

# Ten Short Writing Assignments

## to Practice Free-writing, Brainstorming and Clustering

*Some exercises borrowed from Discovering the Writer Within, by B. Ballinger and B. Lane.*

Find yourself a comfortable pen or pencil and a notebook in which to keep your writing. These exercises are for you to do at school, at home, on the bus, in the park—wherever and whenever you want to work seriously on your ability to write. You need never show your writing to anyone if you choose not to; nothing must make you uncomfortable about what you write.

### Day One

#### Free-writing

Write quickly, not thinking too much about what you want to say before you begin writing. For ten minutes write nonstop. Begin with “When I write, I...”

Look at what you’ve written. What attitude toward writing did you take? Were you extremely critical about your writing, or were you showing enthusiasm? Was it hard to write for ten minutes? Did you run out of things to say?

Read over what you wrote. Underline anything that strikes you as particularly important or interesting, for whatever reason.

Through the performing this exercise you should find that when you write, two writers—the “child” and the “critic,”—are at work, and they don’t always get along with each other. Novelist Gail Godwin refers to the critic as your “Watcher at the Gates,” always daring you to fail. In all of the writing exercises you do, try to restrain that critic, and allow the child to imagine, to dream, to surprise you with what it knows.

### Day Two

List five or ten childhood experiences that left lasting impression on you. Pick the one that sticks out like a sore thumb, the one that wants to be written about. Take ten minutes, sit down somewhere with your writing tools, and remember to keep your pen moving.

Don’t think about what you want to say before you write. Don’t censor yourself (that’s the Watcher at work). If you stall, skip a line and go into another thought. Relax and write what you can on the page.

These are the rules of free-writing. Now pick your experience and start writing for ten minutes.

Read over what you have written. Were you surprised at what you remembered? Did you feel good about your free-writing, or were you stopped in your tracks by the critical Watcher? Did you give yourself permission to write nonsense, or did the “bad stuff” shake your confidence and put an end to your writing?

If you find yourself crossing out a lot of your words, it would help you to write a letter to your critic. Get everything off your chest before you go any farther. Point out when criticism is helpful and it isn’t! Write quickly for five minutes:

Barry Lane, co-author of *Discovering the Writer Within*, offers the following advice: “Think of your imagination as a big, freshly plowed, fertile field. Your critic is a gardener with only a pair of grass clippers and a few thoughts on how the plant should look. You are the sun, the rain, and the seeds of ideas growing beneath the darkness. The plants will all grow in their own directions if you let them. You mustn’t let the gardener snip off the green sprouts before the sunlight touches them, or trim a rose so that it looks like a cabbage plant. You must feel the excitement of letting them grow...”

Without looking back at your first attempt, free-write for another ten minutes about the same childhood experience. If your Watcher intrudes, write faster, pushing the critic off the page. Don't write **words** and **sentences**, write **thoughts, smells, sounds, and ideas**.

### Day Three

Keep your pen moving, and for ten minutes write about another unforgettable experience you've had. If you run out of things to say, write about having nothing to say! Then gradually return to the experience, trying to describe everything you did, saw, said, and felt.

Did you remember things that you thought you had forgotten? Is it getting easier to write? How is your critic behaving? Remember, the Watcher does not like free-writing; the Watcher wants everything letter-perfect. Remember though, that the Watcher is necessary. It helps us make sense of the unruly excesses of our imagination...

### Day Four Brainstorming

Today make a list of places you might like to recall through writing. Places are important; they conjure up thoughts of people, events, etc.

Think of a room in which you spent a lot of time as a child. It could be a classroom, a bedroom, a kitchen, or anything else. Transport yourself back into that room and make a quick list of everything you see there. **Everything!** Look in every nook and cranny of that room until you can remember nothing else.

Look over that list you've made for one detail that triggers more memories. Underline it, and begin with that detail. List more ideas about the room for ten minutes.

Did your pen stay in that room, or did it wander beyond those walls? Did the exercise reveal anything to you about whom you were as a child or who you are now?

### Day Five

For each place on your list, listen for people there. Pick one person who jumps out at you and write about him or her for ten minutes. Do a sketch of that person with words. Now write.

When you have read what you've written, put the paper aside. Do you want to write more about the person? If so, take one item on your list and write about it. Does your pen want to write about someone else? If so, write about that new person for ten minutes.

When we write, we can't include everything. We must pick what is most important. Trust yourself.

### Day Six Clustering

Look over your work for the past five days and search for something that is very meaningful to you. Something you could write about, if you know how to begin. It could be a person, a place, or an event. Write that "something" in the middle of a blank sheet of paper. Let your mind hover over it. Dive at it from all directions.

Draw a circle around your "something." This is the core of your writing, like the trunk of a tree. Keep adding more circles, connecting them with lines. Let new words become branches of the tree. These words may mean something only to you; that's just fine. Let your pen do the thinking. When one branch of the tree is full, start another branch. And another. Freely associated words should fill the page.

Do you see some words that puzzle you? Are there some surprises? Did you allow yourself to finish a branch before starting a new one? How about finding any words that could become trunks of their own?

## Day Seven

You have now practiced free-writing, brainstorming, and clustering. Try any of the methods you've learned so far. Today write about a meal you love. Be specific. Give details. Where did you eat it, who were you with, what time of year was it? What time of day?

What was the tablecloth like? Was the setting plain or fancy? Was the food spicy or mellow? Give details, details, and more details.

Write about the conversation during the meal. Who said what? How did people look as they talked and ate? How long did the meal last? How did you feel there? Details, details, details.

## Day Eight

Today is a day to try some poetry. Poetry, as you probably already know, does not have to rhyme. It's doubtful that any of the poetry you write for this exercise will rhyme. Write a series of ten three-line poems. Give yourself three minutes to write each one. Begin each one with a title that you choose from something your eye falls on: for example, a plant, book, table, reflecting light. Three lines, three minutes. Title the poem. Then, without thinking, write three imaginative lines. Pause for a moment, and then do another. New title, three minutes, three lines. Continue in this way until that short thinking is a part of you and you can call it into use when you need it. All words in a short poem are used economically, and the title should not be one of the words in the poem.

## Day Nine

Your next assignment involves the importance of verbs. A sentence is flat and uninteresting without the energy of the right verb or verbs. Today you will become more aware of how you use them.

Fold a piece of paper in half lengthwise. On the left side of the paper list ten nouns. Any ten.

Now turn over the paper so the right column is showing instead of the left column. Think of an occupation; for instance think of a plumber, gardener, or physician. List fifteen verbs on the right half other page that go with that position.

Open the page. You have nouns listed down the left side and verbs listed down the right side. Try joining the nouns with the verbs to see what varied combinations you can get. Then finish the sentences, using the verbs in the past or present tense, whichever you like.

The purpose of the assignment is to be aware of the power of verbs and to use them in fresh ways. It will wake up dull writing!

## Day Ten

Write about a season of the year. Use all the elements important in description: the sense of sound, touch, taste, sight, and texture. Select a mood, feeling, or emotion to fit the time of year. Why is this season special? What things remind of this season? What events are particular to this time? Let your memories take you to experiences that happened during this season. Write about people who seem to be important to that time of year. Write about places that always remind you of this season. Keep remembering to add details that include all five senses.

You could try all three methods of getting started. Make a list of seasons, and underline the one you like best. Next, write that season in the middle of a clean piece of paper and circle it. Begin clustering ideas; try to fill up the whole page with details. Finally, on a new piece of paper, take one of your ideas and free-write about it, keeping in mind the questions posed above. Write as much as you can.

*Congratulations on ten days of good work!*