitt, Steve. *In the Palm of Your Hand: The Poet's Portable Workshop*. Gardiner: Tilbury, 1995.
- Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. New York: Anchor, 1994.
- Scofield, Sandra. *The Scene Book: A Primer for the Fiction Writer*. New York: Penguin, 2007.
- Stern, Jerome. *Making Shapely Fiction*. New York: Laurel, 1991.

