

## Journal Exercises

In addition to the Journal Exercises in your textbook, you might try some of the exercises listed below. As other instructors who use *A Writer's Craft* share their exercises, we may add to this list. As always, remember that an exercise is just a prompt to get you writing. It may not lead you to a finished story or poem, but it might distract you from writer's block long enough for something good to happen. You might not even realize what is good about what you write until days later when you look at it again with fresh eyes and no longer care about the instructions in the exercise. Take these instructions seriously, in other words, because they give you direction. But if your writing takes you in a new direction, and you like where it's headed, then keep writing and don't worry about the exercise anymore.

- 👉 Talk to your parents or grandparents and find out the career or talents your grandparents, great-grandparents or other relatives of those generations were known for. Try to be specific: not farmer, but dairy farmer, perhaps. Research the vocabulary of this job or skill and write a list of these terms. Drawing on these terms describe a day in your relative's life.
- 👉 Find pictures from you birth or first year or two of life. Write a paragraph about the room, outdoor space, or people in the photograph. If you don't know the place or people, imagine their lives or what is outside the frame.
- 👉 Go to sporting event and describe an activity that usually goes unnoticed: the concessions, the sideline or dugout, or maybe a group of fans in the stands or parking lot. Describe what people are doing there and the space where it takes place. If you include the main action of the sporting event, let that be background noise and not important.
- 👉 Think of a place that has a strong emotional attachment for you. This might be a place you remember from your childhood, the place you had your first date, the place you always went on vacation, etc. In a couple of paragraphs write about this place as a setting. Try to evoke the emotion of the place through the description, without mentioning the emotion. Choose strong nouns and verbs: don't rely too heavily on adjectives or adverbs.
- 👉 Write out the synopsis of a journey. Describe the character or characters who are on the trip. Where does their journey begin? Where do the characters expect to go? What obstacles or complications arise on the journey? Do the characters end up at their destination? Once you've done the synopsis, write out one scene where an obstacle is encountered.
- 👉 Choose three or four abstract qualities that are related to each other like Love, Jealousy, and Shyness or Respect, Distrust, Friendship, and Hope. Write a scene from a play where each of these abstractions are characters. Describe the costumes and physical qualities of each character, then describe the setting where they might come together. This might be a bare stage or a realistic, futurist, or historical setting. Finally give each character several lines of dialogue and allow some tension to build in the scene.
- 👉 Drawing on 3-5 exercises from your journal, in each find 2-3 interesting phrases. You should have at least 8 total phrases. Write these phrases on slips of paper and rearrange them until you find an interesting pattern. Write this in your journal, filling in the blanks to complete sentences or connect images. You may write it as poetry or prose.

- 🔦 Using the draft of a story you have spent some time on, outline what you have written so far (or what you plan to write). Do this in the middle of a page in your journal. Then above this, in another color ink, outline at least 3 things that could happen before what you have written, and below it outline at least 3 things that could happen after it. In a third color ink, underline 2 possible beginnings and 2 possible endings to a story.
- 🔦 Write a list poem using this pattern: While I sleep, you ... (list 2-3 things), While I sleep, you .... (list 1 thing or 4), And when I sleep, you ..., When I sleep and the stars shine, you..., Yet whenever I am asleep, you..., Yes, when I sleep, you ... Feel free to change the words (sleep, stars shine, I, etc.) and of course fill in the blanks with your own lists of things. You can also vary the opening phrase or repeat the pattern more or fewer times.
- 🔦 Write a list of at least five neologisms, invented words, often made by combining recognizable parts of existing words in English or another language. For each invented word, give a brief description of what it might mean. At the end of each definition, use the new word in a sentence.
- 🔦 Write a draft of a scene as a poem, prose poem, or flash fiction of no more than half a page. Keep the action and dialogue minimal, focusing only on the most important moments. Use one or more images to portray the emotional crisis of the scene.
- 🔦 Take a draft for a poem or story that you have written and copy out the 3-5 best lines or phrases in your journal. Feel free to copy them in a different order than they are in the original draft and leave out everything between these phrases. Look for similarities or contrasts between images or words in these strong lines. In a brief paragraph, write down what you would think the theme of the piece would be if you only had these five lines to go on. Then sketch out how you would develop a poem or story that addressed that theme.
- 🔦 In a paragraph or two, describe the pattern you see in the draft of a poem or story. This draft does not have to be completed, and you can draw on what you're planning to write as well as what you have written. What are the strengths and weaknesses of this pattern for addressing the subject of the poem or story? Suggest an alternate pattern and describe how making this change might affect the meaning or tone of the piece.
- 🔦 Go to a familiar place and find something that is often overlooked (it can be an object, animal, person, etc.). Describe that 'something' in detail, including as much sensory (physical) perception as you can and including some movement, however subtle.
- 🔦 Go to a place where you like to write. It can be a place you know very well or a new place for you. Write a thick description of that place or a space within that place. Try to write down as many details as possible. Include the actions of people, animals, or things around you. Include sounds and other sensory perceptions. Try to get across the feeling of the place through your description.
- 🔦 Write a character sketch using only concrete images. Do not tell about the character, but describe the person using specific images. You might tell how they look, what they wear, what kinds of things they have, etc. You might describe their actions -- but only by using concrete

imagery: either by comparing the way they act to something else or by using appropriate verbs. Feel free to use comparisons (he walks like a praying mantis), but not abstract words (he is awkward).

- 🔦 Sketch out the structure of one of your stories (or a new pattern you might try) using one of the patterns in Chapter 9, Finding Patterns. Don't write the scenes, but briefly outline how the shape of the story might look with this structure. What elements will you include? Which, if any, would you leave out? Will it be a linear structure or a nonlinear one? If you want to try a braided structure, indicate which strands you will braid and what order you will use.
- 🔦 Think of a place where you spent some time last summer. It doesn't have to be a vacation destination, though it could be. It could also be someplace at home or at work or outdoors. Now at that place, think of a smaller space, about the size of a bedroom or smaller, some space that you can begin to describe in a paragraph or two. You need to be familiar with it or remember it well. Write down an initial description, which can be in the form of a list or as a paragraph. Then choose one object from that place and in another paragraph, describe it in greater detail.
- 🔦 Write a description of a scene from the perspective of an animal or plant. What might the animal or plant care about? What things would they notice? You may take on the voice of the animal or plant (if it has one) or you may simply write as if you were looking from its vantage point. If there are humans in the scene, what does your point of view character notice about them or think about them?
- 🔦 Try writing a lipogram, where you omit one letter from your alphabet (try omitting a letter like d, c, t, or i -- but not q or z, since those would be too easy). Let your paragraph start on any subject and see where language leads you as you choose words that don't contain the forbidden letter.
- 🔦 Choose an exercise from your journal that involved a description of a place. It can be a real place or a surreal place; it's up to you. List all the positive aspects of that place, then make a separate list of all the negative aspects. Which elements could be included in both lists? Write a description incorporating elements of both lists. Try to draw on some of the elements you thought could be both positive and negative and bring out their dual quality (negative capability).
- 🔦 Start with a catchy phrase you've seen or heard. It might be an old saying, an expression, some text you see every day, etc. Consider the sound and the literal meaning of the phrase. Write a paragraph that echoes the sounds in the phrase and causes you to see the phrase in a new light. You might start or end your paragraph with the phrase. Or it could end up in the middle.
- 🔦 Write a poem or character in response to a character you have seen in a movie or read in a book lately. Your exercise may be written to that character or it may be a contrasting take on that character. You do not have to name the character or the book or movie it comes from. Don't copy the character, though, unless it is to satirize him or her.
- 🔦 Consider a character you are working on for a story, play, or poem. What kinds of pictures would he or she post on Instagram, Facebook, or other social media? Choose at least three of

these imaginary pictures and write the captions your character would write for them. Would your character exaggerate or tell the truth? Would he or she make up serious or funny captions?

- 📖 Take your journal and turn it sideways. Now write a poem on any subject. Let at least some of the lines of your poem stretch all the way across the page. Let some of your lines be indented. Since you probably aren't writing on the lines because they now go up and down (if your page has lines), let the lines of your poem get crooked or curved, or write in geometric shapes: circles, triangles, etc.
  
- 📖 Take your journal to the library. Walk down the stacks and pull a book at random from the shelf (hint: choose a row that has books you might be interested in: fiction, nonfiction, etc.) Open the book to any page in the middle. If you get a title page or an illustration, try again. Without looking, point to a spot on the page, then choose an interesting word from the paragraph you point to (or near). Your word may be a verb, a noun, or even an adjective, but it's best if it's not an article or conjunction. Put the book back on the shelf, then start writing a paragraph with the word you chose. You may need to have a few words in front of it, but your chosen word should be near the beginning of the first sentence. Without consulting the book you consulted, keep writing and see where language takes you.