THE WRITE LIFE

101 Creative Writing Prompts That Will Get You Excited to Write

By Emily Withnall for The Write Life

Every so often, you'll find yourself in a rut with your writing.

That's where prompts come in. They can spark new ideas or push your writing in unexpected directions.

The prompts on this list mix genres, but almost all of them can be used for prose or poetry.

Whether you like to immerse yourself in an experience, like visiting an art museum, or need an intriguing question or plot point to get you started, this list contains a wide variety of entryways into new writing.

And for creative revision ideas, check out the prompts at the end of this list. Happy writing!

Stream of consciousness prompts

1. Open your notebook or a blank document on your computer and set a timer for 5-7 minutes. Write without stopping and without censoring yourself. Don't worry about grammar, punctuation or making sense.

Once you are done, DON'T read it. Repeat this daily (or weekly) until you have roughly 10 single spaced pages. Once you have 10 pages of material, read through it and underline any interesting phrases or images.

Pull these into a new document and identify themes or patterns. Use one fragment to begin your essay, poem, or short story and incorporate the other fragments as you continue writing. (Or, use the other fragments for different pieces of writing.)

2. Make a list of concrete and vivid words from your favorite songs. Choose five from your list and write a story incorporating all of them. You can revise later; for now, try to let the vivid unexpectedness of your chosen words guide you into new ideas and connections.

3. Read several poems. Find one that suits your mood or thoughts at the moment. Let the emotion or ideas in the poem settle in you. Begin writing without regard for meaning or grammar. Don’t stop to edit. Keep going for as long as you can.

4. Set aside 20 to 30 minutes to listen to any music of your choice. Close your eyes and, without analyzing, allow yourself to feel how your body and heart are responding. Let your thoughts float by without comment.

When the music is over, take five to 10 minutes and without pausing or lifting your pencil from the paper (or fingers from the keyboard) write whatever comes to mind about the experience.

5. Write an essay or short story that is entirely contained within one sentence. Allow for detours and interruptions — tidbits of song lyrics, physical sensations, flashbacks — to flow and come out. How do all the thoughts and distractions combine to form a bigger picture or statement?

6. Step One: Choose something that's weird, stupid, hard and scary. There. You've thought of it already, before you started thinking "oh, no, can't use that, it's one or two of them, but it's not all four." Yes. That one, Write it down. Well done. Now write what's weird about it. This is your weird line. Write what's stupid about it. This is your stupid line. Write what's hard about it. This is your hard line. Write what's scary about it. This is your scary line.

Step Two: Now write four separate lines about your weird line, one line each for what's weird, stupid, hard and scary about your weird line. Then do this for your original stupid, hard and scary lines. Now you have 20 lines about what's weird, stupid, hard and scary about your topic. That's six more than you need for a sonnet.

Take your favorite line from Step Two and make another set of weird, stupid, hard and scary lines for it. Comedy erupts at this level because at this point, you're explaining the humorous nature of your humorous explanations, which puts us in the mindset of being funny in a way that keeps the writer's editorial voice out of the way of getting something on the page.

Experiential prompts

7. Gather up a number of small household objects, trinkets and figurines and place them in a box or bag. Close your eyes and grab the first thing you touch. Repeat this four more times until you have five objects in front of you. Now write a poem, story, or essay that incorporates all five objects.

8. Find a public place. It could be a train station, a park bench, a street corner, a coffee shop, a bookstore, the line at the Department of Motor Vehicles — and listen to the people around you. Choose one quote from a stranger and use it as the first and last line of a new story or poem.

9. Eat a little dark chocolate before getting on the subway or bus. Sit in the middle of the car, and don't get on a car where there are no seats for you. Sitting is best for this. Eat a little

more dark chocolate. For the next few stops examine the interior of the car with care. Then close your eyes and make a low hum from deep inside you.

As soon as the car stops, write nine words as fast as you can before the train moves again. These are not words you were thinking about, just write, don't question what you write, just write. Repeat this humming and writing for nine stops. Get off the train. Find a bench or patch of grass.

Now look at that first set of nine words carefully, then write something about the words. What do they mean to you? Then move onto the next set of nine words and repeat. After this is finished poke around all this writing and see what kind of poem is hiding inside.

Please note: Try to not engage with anyone while in the car, or while leaving the subway. Don't break your concentration. Maybe have a little note prepared to hand a friend you might run into which explains why you can't talk to them. Don't wait for their response, just hand them the note.

10. Go to a museum and look at art. Find a painting or photograph with at least a few people in it. Observe how they are dressed, the place they are in, how they are positioned, etc. Write a short story about these people. Where are they and who are they? What is at stake?

11. Write a short story inspired by a strange or humorous internet video you watched a while ago. Don’t worry about rewatching it to make sure you get the details right. Allow the fallibility of your memory to take the story into a new and bolder direction.

12. Take a walk somewhere scenic — perhaps in a park, natural environment or art museum — and write a short lyric essay that ties together issues already on your mind with ones that come up as you explore and carefully observe your surroundings.

13. Wash a penny, rinse it, slip it under your tongue and walk out the door. Copper is the metal of Aphrodite. Drink a little orange juice outside and let some of the juice rest in your mouth with the penny. Oranges are the fruit of Aphrodite, and she is the goddess of love, but not fidelity. Go somewhere outside with your penny and juice. Find a place to sit.

What is the best love you've ever had in this world? Be quiet while thinking about that love. Be quiet so quiet, let the very sounds of that love be heard in your bones. After a little while take the penny out of your mouth and place it on the top of your head. Balance it there and sit still a little while, for you are now moving your own forces quietly about in your stillness.

Now get your pen and paper and write about POVERTY, write line after line about starvation and deprivation from the voice of one who has been loved in this world.

14. You walk into an art gallery and find a series of paintings that illustrate your life. The final painting stops you in your tracks, because it represents what you consider to be the biggest turning point in your life, thus far. Describe the painting in detail.

Place-based prompts

15. Write a story about someone who resides and works in a space that is intermittently peopled and completely isolated — a national park, a large estate, or a new planet. How do these extremes affect the life of your character?

16. Humans have successfully established a colony on Mars. A few people died in the process, but the colony has sustained 30 people for six months so far. Who are these people and why were they chosen?

Zero in on one in particular and provide her backstory. How does this character feel about being on Mars? What's the next step in the Mars colonization process and what role does your protagonist play in it?

17. First, list 10 places. (Any places will do: your living room, a hiking trail, a movie theater, whatever pops into your head).

After you have listed those 10 places, for each one, list the first sound that comes to mind. Once you have all 10 places and all 10 sounds, circle the pair that you find most intriguing, then start writing.

18. Haunted houses are a classic setting for ghost stories. Write a poem or story about the house you live in as though it were haunted. Imagine what kind of spirits might live there, why they remain, and how they inhabit the space. Describe the sound of the creaky floorboard near the refrigerator, the way the windows slide shut on their own and the weird smell near the fireplace.

19. Write about a time nature gave you the hope you needed to move forward and believe again. For example, maybe you see a particular animal frequently, watch clouds, or make a ritual of swimming in a nearby lake. Be specific. Include detail. What did it feel like in your body?

20. Write about where you were raised: the block, neighborhood, town, city. What memories stand out about that place. Why? How do you think being raised there shaped you? If you were raised in various places, write about each place and the memories of that place.

To help jostle your memory, you can draw a map of the block and/or neighborhood. Include where you played, went to school, went food and clothes shopping. Where did your friends live? Your first love? Your enemy? Was there a place where everyone congregated? A store where everyone shopped? A girl everyone was in love with? An old lady everyone was afraid of? Expect memories to come flooding in. Write them down as you go.

21. Traveling usually catches us unprepared in some way, and what we do about it can be very revealing. Write about a time you (or your main character) packed all the wrong stuff.

22. Locate yourself in the history of the place you grew up in. Do some research: What native tribes inhabited the place? What happened to them? What immigrants lived there during what times? How were the streets and buildings named? When and how did your family come to live there? Write about how your family's history connects with the historical narrative of your town.

Prompts to engage your emotions

23. Make a list of emotions. Choose one and assign it a color. Write a poem about this emotion indirectly by writing about your chosen colors. Bring in many different shades of your color and invoke sensory details. What sounds and smells does your color evoke? How does the color feel in your hands or on your skin?

24. First, write about the effect of loss, heartbreak, grief, or illness on your life as if it were a weather system. Think back to the day things changed or you got the news or had a difficult conversation that changed everything. Then think about how things progressed after that, making note of any events, physical or emotional changes, support systems, etc.

Track your "grief system" or "illness system" the way a meteorologist would track a weather system. Use meteorological terminology. Feel free to draw maps.

25. Mother and daughter are in a changing room, before a floor-length mirror, arguing over a wedding dress. The mother is thrilled about this wedding; the daughter is tempted to call the wedding off. Write a scene with dialogue but show, don't tell. Do not have the characters state their feelings, but rather, show them through tone, gesture and indirect comments.

26. Think about a time when you inadvertently uncovered something (good or bad) you weren't meant to know — perhaps you overheard a conversation about yourself or someone close to you, followed an Internet search that spiraled to an unintentional conclusion, or submitted an online DNA kit without considering the consequences. Write an essay about the discovery and the actions you took as a response. Did you confront this new truth or carry on as if you had never learned it?

27. A phobia usually refers to a common fear (heights, snakes, the dark), but it can also be a fear particular to a person, depending on the experience or trauma that first triggered its power and hold over that person. Think of an everyday object (a shoelace, a birdcage, an ice cube) and write a testimony in which the narrator explains how the unique fear came about.

28. Think about the ways you cope when you are overwhelmed, traumatized and/or not wanting to confront reality. In particular, think about the things you convince yourself you are doing for one reason but realize in retrospect that your real motivation was completely different. Do you lose yourself in exercise, work, alcohol, books, relationships — or anything else? Write about the various ways you have avoided the truth, your trauma, etc. Be specific. What precisely did you do to avoid facing something? Show when you started and when you discovered what you were really doing.

29. Write an elegy for something you've had to let go of this year.

30. Make a list of your favorite possessions, your favorite flowers, the vehicles you've owned, the items in your basement (or garage/attic/storage shed), the places you've traveled, the times you've felt most alive, etc. If one or more items on your lists jump out at you, take some time to develop your thoughts about that one particular item. If it's an object, describe its qualities, how you use it, how it makes you feel, its history. If it's intangible like a mood or feeling, write about its weight, its effect on your body, use metaphor, what you do in response to the feeling.

31. Write about an ethical dilemma you've faced in your life, whether in the workplace, at school, at home, with friends, in a romantic relationship or while pursuing a hobby. What did you do about this dilemma? Why? If you could go back in time, would you do things differently?

32. Write about a time when music — playing it or listening to it — transported you, brought you from one state-of-mind to another. If you play an instrument or just sing in the shower, write about how it feels to make music. Describe specific scenes of when you turned to music — after a day at work when you were ready to give notice, a fight with a friend, a slog through rush hour traffic. What kind of music did you turn to? Did you dance, sway or move? Were you alone or with others? Write about the physical sensations within your body.

33. Write an essay exploring your personal opinions of solitude. When were you alone and why? Did you choose to be alone or was it a choice you had no control over? How, and why, did it help or hinder your emotional state?

34. Do you have regrets or things you would do differently were you given the chance? List a few of them. They can be regrets about love or decisions about education, career, friendship, etc.

Pick one from your list. Write about what you would do differently. Consider what you did, how it manifested in your life, what good and bad came of the decision. Do you think you would be who you are and where you are today had you done some things differently? Would it be worth it to go back and make that change? What can you do today to bring you closer to that person you wish you were now had you done behaved differently?

35. Write about the loss of something you've never had. It could be an emotion, a relationship, or a possession. Approach it as a loss rather than an absence — use your imagination to try to know what you've never known. For example, if you've never had a dog, write about your ideal dog and what it's like not to have her in your life.

36. Write an ode to one of your guilty pleasures that engages directly with its unsavory elements. Use your imagination to transform the details into avenues for lyrical observations.

37. Take a small emotional moment in any scene you've written, especially a scene which seems to skimp on detail or lack that extra "something"; then, in five minutes, write a sentence or two that focuses on a seemingly insignificant detail, deepening that moment's significance just by describing that detail (or details) precisely. If possible, use inventive verbs,

metaphors that appeal to the senses and rhythmical language, something lyrical but not too self-conscious, something just short of poetry.

Writing about relationships

38. We all tell lies, and tell them shockingly often: Research shows that on average in an ordinary conversation, people lie two to three times every 10 minutes. Jot down some answers to the following questions about lying:

- Do you think you lie two or three times every 10 minutes, as the statistic quoted here contends? If not, how often do you think you lie? Why, generally speaking, do you lie?
- When do you think you are lied to? For example, do you think friends, romantic partners or your parents have lied to you? Can you remember particular occasions? Do you think they were doing it to be kind, or for other reasons?
- Do you agree with this writer's opinion that we have to lie to maintain good relationships? Why or why not?
- Are there "good lies" and "bad lies"? What examples can you think of to illustrate each category?
- Do you lie to yourself? How? Do you think it helps or hurts in the long term?
- When do you think it is especially important to tell the truth, even if it is painful?

Then, write about a time you lied to someone or about a time you were lied to. Be sure to distinguish between your feelings then, and your feelings now as you look back. Was there a reason to lie? Was the reason "good enough"?

39. Tell a story of a new relationship from both people's perspectives. Here's the catch: there should be no scenes between the two of them. You can only use descriptions to other characters, diary entries, thoughts, dreams and anything else that doesn't involve contact between the two main characters.

40. Borrow a couple of characters from a favorite novel, put them in a situation from another novel, and write what happens next. For example, imagine Harry Potter and Anne Shirley in the Paris Uprising of 1832 (from *Les Miserables*). Why are they there? What happens? How do they interact with Jean Valjean and Cosette?

41. Write a Five-Sentence Mini Memoir. To begin, focus your attention on your breath. Breathe in and breathe out. Notice each inhale and each exhale. Do this for several minutes. Your attention will wander. This is normal. Release the thoughts that flutter into your mind, then return your attention to your breath. Repeat as often as necessary.

Once you are settled into the rhythm of your breath, think of a person. Choose the first person who comes to mind. Then write the following five sentences.

- Sentence 1. In one sentence, describe your person's hands.
- Sentence 2. Write one sentence that describe what your person is doing with his or her hands.

- Sentence 3. Write one sentence that uses a metaphor to say something about a foreign or distant place.
- Sentence 4. Write one question you would like to ask your person in the context of the foreign place and the thing he or she is doing with his or her hands.
- Sentence 5. When you ask your question, your person looks up, notices you there, and answers your question in a way that suggests he or she "gets" only part of what you asked—the answer is an incomplete or oblique response. In one sentence, write your person's response to your question from Sentence 4.

Read your five sentences aloud. Listen for the deeper theme that unifies your sentences into a cohesive mini memoir.

42. Write a love story between two inanimate objects. How did they meet? What obstacles do they have to overcome?

43. Write an essay based on conversations you've had with friends or family about parenthood. Reflect on your own, or someone else's, thoughts and experiences with the struggle to balance the role of parent with the rest of one's identity. Use the essay to explore what beliefs or attitudes these observations stir in you.

44. During a long car trip, you stop at a yard sale in a strange town and find an interesting picture frame. It holds the photo of a familiar face — your fiancé's! There's a passionate inscription to a stranger, dated three weeks ago. You must find an explanation. The first clue comes from the person whose name is on the photo. Who is it? What happens next?

45. Write a story that begins with a neighborhood or family potluck. What dish does each person bring? What does the food selection reveal about the individual? What underlying or external conflicts arise during the get-together? Add taste, sound, colors, and climate to the picture.

46. A woman is convinced that she is being spied on by her creepy neighbors, but when she goes into their house, she finds a little more than she bargained for. Write a story about what she finds.

47. Make a list of family members, then pick a body part (hands, feet, noses) or a simple human act (how they laugh, sigh, etc.) to write about these people. What can you tell about your mother by describing her hands, how they've held you, cooked for you, beat you, etc.? What can you tell about her by describing the way she laughs, when she laughs, how she laughs, etc.?

Repeat this for each family member. See if a pattern emerges or if you have any revelations.

48. Create an interaction between two characters, written entirely in dialogue: A diner in a high-priced restaurant finds a worm in his salad and wants his dinner free; management finds his request excessive.

49. Write a short story in which a character pulls off a risky and unusual stunt in an effort to communicate an important message to someone. Is the outsized gesture effective? What does the choice of action reveal about the character's personality? Are there unintended consequences involving the spectators?

50. Make a list of significant events in your own life. They don't have to be significant to anyone except for you. In other words, these events don't have to be all big things, like getting divorced or being hospitalized.

Significant events can also include things like the time your best friend stopped talking to you or overhearing someone say something you totally disagreed with. Come up with as many events as possible. If you feel stuck, add in stories you've read in the news.

Identify at least two events on your list that involve at least three people (you and two others if you're writing about a personal event). Choose one event and write about what happened. First, write about your own perspective, telling what happened in as much detail as possible. Be sure to include any thoughts or feelings you remember having.

Next, write about what happened from a different person's perspective. Try to put your own views aside and get "inside" the other person's head. What do you know about them and their background and experiences? What do you know about how they see the world? Use this knowledge to help you describe their perspective about the event. To make their perspective believable, do your best to keep your opinion or differences in perspective out of their narrative.

Finally, write a third paragraph from a third person's point of view. Read the different perspectives out loud. What differences emerge? Lean into these differences as you keep writing.

51. Your character hates rich people. Give him 3-4 lines of really nasty dialogue. Then, in two sentences or less, identify the specific source of his feelings.

52. Write a story focused on two characters: One who desperately wants to find a way in, and one who desperately wants to keep the other out. What happens? What's driving each character to behave this way? And, most importantly: Who wins?

Writing about time

53. Write about measuring time with something not expressly intended for that purpose, like cracks in a floor, scuffs on a boot, or weeds in the flowerbed.

54. Think of the oldest item of clothing you own. First, describe it physically, in terms of color, material, etc. Try also to incorporate senses besides sight and touch (the sound it makes, a taste or smell the color evokes). Next, write about a specific memory in which it played a part.

55. Write about a character who is always late. Why is she "always" late? What are three things she's actually on time for? Describe what's in her purse.

56. Play with making lists to tell a story, paint a portrait, set a scene or a mood. Some suggestions include: Things you carry; steps you take to get ready to go out; questions for the doctor; directions on how to assemble something, get somewhere, prepare a meal, or cure an illness; gifts that people have given you; people who come to visit; tests/procedures/medications; music playlists; steps of a ritual; what's in your closet, pocketbook, briefcase, sewing box, garage, tool kit, junk drawer, etc.

Now look back on the lists you just made and think about what you would have written five, 10, 15 or more years ago. Create a list timeline to illustrate how your interests, tastes, and needs have changed, and/or to show what aspects of your life have remained constant.

57. Go inside the mind of a patient whose heart stops for 10 minutes. Give the patient the chance to make a shocking discovery that reframes their life. Include supernatural elements, but do not use the phrase "the light flashed before their eyes," or any other near-death experience tropes.

58. Write a story or essay consisting of one paragraph or section per month, covering the events of the past year. Focus on one situation or incident each month, and allow this event to associatively lead you to other memories or ruminations about relationships in your life or your character's life. Bring in specific and timely details about the environment, setting, or special occasions that inspire you to reflect on the passage of time.

59. It turns out there was a trap-door in the ceiling that had been disguised by the plaster. Once opened, the door revealed an attic. And in the attic, far in the back, behind a curtain of cobwebs, there was a suitcase. They brought the suitcase down into the house. How did they open the suitcase? And what was in it? Write the scene.

60. Pick a historical event that's always fascinated you. Write a from the point-of-view of someone who wouldn't get mentioned in the history books.

61. Write a short story or poem from the perspective of a pair of shoes. What kind of shoes are they? What kind of life have they lived? How many miles have they walked? What do these shoes have to say about their owners?

62. In one page, describe the events of a single day (whether real or imagined). Then, in one page describe the events of a single hour. Then, a minute. Focus in on time and slow it down, expand it.

63. Write a short story in which your main character makes a comparably spontaneous decision or gesture. Then, fast-forward forty years later to reveal how that seemingly small action becomes far-reaching, or perhaps even life-changing.

Writing to interrogate motivation

64. Write about moments you've been silent and wish you hadn't been. Examine why you remained silent. What were the repercussions? Also consider moments you weren't silent and wish you had been. Remember to write scenes. Show AND tell. Use your senses.

65. A woman is working in her garden when she discovers an unusual egg. What happens next?

66. A group of the few remaining humans who are not fighting in World War III have taken cover in the New York subway system, which is sealed off from the city. When they almost run out of supplies and are forced to escape, what meets them at the surface?

67. How do you want to begin your story? Or, what are the ways you could begin because there is no single place to start. Imagine you are telling your story to a friend, a family member, someone who has had an experience similar to your own, a stranger, a doctor.

Experiment with different beginnings. The stranger, who doesn't know your characters, may allow you to speak more openly about them since you may not feel the need to protect them. But the stranger is also an untrustworthy listener which may make you stifle some of your own truths. To a friend, you might open with your deepest fear, while with a family member you may want to proceed more gently.

Keep writing opening sentences. Save them. Return to them to see how they feel. Use them as prompts or talk back to them. What's the opening sentence you would write if the listener is you?

68. Write about a secret wish that one of your characters has never told anyone. Then, write a scene completely in dialogue in which your character someone about it.

69. Think about the times you have seen people make complete fools of themselves attempting to do something they are clearly not good at. What did you think, and how did you react? What motivates others to continually engage in activities, performing arts, sports or academics that they aren't naturally adept at, and that they may never be good at, no matter how much time they devote to it? Write about something you aren't good at but keep doing anyway. Do you find value in continuing to engage in things you aren't good at?

70. Write a short story in which a totalitarian government has enforced a ban on some aspect or invention of society that has long been considered integral for human expression. How does the government justify its stance and exercise control? Are the people both victims of suppression and somehow complicit in its enforcement? What type of characters might reside in the liminal gray area between hero and villain?

71. Do you believe that things happen for a reason? If so, what examples from your own life or lives of others can you give? If you don't believe it, why not? Did your belief shift over time? Write about an event from your life that has led you to your current belief. If your belief changed, consider writing about why and how your perspective shifted.

72. Write a story in which a character endures a slew of bad luck in the form of several unfortunate incidents within a short span of time. Though the events may seem unrelated, are there larger forces at work? How does your character's response to this streak of bad luck reveal her personality or foreshadow future consequences within the narrative?

73. Write about a person with a strange collection. Maybe it's flawed stamps produced between 1949 and 1959, or abandoned left shoes, or — gulp — body parts. What is this character's collection? How did it get started? What makes it so important to the character?

74. Make a list of your favorite books — including ones you read as a child. If you can remember, make notes about where you got these books (public library, school, bookstore, etc.). When you are done, review the list and look for any patterns. What books most influenced you and why? Choose a book (or two) and write an essay about how the characters or storyline helped you, inspired you, or sparked a particular interest.

75. You are permitted to commit one crime with absolutely no consequences. What would you do and why?

76. Write a list of "firsts" — i.e. first time you kissed someone, first time you drove a car, first job you had, the first time you had a drink, etc. Select one. Write about how you felt. Who was there? Show and tell. Repeat this for as many on your list as you want. Then reread your writing. Is there a pattern?

77. Write a scene or stanza in which the action begins with a knock at the door.

78. Write a list of risks you've taken. It can be anything: you traveled alone, jumped out of a plane, moved somewhere far from your loved ones, told someone you had feelings for them, etc. Pick one from the list. Write it with scenes. Remember to write how it felt in your body. Examine why you were willing to take that risk. What gave you the courage? What did you learn about yourself? Would you do it again? Why or why not?

79. Imagine you are a character from a classic tale pitching your memoir to a literary agent. You know that it will become the next bestseller. Write your query letter, story synopsis, or elevator pitch to the agent.

80. Trace your journey to becoming a writer. How did you come to writing? Do you remember when you first started telling stories, to yourself and to others? Do you remember where? When did you realize you are a writer? When did you own it? What made you own it? Have you answered the call? How? Remember to show scenes. What did it feel like in your body? What does it feel like now?

81. An alien community takes over Disney World by secretly inhabiting the costumes of the performers. No one knows about the kidnappings due to media coverup, until a young and brand-new reporter decides to do some digging. Tell the story from the reporter's perspective.

82. Write about a childhood story you tell regularly. Make it as detailed as you can. Then, interview a family member or friend who was part of the story, or who knew you at that time.

Avoid leading questions; the purpose of the interview is to uncover details of the story you don't remember, perspectives that differ from yours, and/or the way others perceived you.

Write down the details from the interview and compare them with your own narrative. Where do the stories align? Where do they differ? Whether you agree with them or not, write an essay that leans into the differences you uncovered. How does it make you feel? What did you learn about yourself and/or the other person?

Lost and found prompts

83. Make note of (or take pictures of) street signs, ads, slogans, news headlines or quotes from books or well known writers. Keep a running list and use a sentence or word from your list as the first line of a poem or essay. Alternately, create a found poem by pairing a number of items by meaning, theme, or some other connection. Play with the ordering of the phrases and see what emerges.

84. Write out the first sentence of all of your favorite books. Try to come up with at least 30 books/sentences. Cut your list up so that each sentence is on its own thin strip of paper. Mix them up in a bowl and choose one at random. Start your essay or story with this sentence. When you have a complete draft, revise your first sentence.

85. Pick a tree — be as specific as you possibly can. Name it. Describe it in detail (smell, sounds, textures, colors, etc). What's in it? What's on it? What is around it? What is nearby? Then describe that same tree in winter; in spring; in summer; and in autumn.Then describe that same tree when it was a sapling. Then describe that same tree when it is about to meet it its end. How does it end? What takes its place?

86. Take a declarative phrase from a poem or story and regard it as a false premise. For example, taking Emily Dickinson's line, "Hope is a thing with feathers," as a false premise would result in an opposing statement such as, "Hope has no feathers."

Consider what your opposing statement says or reveals. Do you agree or disagree? Freewrite your response to expand on your perspective.

87. So many great films have been adapted for the screen from works of fiction and creative nonfiction. Think of a movie you love that isn't based on a book and try to write a short story version of it. Examine the types of shots used, the lighting, how scenes are staged, and try to translate these visuals into the structure of your story.

88. Write about the stories and books that have stayed with you. Is there a book you've read again and again? Is there a poem you return to repeatedly? Have you read a book recently that shifted your whole axis, that you know you'll be processing for a while? What has story gifted you that nothing else could? Why?

89. People love to give unsolicited advice. Write about the worst advice you've ever gotten. Why was it so bad? Did you realize right away it was terrible advice? It not, why? How did you come to the realization? If yes, how'd you know so quickly? Next, write about some good advice you've been given. Who gave it to you? Why was it so good? Did you use this advice in your life? How?

90. Search for a particular issue or topic you are interested in on the internet and look only at the image results. Choose an image that grabs your attention and study it for a minute or two. Then, write a poem based on the topic and/or image.

91. Take something you have recently learned — a fact, a skill — and give it to one of your characters in a significant way. Make what you have learned a key element in the progression of the scene. For bonus points, teach yourself something you have always wanted to learn – a foreign language, how to pick a lock, juggling, etc.

When you feel a little confident in your new skill, write five pages showing one of your characters learning the same thing. Draw out areas of frustration and confusion.

92. Write an eight-line poem or flash piece using the following constraints:

- The first and last lines should use only one-syllable words.
- The second and seventh lines should use only two-syllable words.
- The third and sixth lines should only use three-syllable words.
- The fourth and fifth lines should use only four-syllable words (you can count hyphenated words as one word).

93. What do each of your names mean? Where do they come from? Do the meanings suit you? Do you like your names? If you don't already know it, look up the meaning of your name, or describe how your parents chose it.

Are there other people who share your first and last name? If not, write about how you feel about your name and what it feels like to be the only one in the world with your name. If you do share a name with others, read about two or three of these people. Who are they? Do you share anything in common? What would happen if you were all in a room together? Write an essay or short story about this imagined encounter.

94. Imagine a body of water. This might be a lake or a pond or a rushing river — it can be anything. What do you see in your mind? Describe this body of water in detail — detail that addresses all of the senses. What colors do you see? Lights and shadows? Sounds? Smells? Textures? How does it feel on your skin? What is in it, near it, above it? Jot down the feelings this body of water evokes — either in you or in a character.

Prompts for revision

95. Open your latest draft and copy a portion — a paragraph, a page, or a chapter — into a new document. Now eliminate one word in each sentence of the pasted draft. (You may have to revise a few to preserve clarity, and that's OK.)

Next, trim two syllables from each sentence. Look for multisyllabic words; is there a simpler word you can use instead? Then, interrogate your modifiers: Does she "tend to sing in the mornings," or can she just "sing in the morning?" Is saying that "he likes to call her late at night" worth the extra words compared to "he calls her late at night?"

Scout for places where you filter action through your narrator versus simply letting the action occur. “She saw the truck slam into the wall” is much less impactful than “The truck slammed into the wall.” “He felt the warm summer sun on his shoulders” could just say “the summer sun warmed his shoulders?”

Now compare the original to your new, lean-and-clean draft. Which do you prefer?

96. Print or write out a handful of unfinished poems you’ve had difficulty revising. Cut out each line and mix them up. Rearrange the lines to make a new poem. Consider using one of the lines as the title.

97. Search your manuscript and remove these filter words: Saw, smelled, heard, thought, knew, touched, wondered, realized, noticed, watched, looked, seemed, felt, decided, remembered and reminded. Read each sentence with and then without these filters. Which version do you like best?

98. Revisit a scene in your story. Cut all the visual cues and replace them with all other sensory details. What texture emerges? Insert needed visual cues back in.

99. Write the story of your life in five sentences. Next, write the story of your life in three sentences. Finally, write the story of your life in one sentence. It’s important to follow this sequence so you can notice what you struggled to put in or leave out. Pay attention to the way your writing shifts each time. Use your one-sentence memoir as the opening line for an essay or memoir.

100. Write three new openings to your essay or story. Each opening should be at least a paragraph in length. Start each one at a different point in the action. Consider writing one opening that starts at the end.

101. Make a list of different professions. For example, carpenter, chef, plumber, electrician, lawyer, etc. Then for each profession on your list, come up with verbs that describe the types of things they do. Revise an essay or scene in which you use only the verbs from one of the professions on your list. Alternately, begin a new draft using only these verbs.