



AUGUST TO OCTOBER 2015 WRITING EXERCISES

“Every true apprentice writer has, however he/she [sic] may try to keep it secret even from himself/herself [sic], only one major goal: glory. The shoddy writer wants only publication. He fails to recognize that almost anyone willing to devote between twelve and fourteen hours a day to writing—and there are many such people—will eventually get published. But only the great writer will survive—the writer who fully understands his trade and is willing to take time and the necessary risks—always assuming, of course, that the writer is profoundly honest and, at least in his writing, sane.”

John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction*

Welcome to some writing exercises caged from some of the best teachers of creative writing in our times. Of course, those choices have been made by the editorial assessment of one who has experienced far too many “experts” to claim anyone one of them as *the* best. Any of us could declare any number of creative writing teachers as *the* best. Maybe that’s because creative writing teachers steal from each other at will, but I digress.

The selection of exercises is presented to you for discussion and decision. Briefly, discuss the choices with your colleagues in any way that gives you traction. Then, blast out a free written draft to see what develops. We will be using the August meeting time for the draft process in preparation for your presentation (to your critique group) of a fuller version of your draft in October. Revisions and editing should reach toward a length and structure that fulfills the goals for your story. A novel length will be reflected in a broad-vision writing style, whereas a short story style will be reflected in a tighter style. You may be working in a vignette form, or focusing on a scene or snippet of some kind. Regardless, be sure to type, double-space and paginate your manuscript, provide a title and by-line, and bring six (6) copies to the October meeting for presentation to your critique group.

Several options for critique group processes are possible, and our workshop leaders will discuss them at the August meeting and present them to you as choices for your individual group procedures.

FICTION EXERCISES from *The Art of Fiction* by John Gardner

Describe a landscape as seen by an old woman whose disgusting and detestable husband has just died. Do not mention the husband or the death.

Describe a lake as seen by a young man who has just committed murder. Do not mention the murder.

Describe a landscape as seen by a bird. Do not mention the bird.

Describe a building as seen by a man whose son has just been killed in a war. Do not mention the son, war, death, or the old man doing the seeing; then describe the same building, in the same weather and at the same time of day, as seen by a happy lover. Do not mention love or the loved one.

Write a novel opening, on any subject, in which the point of view is third person objective. Write a short-story opening in this same point of view.

Write a two-page character sketch using objects, landscape, weather, etc., to intensify the reader's sense of what the character is like. Use no smiles ("She was like..."). Purpose: to create convincing characters by using more than intellect, engaging both the conscious and unconscious mind.

Write a two-page dramatic fragment (part of a story) using objects, landscape, weather, etc., to intensify two characters, as well as the relationship between them. Purpose: the same as in previous exercise, but now making the same scenic background, etc., serve more than one purpose. In a diner, for instance, one character may tend to look at certain objects inside the diner; the other may look at a different set of objects or may look out the window.

Describe and evoke a simple action (for example, sharpening a pencil, carving a tombstone, shooting a rat).

Write a brief passage on some stock subject (a journey, a landscape, a sexual encounter) in the rhythm of a long novel, then the rhythm of a tight short story.

Write an honest and sensitive description (or sketch) of (a) one of your parents, (b) a mythological beast, and (c) a ghost.

In a fully developed monologue, **present** a philosophical position you tend to favor, but present it through a character and in a context that modifies or undermines it.

Without an instant's lapse of taste, describe (a) going to the bathroom, (b) vomiting, (c) murdering a child.

Write, without irony, a character's moving defense of him/her self.

Write a true story using anything you need.

POETRY: Exercises adapted from *Serious Daring* by Lisa Roney, Oxford University Press.

Breaking Lines. Choose a short poem you have written before. Rewrite it five different times with different punctuation and line breaks, sometimes making small changes, other times radical changes. You may find that these changes make you want to change some of your word choices as well. Bring the five editions to the critique group for response.

Conflicting feelings poem. Write a poem about an event about which you feel great conflict or mixed feelings. Remember to use concrete and specific imagery. Also consciously use your punctuation, line breaks, and caesuras to reflect your mixed feelings or hesitations.

Love-hate poem. Write a love poem, or at least a poem of admiration, to someone you don't like or have misgivings about. Though you shouldn't become sarcastic, a bit of irony might work well. Think how your line breaks and punctuation can help you destabilize the surface emotions.

Scanning poems. Choose three of your favorite poems and identify the accented syllables. First, mark each accented syllable with a diagonal line above it, and then count the unstressed syllables with a small U above them. Think about how this pattern relates to the meaning of the poem. Write twelve (12) lines of iambic pentameter yourself.

Formal Limitations. Write one poem without using any adjectives or adverbs. Write another poem without using any forms of the verb "to be."

NON-FICTION/MEMOIR: “...one of the keys to writing resonant memoirs is to be aware of how you fit into the world.” Lisa Roney, *Serious Daring*.

Early Memory. Describe one of your earliest memories. Which seems most prominent and what emotions make that memory stand out? Is fear involved? Loneliness? Pleasure? Pain? Try to connect that early memory with your life today.

Body Memory. Strong feelings about our bodies often connect to other aspects of our lives—sports, disability, sexuality, ethnicity, religious practices, etc. Write about some aspect of your body starting with an early memory and connecting to the present time.

Parent Memory. Write about a time you saw one of your parents cry (apologize, lose their temper, laugh, show courage).

Daily Memories. For one week, write down a memory at any time of day that works for you. No limits on variety, time past, emotional or intellectual touchstones.

Self Character Sketch. As you work on a memoir piece, write a separate one-page “character sketch” of yourself. Decide which features of your personality to emphasize and which ones to minimize. This should help you decide which traits resonate with your material.