

A Place to Start: A Selection of Writing Prompts from New Writing South.



For National Writing Day we asked our Creative Writing Programme tutors to share their favourite writing prompts. Something to get you started if you're staring at a blank page, something to help shape your characters or get your descriptive language flowing.

Pick and choose the one that's right for you or for your writing project – or just try them all!

1. Building a character:

Write about someone you regularly see in everyday life but never have a conversation with. Whose life are you curious about? How do they make you re-evaluate your own? **(With thanks to John McCullough)**

2. Getting into the head of another person:

This is a good character exercise and anger/annoyance dissipater.

Someone has annoyed you: an angry word at home, a crass remark in the street, a politician on the news or social media-ranter.

Bite back the urge to respond. Instead try to get inside their head. What has happened to them today, or in their lives, that prompted the remark that got you going. You don't need to sympathise with them, just try to understand where the remark came from. Knowing any character's motivations makes them more credible. Write down what you come up with.

(With thanks to Lizzie Enfield)

3. Finding a place to start:

Write on separate Post-its:

1. An action
2. A thought
3. A line of dialogue
4. A (non-visual) sensory perception (eg the feel of a fabric, cold air on your skin)
5. A visual description

Now write something incorporating them all. **(With thanks to Umi Sinha)**

4. Write a Cinquain (this is like a simpler haiku):

- The first line is a one-word title, the subject of the poem
- the second line is a pair of adjectives describing that title

- the third line is a three-word phrase that gives more information about the subject (ING words)
- the fourth line consists of four words describing feelings related to that subject
- and the fifth line is a single word synonym or other reference for the subject from line one.

For example:

- Snow
Silent, white
Dancing, falling, drifting
Childhood excitement, covering dreams
Blanket

(With thanks to Sara Clifford)

5. Choose an object:

In Rachel Cusk's latest novel, a writer sets himself a daily task of thinking about an object that doesn't mean anything to him and including that object somewhere in that day's work. In the novel, the example Cusk's character gives of such an 'object' is... a hamster.

The solid fact of an object with no emotional resonance for the writer can helpfully focus the writing. Of course, you may have a meaningful relationships with a hamster, in which case choose an alternative - and another the next day, and another the next day etc. **(With thanks to Hannah Vincent).**

6. Creating a character:

Dead spider plant

Business card

Broken radio

Locket with two photos inside

Rescue Remedy

Blonde hair dye

Tarot cards

Jar of pickled onions

Lap top

Invent a character who owns these things. Write as much as you can about this character, and incorporate some (not all!) of these items into your description. **(With thanks to Sally O'Reilly)**

7. Activate the senses:

One way to get past the blank page is to activate the senses one by one.

For example: close your eyes and note all the sounds in the room.

Write them down and think about why you noticed them and which you noticed first.

This activity can be repeated using smell, touch, sight and even taste. Then consider how a particular character might notice and respond to particular things they have experienced directly through their senses. For example a baker might be tuned to smell, while an architect might notice shapes, colours or scale of objects in relation to each other.

Once you have begun to identify your character's propensity to notice certain things over others you can start to think which particular words they might use to describe them.

This exercise can be begun in a room, but can then be developed further in the outside world. **(With thanks to Rosie Chard)**

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