Queer and Peer-led Creative Writing Toolkit

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Introduction

Over 2023-2025 the Centre for Arts and Wellbeing at the University of Brighton partnered with New Writing South to run writing and wellbeing workshops.

The first one took place at the Coast is Queer Festival in October 2023. Subsequent workshops took place at Yellowave on the beachfront in Brighton between January and June 2025 with the aim of supporting emerging and established LGBTQ+ writers and our allies to use writing as a wellbeing practice.

The project was made possible by the Ignite Community-University Partnership Programme at the University of Brighton, which was funded via the AHRC Impact Acceleration Account.

This writing and wellbeing toolkit is the result of that work. It's designed for use by community groups who want to use writing to promote mental health and wellbeing in the LGBTQ+ community.

- Dr Louise Tondeur, June 2025.

The Toolkit

Here are some tools you can use with the participants who come to your writing workshops. I used almost all of these during the Coast is Queer/Yellowave workshops so they are tried and tested. Adapt and rewrite based on your client group and on input from the participants themselves.

Freewriting

Freewriting essentially means writing without rules, without stopping and without editing. For a fuller explanation of what freewriting does, take a look at *Writing with Power* by Peter Elbow. You can time freewriting by, say, asking participants to write for one minute without stopping. You can increase the time: anything beyond five minutes of freewriting might be too much in a workshop but can work brilliantly when writing solo. The lovely thing about freewriting is that it can be combined with almost any other writing game or prompt. You could, for instance, spend one minute writing a list of words or five minutes writing a postcard. The point of freewriting is to generate words and ideas and to get past the surface stuff that gets in the way of our authentic selves. It's also an antidote to perfectionism.

While it's possible to do freewriting as a warm up with no prompt, adding a prompt helps to introduce the topic of a workshop, to help participants feel like the freewrite has a purpose, and to keep people safe and on task. You can simply give everyone a starting word for the freewrite or ask them to freewrite about a scenario or a character. Another easy-to-access starting point is to ask them to write about the environment or place you're in.

Some writers hate freewriting, probably because the need to edit as they go is too strong. It's sometimes said that the more a writer resists freewriting, the more they need to try it! You might have to remind the group that they don't have to show anyone the result and that it's possible to edit later – as thinking that we have to get the writing 'right' in the first draft can put people off. I also suggest discussing the tool itself by saying that freewriting is one of many tools but not the only one, and asking questions such as:

- Who's written like this before?
- Who liked it and who didn't?
- Did you go with it or resist it?
- Do you usually edit as you go or edit later?

When you love freewriting as a workshop leader it can be easy to fall into the trap of assuming that everyone else does too! This is true with any writing tool. Establishing who does and doesn't find it useful – perhaps by asking them to experiment with it at home – and then discussing its use helps the workshop leader to remember this. It's a lesson I learnt the hard way.

There's another version of freewriting – Julia Cameron's Morning Pages are a version of it – where you 'write what's in your head'. This is sometimes called 'stream of consciousness writing'. I suggest that you don't use this kind of freewriting in a workshop, but that you could point people towards Cameron's book *The Artist's Way*, which includes this and other tools. There are free videos on her website explaining them. They can be very useful for anyone who feels creatively blocked.

Freewriting as a writing and wellbeing tool
You can use freewriting as a writing and wellbeing tool as it encourages self-expression. It's a way of bypassing the internal censor in order to get everything out of our heads and onto the page. If you want to use it in this way, I suggest putting some boundaries in place by suggesting a theme for the freewriting. Discuss what happened afterwards in pairs and feedback to the group as a whole without sharing the actual content of the writing.

Suggested themes:

- A time when I felt happy
- The first time I…
- When something changed
- The first house I lived in
- My favourite place

Sensory writing

This technique simply involves using the senses as a way into a writing practice. You could call it 'writing through the senses'. It combines well with freewriting and, like freewriting, there aren't any rules: so participants could write single word responses. They don't have to compose something or come up with a story idea or poem as a result. Writing through the senses also combines well with mindful writing, because the observation involved encourages us to be present in the moment.

The simplest version of this exercise is to spend one minute freewriting based on each of the senses. This isn't an imaginative exercise. We're simply observing what's around us by deliberately tuning in. The workshop leader uses the following prompts then times the group for one minute:

- What can you see? Write about it for one minute.
- What can you hear? Write about it for one minute.
- What can you taste? Write about it for one minute.
- What can you smell? Write about it for one minute.
- What can you touch? Write about it for one minute.

Another version of this exercise I like is to ask writers to go on a mini writing adventure. That might be during the workshop (look around the space for five mins) or preparation for it (look out of your window or travel around your local area for five mins). Participants collect materials to use by tuning in to each of their senses during these explorations.

Here are a couple of caveats
Remember to include those who don't have access to one of their senses by using phrases like 'use all the senses available to you'. Alternatively you can avoid going through all of the senses one by one and instead ask participants to pick one or two of the senses to focus on during the exercise.

Close observation
Close observation involves getting up close to something – an object or a view or something from nature, for example – and observing it through all of the senses you

have available to you more closely than you usually would. So, for example, ask participants to find a natural object to bring in to the workshop then ask them to do nothing but observe it for five minutes before writing about it. You can extend the timeframe if you like. You can also ask participants to look for everyday objects in their bags or pockets to share with the group and do the same observation exercise: do nothing but observe it for five minutes. It is astonishing how much you can notice about the kinds of object you use all the time without thinking about it. Close observation can involve tuning into the senses again – with a bit of an imaginative leap – or you can ask what sounds, tastes and so on might we *associate* with the chosen object.

Mindful observation
As mentioned, you can use sensory writing as a way into a mindful writing practice starting with mindful observation. These exercises can be trialled in a workshop, but need further exploration at home for them to work fully. Therefore you might like to set these exercises as homework and ask your participants to report back during the next workshop if relevant.

For example, you could ask participants to:

- Pause three times during their day and simply notice what's going on around them for five minutes. Once the five minutes is up they jot down some notes.
- Travel around their home, notice anything they are particularly grateful for, and spend some time appreciating it. Then jot down some notes.
- Travel around their local area (a walk around the block for instance) and pause three times to notice what's going on around them. Once they get home, they can jot down some notes.
- Stop at noon on a particular day and record the view outside their window. Repeat this regularly for a year, keeping the results in a journal.

Sensory walks/encounters
Another extension of sensory writing is to go on sensory walks or encounters with nature. Ask participants to pick out natural places near to them which would be suitable for close observation. For example, I might choose the old graveyard near our house or the beach. They go to this place to observe at different times of the day and write lists of words as a result or create a poem to read at the next workshop.

If you happen to be holding your workshop somewhere close to nature, you can incorporate sensory walks or encounters during the workshop or if appropriate you can take your group out to try this. I once took a group to the fountain in the centre of Brighton to write poems, with cars and buses zooming past us on either side – so nature in an urban environment works just fine.

Here's what to do:

1. Emphasise the importance of tuning into the moment/the senses
2. Remind them that pausing/observing the current moment is key to a mindful approach to writing
3. Ask them to observe whatever it is for longer than they usually would
4. Clarify that the writing comes after the moment of pause.
5. Give them time and space to write after the pause.

Creative Visualisation

This technique involves telling the group a simple story. They imagine they are experiencing that story as you tell it. This technique overlaps with freewriting – because the written response after doing it usually uses that technique – and with sensory writing, as we try to experience the world of the story through the senses when listening to it and responding to it.

Here's a quick guide to creating a framework for your story. Frame the story as a journey. They start in a particular location and end in the same location. You might also want them to imagine collecting and returning with a particular object. Top and tail the story by asking everyone to get still and quiet, or by taking a few deep breaths and/or by asking participants to close their eyes, put their hands on their knees and their feet flat on the floor or whatever is appropriate for your group.

If you haven't done this before, write a script for your story beforehand and remember to focus on the sensory experience. One simple way to do Creative Visualisation is to ask participants to imagine somewhere peaceful where they feel safe and comfortable, with a beautiful view of a beach or lake or stream. They imagine getting up and going to a walk along by the water, then return to the same spot at the end of their imaginary journey.

Journey into a poem

Here's an example. First a little bit of context, I love Matsuo Bashô's frog Haiku. A few years ago a colleague introduced me to a collection of 100 translations of the poem, called *100 Frogs* by Hiroaki Sato, including this one, translated by Cid Corman:

old pond
frog leaping
splash

I've done this Creative Visualisation in workshops based on the poem. Here's the transcript. You are welcome to use it. Simply read out, leaving pauses between the paragraphs.

> *Sit with your hands on your knees, your feet flat on the floor if you are able, otherwise get comfy. If you'd like to, you can close your eyes. Breath in deeply and breath out fully.*
>
> *Imagine you're in a beautiful Japanese pagoda with a stunning view from the veranda. You feel safe and relaxed there. It's just after lunchtime on a warm day. You decide to go for a walk through a forest. Imagine yourself doing that now. You get to a secluded clearing in the forest. You go along a pathway out of the clearing.*
>
> *In front of you is a large old pond. Everything is peaceful. The pond is surrounded by golden Japanese rushes, trees, plants and tall grasses. You find a fallen tree trunk and sit down. The pond is full of life but because it's the middle of a warm day, for the moment, everything is still. Take in all the details.*

You feel safe, calm and peaceful watching the pond.

Suddenly a frog leaps into the old pond. A splash goes up. The water ripples. The air seems to vibrate. And just as suddenly, the sound dies away, the surface of the pond is still again.

You get up and take the path back to the clearing and through the trees to the pagoda and sit on the veranda. You feel safe and relaxed there. Breath in deeply and breath out fully.

Open your eyes if they were closed. Make some notes about what happened.

What to do after the Creative Visualisation
Participants can write about the journey they went on and what happened immediately afterwards, perhaps by jotting down some sense impressions. You can also ask people to discuss what happened in pairs and write about it later. If you asked people to 'bring an object back' from their journey, you might like to ask them to write down some words and phrases about their objects. You could also ask them to write their own haiku.

Here are a couple of caveats
Make sure this exercise is accessible to people in your group. The relaxed pose and deep breathing at the start won't work for everyone. Around 1-4% of people can't visualise, but they will still be able to follow the story and write about it afterwards.

Writing props
A writing prop is simply an object that you use as a starting point for a piece of writing. This overlaps with sensory writing, because you can use any of the nature objects or everyday objects participants have contributed as the starting points for stories or poems. Alternatively the workshop leader can bring interesting or curious objects from home or find objects to use in the workshop space. You don't have to make these unusual objects as often the most mundane prop turns out to have an interesting story to tell.

What to do with your writing props
I've already suggested close observation above and that can be an excellent way to start working with props. Another way in is to tell the story of one particular object. For example, take a wooden spoon. Ask about its provenance. Where was it made? As it's made of wood, where did the tree grow and when was it chopped down? Who chopped it down? What's their life like? What's their family like? Who worked in the factory where it was made? What's their life like? What's their family like? How far has the wood in that wooden spoon travelled? How old is it? What dishes has it contributed to? Has it ever been used for something other than cooking? If so what and who was involved? You don't have to know the factual answers to these questions. Instead, ask participants to take an imaginative leap and make up these stories. You could ask them to research objects from their lives or their families' lives to come up with an innovative piece of life writing too.

As the name ‘prop’ suggests, you can use these objects to set up a stage area that suggests or hints at some kind of happening or story. It’s fun to have this arranged before the participants arrive for maximum impact. Alternatively you can ask participants to set up their own scenarios for other group members to use. It can be a fun game to bring in a set of random props (a wooden spoon, an old pair of glasses, a cracked coffee cup and a feather) and to ask the participants to use them to tell a story.

Here are some scenarios I’ve used with groups in the past:

- An open umbrella and various everyday items like a jumper, some keys and a pair of sunglasses
- An open suitcase with the contents spilling out: clothes, train ticket, money
- A crime scene set up by the participants using whatever we had to hand in the workshop space

What to do with writing scenarios

1. These scenarios are great for setting up a theme you’re going to investigate over one session or a few sessions. I once adapted the open umbrella scenario above using references to so-called ‘unlucky’ things to kick off a session I did with young people on superstitions, for example.
2. You can use them to suggest how a stage space might be used to start a short play or monologue. If so, think about where your audience will be too. If you’re in a hybrid performing arts/writing space, ask participants to suggest dialogue or do some improvisation using the props before writing.
3. You can use scenarios to tell a story by inventing characters who would interact with the writing props. You can ask the whole group to come up with the characters together to avoid anyone getting stuck, before doing a bit of writing and sharing what everyone has come up with.

Postcard writing

In order to do this you need a set of interesting postcards, or you can ask participants to bring in postcards to use. Alternatively, ask everyone to imagine what might appear on a postcard first. They can swap postcard image ideas with one another for an extra twist. I suggest collecting postcards when you can to use in workshops, so you have lots of contrasting starting points ready and waiting when you come to do these kinds of exercises. Many of the exercises you can do with postcards can also be done with printed photos. The benefit of postcards rather than photos is that we’re invited to write on one side and they will often suggest a location for a story or character.

Focus on the image

What’s going on in the image on the postcard? What might it be like to be in that environment? Participants could go through the sensory writing questions again (what can I see or taste etc?) imagining they are ‘in’ the card or you can simply ask them to write lists of words or phrases or a story or poem inspired by the image on the postcard.

You can also ask everyone to suggest a made-up character who bought or came across this postcard and why they were drawn to the image. Use these ideas to inspire longer pieces of writing.

Focus on what's written on the back of the postcard
You can do this with actual postcards if you like, as that effectively demonstrates just how little you can fit on a postcard! Invent two characters: one is sending a postcard and one is receiving it. Decide where they are and why they are sending it. Perhaps the second character will write a postcard in response, too. Have participants write the postcards in character. Discuss the stories that emerge. How much of the story can you get onto the back of a postcard?

Alternatively, have participants write a postcard in the usual way – by actually writing on the back of the postcard – but with something left unsaid or unspoken. Have them swap postcards with someone who has to respond to the postcard by writing their own poem or the start of a story.

You can also use blank postcards to ask people to record their expectations and feelings about what the writing session might be like. The useful thing about blank postcards is that the participants can either draw the image or write a few words and phrases or both. You can repeat this at the end of the session or series of sessions to discover whether their expectations were met or transformed somehow. Blank postcards are available from stationery shops.

Focus on the size of the postcard
Use the size of the postcard as a constraint. The task is to write a very short short story, that is, a piece of flash fiction, which would fit onto a postcard. In this instance, you don't have to worry about leaving space for the address. This piece of flash fiction can be about anything but must have a beginning, middle and end and involve a main character. The resulting pieces of writing are called 'postcard stories'. These are stories of (roughly) 250 words or fewer. They don't have to be written as if they are messages on a postcard this time – simply focus on the length. After your participants have had a chance to redraft, it's fun to collect these short pieces of writing together so you can read everyone's postcard stories.

Life writing postcards
You can use the idea of postcard stories to inspire short snippets of life writing. By the way, the themes I've suggested for freewriting and the list writing and journalling prompts (coming up later) work as warm ups for life writing postcards.

Using postcards for life writing allows participants to home in on what they really want to say, keeping it as clear and to the point as possible. It also allows you to create a sharing wall by pinning the stories up and allowing everyone to read each other's work.

The participants each have three blank postcards. They write about:

- A place they once lived, as specifically as they can.
- The first time or last time they… (decide as a group how to fill in that gap)
- Their happiest memory

Postcard life writing can inspire longer snippets or snapshots of life writing of, say, 500-1000 words per memory. Collectively decide on the prompts as a group and discuss how the writing went afterwards in pairs even if some participants don't want to share the actual writing.

List making

Like freewriting, lists are a way of getting you off the hook. You don't have to write anything beautiful or profound or even interesting and you don't need an idea to start. You simply write a list of words or phrases. Again, like freewriting, you can mine this exercise for words and phrases to use in polished pieces of writing later. Lists are a gentle way to start writing with a group who may be lacking in confidence, or when people don't have any ideas or when participants might find it challenging to write in full sentences. There's no crafting required when writing a list: that comes later when you form the words and phrases into something interesting.

Types of lists:

- A list of things in the room you're in
- An alphabetical list
- A list based on one or more of the senses
- A list of the objects in your bag
- A list of jobs
- A list of hobbies
- A list of places you've been or lived in or would like to explore
- A list based on a walk around your local area (what nature writers call 'your patch')
- A list from the point of view of a fictional character: a shopping list or to do list
- A list describing what you can see through a window or door
- A list about any topic or theme you're working on

What to do with the lists

As I said above, you can use lists as source material for any piece of writing. They are almost always a useful starting point.

Here are some ideas for next steps:

1. One next step after making a list is to turn it into a list poem. This is what it sounds like: a poem that uses a list of things as its structure. You could ask participants to start with a title which will suggest a list, such as 'What I Carry in My Pocket' or 'The Things I Pulled Out of the Ocean' or 'Rules for Life'. Examples: 'The Shopping Forecast' by Eddie Gibbons, 'Why We Oppose Pockets for Women' by Alice Duer Miller, 'What Every Woman Should Carry' by Maura Dooley and 'Mr. Grumpledump's Song' by Shel Silverstein are examples of list poems you can easily find by googling. 'Rookie' by Caroline Bird is also a kind of list poem, inspired partly by mental health challenges.
2. Another next step is to take the lists, perhaps by reading them out, or discussing them in pairs, and using them to suggest made up characters. Once you have a few characters in mind, flesh them out by giving them a job (or something they do with their time) and coming up with a few details about their lives. Then write about them.
3. And finally, and more radically, you can also use lists as fodder for the cut up technique. Print out the lists and cut them up. You'll need a receptacle to hold them or this can become unwieldly. I usually use a hat. Ask participants to take scraps of paper out of the hat and to use whatever they say to make a

story or poem. The less sense these scraps of paper make the better – that's where the imaginative leap comes in.

Journalling

Encourage participants to keep a journal during the time they're attending the writing workshops. In it they can record thoughts and feelings about the process, any snippets or lines they want to jot down. They can also use it like a kind of ideas scrapbook, a place to record dreams, to draw, to ponder, to write down what they're grateful for. A journal can involve freewriting or lists of words (see above) or can be a response to prompts. Here are some prompts to get you started. Ask group members to suggest some of their own.

- What am I grateful for today?
- My superpower would be…
- If I could fly where would I go first?
- If I was invisible what would I do?
- If money was no object I would…
- If I had my own hotel on a beautiful island, the theme would be…
- How many different cities have I visited?
- How many different seas, oceans, lakes, rivers and lochs have I seen?
- If I had my own castle I would…

Make a spark box

You can use any kind of receptacle for a spark box but an old tissue box works well because it will have a readymade hole. On slips of paper, create some writing prompts. These might be a prompt word, phrase, saying, made-up character, place, jobs, quirks, deepest desires, secrets, or lines of dialogue. Ask everyone in the group to contribute ideas. Anyone can pull out a 'spark' or idea to use to kickstart a piece of writing. When using the spark box with the group decide on a rule in advance. For example, the 'spark' must appear in the opening line. Once the spark box has been going long enough the ideas will start to take people by surprise! If someone has pulled out a 'spark' they must add a 'spark' to keep the ideas flowing. Eventually the spark box will contain so many good ideas you can use it to run a whole workshop, simply by pulling out 'sparks'.

Movement-inspired creative writing

by workshop participant Lu Blue

This movement inspired exercise is designed for small groups, to encourage collective participation and use of imagination without forming words.

Each group member takes it in turn to create a specific movement or shape, which can be still or dynamic.

- It can be expressive of a particular object, form, feeling, emotion, or symbolic of something in the environment, or how something feels, expresses etc.
- It is either held in a position or acted out

The other group members observe the movement or shape and interpret what they see for themselves, this is open for discussion whilst the active member is in the shape or active movement. Each participant has a time frame. 3-5 mins etc.

The group's observers reflect on how the movement or shape develops the beginnings of a story, poem, or other creative work piece.

Observers can also group their thoughts together to collaboratively create a narrative, poem, or other written piece as a further group development piece.

The process is repeated, allowing other participants to create their own shapes, movements, or expressions, whether static or dynamic, emotional, symbolic, or representative of environmental elements, objects or feelings.

Explore with 2+ group members being active with physically improvised expression.

The movement-inspired exercise aims to spark creativity and imagination within a performative group collaboration, whilst using physical expression as a prompt for writing and encouraging participants to explore the connection between movement, observation, and storytelling.

Two exercises

by workshop participant Dee Bankhead

3 things of interest

This exercise is for any number of people working on their own, with scope for group discussion/dramatic activity:

1. Go outside this space
2. Note or pick up 3 things of interest
3. Tell the story of each person or animal who last interacted with each thing

This might turn into:

- A 3-act play/3-part story
- 3 standalones
- Something interconnected & more complex

A series of freezeframes

For between two (plus camera person!) and many people divided into manageable groups. First explain the concept of a freezeframe. You could draw them first to create a storyboard if you like. In a freezeframe, people create a picture (like a photo) by posing and freezing in place.

1. Illustrate how an argument which is resolved might look, in terms of gestures in a freezeframe: finger-wagging and cuddles or handshakes.
2. Have a go using the ‘camera’ to make the images i.e. the camera person pretends to take the picture and everyone freezes.
3. Create several of these freezeframes or photos.
4. Practise the movement between 3 or more photos (but max 6) to show progression from problem to resolution.
5. Show your group's ‘photos’ or freezeframes to the other people present and ask for a verbal interpretation.
6. Ask for another group to volunteer to enact your ‘storyboard’ or series of ‘photos’ and give it more life.
7. Ask for constructive criticism/appreciation of each group's effort
8. Follow on activity: these could be either read out as stories /filmed as dramas

How to structure a writing workshop

How to start
Start with a brief introduction to you and the purpose of the workshop, then segue into the warm up. You might like to make the warm up something that you repeat regularly to ease the group into the work. It shouldn't be too challenging. You can (optionally) use it to set the theme for the session if there is one. Often the warm up will suggest itself once you've thought of your main activity for the session. If you like, you're shaping the workshop like a menu and the warm ups are the bread and nibbles as everyone's sitting at the table waiting to start. They are light and quick and are not meant to be the main event or main course.

Suggested warm ups:

- Write for one minute about whatever is in your head.
- Describe what you can see in the room.
- Talk with a partner for one minute about what you hope to get from the workshop.
- Describe this [natural object, postcard, prop] by creating a list of words or phrases.
- Write about/talk about your journey to the workshop.
- Respond to a starting word [blue or ocean work well] by writing a list of words.
- Play word association.
- Listen and respond to a poem.
- Ask participants to suggest warm ups. You could even allocate the role of 'warm up leader' to a different person each time.

Should you set up ground rules with the group?
If you're doing a series of sessions, I suggest getting the group to come up with ground rules in the initial introductory session and writing these up so everyone can see them. If you're running a one-off session or drop-in sessions, I suggest going over some guidelines at the start. Here are some of the things you might include. These need adapting, depending on your situation:

- There is no obligation to share work or even to take part.
- If anyone shares, keep it inside the workshop.
- There will be discussion points as well as moments of reflection. This includes individual work, working in pairs and in small group.
- Keep the discussion respectful and be open to the views of others, remembering we come from different experiences.
- If a sensitive topic comes up, try to keep focused on the writing or discussion task at hand – use the writing itself to explore and think things through.
- If you know you tend to dominate discussions, remember to allow everyone time to speak. If you tend to stay quiet, that's ok, but you might want to challenge yourself to join in on occasion – up to you.
- You can do the activities home too when you could to spend longer on them.

Should you ask people to introduce themselves?
Introductions take time. Even if you only spend one minute per person, if you have twenty participants that's quite a chunk of your workshop. What you want to avoid is spending half of a one-off workshop on introductions because then people get

frustrated when you don't get to the writing part quickly enough! Here are some ideas for introductions. You could do any one of these, or a combination:

- Ask everyone to arrive 15 mins early, which allows for introductions. This is particularly important if the group have never met before. It also sets up the expectation that only introductions will take place during this time, and it won't usually matter if someone arrives late.
- If you're doing a series of workshops, the whole of the first session could be based on introductions to them, their current writing practice, what they hope to get out of the workshops, who you are, what the workshops will be about.
- Walk around the room and introduce yourself and ask the participant's name, how much writing they've done and something interesting about them.
- Have people introduce themselves in pairs, then swap and do the same again. After the break, repeat, this time everyone must speak to someone they haven't met yet.
- Include 1 min of introductions in each pair or group activity
- Base some of the activities on things about your participants, without them feeling compelled to take part. For example, ask them to write a list of words describing their journey to the workshop with the option to share. Or ask them to write a 250-word flash fiction piece set in their home town or based on the job they do.
- Ask everyone to bring a book to recommend and to pin those recommendations up on a board.
- Another fun way to do introductions is to ask everyone to write something interesting about themselves on a sticky note and to put that up on the wall, then use those in a piece of writing and/or ask people to guess who each one belongs to by the end of the workshop.

Shorter activities

After the warm up, come up with a five-to-ten-minute activity based on a theme or a type of writing or a writing technique. Try to include a mix of pair work, individual writing, discussion and group work. So if the warm up was individual work, the next activity might be a pairs game, for example. You can think of this as the starter.

Include two or three of these shorter activities depending on time. You could also incorporate discussion or sharing in pairs or groups at this point. Instead of the main writing activity below you can instead use two or three more shorter activities, creating a smorgasbord effect.

Have a break

Have a break at this point if time allows. You can set up an expectation for the break. For example: *We'll have a ten-minute break. Please come back with an interesting object to write about. When you get back, make a list of words about your object to use in a poem.* This has the advantage of giving them an activity to do immediately on arriving back in the room. Also it rewards people who get back on time because they get to make their list, but people who come back late won't have missed the start of the main event.

The main writing activity

Then go into the main event or the main course. This is a ten-to-twenty-minute activity, designed to illustrate the main point of the workshop. So if the point of the

workshop is to start some life writing, this is where you do it. This is likely to involve participants working on their own, but group writing projects (such as group poems, or improvising and writing dialogue, or shared storytelling) also work. After the main event, have people either discuss what happened in pairs or feed back to you about the highlights or any challenges.

Your final activity
Penultimately, go into the final exercise or the dessert if you like. This is where participants can share work (if there's time – but see below about sharing) or where you set up some homework or independent writing to do before the next workshop.

The round-up
At the end of the session, gather people together for the conclusion. This is a warm down, where you're saying goodbye and letting people come down from what can be an intense experience. To continue the restaurant analogy, in this part of the session, you've paid the bill and are putting your coats on and bidding each other farewell. During the round-up, you might do the following:

- Go over the reasons for doing what you've been doing briefly
- Suggest any extra resources that might be useful
- Ask for one- or two-word responses to how they found the session
- Check if anyone needs support. Sometimes a workshop can bring up issues for people. The round-up is a good chance to tell people how to ask for help.

Should you include sharing/reading aloud?
As with introductions, sharing written work or reading aloud takes time. It can also add pressure to perform or to create something 'good' during the workshop. I don't think we should always aim for sharing at the end of a workshop for those reasons. Some workshop leaders will follow this format religiously:

1. Writing activity
2. Read aloud
3. Give feedback

This can work well with groups of writers who've all been writing for a while, but even then it can be scary and this format can become tired. Therefore I suggest the following:

1. Make sharing work in any format (reading aloud or passing it to others to read) one hundred percent optional.
2. Tell the participants upfront if they'll be offered a chance to share the work or whether it will be kept personal.
3. Build in opportunities to either share work OR to discuss the process of writing and the ideas without sharing throughout the workshop. You can do this in pairs or groups to avoid participants having to share with the whole group.
4. If you're running a series of workshops, consider having a sharing opportunity in the final session (again optional), making it celebratory.
5. Those participants who want to give and receive feedback could use your sessions as an opportunity to meet others who want to do similar, at which point they could form a feedback group (commonly known as a writing group).
6. If you do get people to share at the end of each workshop, limit the time allowed to a minute or so and make sure you have enough time left to get through everyone who wants to have a go.

Sample workshop

Ground rules
Welcome everyone. There is no obligation to share work or even to take part.
If anyone shares, keep it inside the workshop. Keep the discussion respectful and be open to the views of others. You can do the activities home and spend longer. Some of the exercises involve the senses: simply focus on those that are available to you.
[5 mins]

List making / Journaling

Do any of the following:

- Make a list of ten objects/colours you can see in the room.
- Make a list of five things you can hear and/or smell – harder!
- Write a list of three interesting things about you.
- Write a list of three things you are grateful for – they can be the smallest things – that colour blue, the taste of coffee, the sun came up this morning.

List making is one of the best ways to start writing (either as a beginner or to launch yourself into a longer writing practice). If you want to use it, try pausing three times a day and do nothing for 5 mins (harder than it sounds) and then make lists of what you observe.
[5 mins]

Sensory writing
Write about what you can see, hear, smell, taste, touch or sense for one minute. You can make lists of words, you don't need to write in sentences. (You can also write what you would like to, say, taste or smell – make it up if you want to!) If you don't have the use of one of your senses, concentrate on any of the others.

As well as being part of mindful writing and observation, lists are great for coming up with source material you can use later.
[10 mins]

Mindful observation exercise
Take any ordinary object that you have to hand – a pen, a bus ticket, keys, a bag, a book. If you don't have anything on you it could be something in the room. Watch this object closely, not only looking at it, but weighing it in your hand (if you can) and really experiencing the object in as many ways as you can. Say we're going to do this for one minute. Then make a list of words.

Introduce yourself to someone sitting near to you: how did those first two exercises go down, what chimed for you?
[10 mins]

Guided writing practice 1
In this guided writing practice, I'll invite you to close your eyes if you would like to and imagine that you are sitting somewhere very comfortable. For me that would be a fireplace and a comfy chair and a pile of books.

Pause for a moment. Close your eyes if you would like to. Take a couple of deep breaths if you're able to. Become aware of the place that you're in, the seat you're sitting in now, and the space we're occupying.

Now imagine that you are sitting somewhere very comfortable. You've got everything that makes you feel safe and comfortable around you. Think about where you are, the details, the sounds, the colours (for instance). Fully occupy the space. Let it fill your imagination.

Become aware of the place that you're in, the seat you're sitting in, the space we're occupying. Pause for a moment. Take a couple of deep breaths. Open your eyes if they were closed. Make some notes.
[15 mins]

Take a break

Guided writing practice 2
This is a similar practice but it takes longer and it involves a journey.

Pause for a moment. Close your eyes if you would like to. Take a couple of deep breaths if you're able to. Become aware of the place that you're in, the seat you're sitting in now, and the space we're occupying.

Now imagine that you are (once more) sitting in that comfortable space.

In your imagination, get up and go for a walk. Outside there are several pathways you could follow. You walk along next to a stream. Everything is peaceful. You are surrounded by several kinds of plants: young and old trees, grasses and flowers. Fill in the details. What is the environment like? Fill in the smells and colours if you're able to.

You walk for a while, then reach your destination. You sit down, perhaps on a blanket, or on a bench, or an old tree trunk. This is a very friendly place.

Become aware of the place that you're in, the seat you're sitting in, the space we're occupying. Pause for a moment. Take a couple of deep breaths. Open your eyes if they were closed.

Make some notes. This might turn into a poem or a story or a piece of life writing.
[20 mins]

No need to share. Feel free to opt out and sit quietly or make notes if you'd rather, or to listen to someone else. But if you would like to, talk to someone sitting near to you: how did these guided practices go down, what chimed for you?
[10 mins]

Photograph
Think about the place you ended up on the guided journey in the last practice or the comfy place you started with and imagine you have a photograph of it. Imagine

you’re holding it in your hand. Write a brief description of the photograph. Describe the photo to someone else.
[5 mins]

Freewriting
Imagine you’ve had that photograph turned into a postcard. There’s a choice:

- You’re going to send the postcard to someone. Write down what you say on the back.
- Send the postcard to your younger self: write three things you’d like to tell your younger self.
- You receive the postcard from your older self: write three things your older self would like to say to you.

Again, no need to share. Feel free to opt out and sit quietly or make notes or to listen to someone else. But if you would like to, talk to someone sitting near to you: what did you learn from writing that postcard?
[15 mins]

List making / Journaling

- Make a list of three things you’ve learnt in today’s workshop.
- Make a list of three things you could use / write about another time.
- Make a list of three things you appreciate about yourself.

[5 mins]

Close
Thanks very much for taking part. Everyone gets to share one thing from their list. (Offer an invitation to future workshops if relevant).
[5 mins]

Resources

Where to find more writing prompts and ideas:

- *52: Write a Poem a Week by Jo Bell*
- *Becoming a Writer* by Dorothea Brande
- *What if* by Anne Bernays and Pamela Painter
- *The Right to Write* by Julia Cameron
- *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron
- *The Art of Writing Fiction* by Andrew Cowan
- *The Craft: A Guide to Making Poetry Happen in the 21st Century* ed. by Rishi Dastidar
- *The Five-Minute Writer* by Margert Geraghty
- *More Five-Minute Writing* by Margert Geraghty
- *Writing Down the Bones* by Natalie Goldberg
- *Wild Mind* by Natalie Goldberg
- *Why I Write Poetry: Essays on Becoming a Poet, Keeping Going and Advice for the Writing Life* ed. by Ian Humphreys
- *The Observation Desk: A Toolkit for Writers* by Naomi Epel
- *The Write Brain Workbook* by Bonnie Neubauer
- *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott
- *Steering the Craft* by Ursula K. Le Guin
- *One Hundred Frogs: From Matsuo Basho to Allen Ginsberg* by Hiroaki Sato
- *How to Write* by Louise Tondeur
- *Find Time to Write* by Louise Tondeur
- *How to Think Like a Writer* by Louise Tondeur

Final word

Thank you so much to all the participants who came to the first writing workshop at the Coast is Queer in 2023 and to everyone who came along to the workshops at Yellowave during the first half of 2025. Your enthusiasm and creativity were much appreciated. Thank you to my wife Dr Sarah Barnsley for proof-reading. Thank you to our funders, the Ignite Community-University Partnership Programme at the University of Brighton, funded via the AHRC Impact Acceleration Account. Special thanks to New Writing South, in particular, Anna Burtt, Anna Jefferson, Liam Offord, Adryon Stuart and Lesley Wood.

- Dr Louise Tondeur, June 2025.

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