

Creative Exercises:

Revising and Building

Use these prompts to revise existing work. Some of these will help you revise the structure, imagery, or conflict of a current project. Others may help you flesh out and develop characters within the piece. These exercises may not necessarily be used in your final drafts, but they will help develop your writing and revision skills.

Structure

- **Beginnings:** Look through the beginning of your piece and find at least five **provocative sentences** (startling/jarring/strong opinion/etc) or lines. Consider how the story might change if it began there.
- **Middle/Endings:** Write down what the **tension/conflict** of the story is and come up with at least four possible **resolutions**. Consider how each changes the ending of the story? The meaning? What would you have to do to move the story to such a resolution (expansion/compression, change in narration, etc)?

Revising a Poem: *

- Count the number of words/sentences/stanzas in your poem. Cut half the words/sentences/stanzas. (Forces you to use clear, vivid words. Cuts lengthy, confusing sentences.)
- Re-write the poem backwards.
- Rearrange the stanzas, sentences, or lines.

Conflict

- **Undercurrents:** Describe a specific, happy event using sensory details to show its positive appeal. After this, write a list of all the negative moments (**what went wrong?** Who had a bad time?) or a list of what might have gone wrong. Now write a scene, without exposition, using these elements.
- What is the **revelation** that your **main character** comes to (or that you want them to come to). Bullet three to five stages that lead up to this change. Write a short, vivid scene that captures the character's behavior at each stage. Then write the moment (**climax**) when the character makes a decision.

Dialogue

- **Dialogue** = *Character 1 wants something. Character 2 doesn't want to give it to them:* Find a section of dialogue. Next to each line, write the **purpose of each line**. If there's no purpose, cut it. If it doesn't fulfill its purpose, find a way to make it work better. Be wary of unnatural dialogue as well.
- Pick **two characters** and **write a conversation** between them about a neutral subject. Write the dialogue on the left side of the paper. On the right side, write the speaker's internal thoughts. How might the right side's thoughts begin to influence the left side's dialogue?

Point of View

- **Practice with First Person:** Chose a character in your story. Writing from their perspective, have them offer a physical description of him/herself, write their opinion of one or more characters in the story, and/or have them justify/apologize for/describe one of their actions during the story.
- **Change Point of View:** Experiment with changing the point of view of the narrator in your story by choosing passages and changing the pronouns. This can allow you to change from 1st to 3rd, 1st singular to 1st plural, or from one character narrating to another. Just make sure you're not simply changing pronouns. A first person narrator sees things differently than an omniscient third person or limited third person or a different first person narrator.
- *Speech Acts: Narration should always have a purpose and an audience:* Pick a **character** in your story and think of an issue they would want to **confess, demand, scold, or promise**. Who would their audience be? What is it that they want from the confrontation and why is this thing being withheld?
Some Ideas: car dealer/buyer; police officer/driver; parent/child; starving person/rich man

Tone

- **Change Tone:** Select a short piece of prose and **substitute a synonym** for at least one word per sentence. Consider how this **changes the meaning or tone** of the sentence / passage.
- **Consistent Tone:** Chose a desired tone (anger, admiration, resentment). Adjust words, phrases, etc throughout the passage to **create the chosen tone**.
Neutral: I watched Jim sit down across from me.
Anger: I glared over at Jim as the weasel sank into a chair across from me.

Show, Don't Tell

- **Describing Emotion:** Find a moment in your story where you TELL a character's emotional state (ie "Jim looked sad"). Write a list of 5-10 postures/gestures that show this emotion. Now try to re-write the paragraph using one or more of these.
- Imagine you are a private detective **investigating your main character** by snooping around a room they're regularly in. Make a long list of the items your find. Pick ten or so items that you think are particularly revealing and deduce as much as you can about these character from what you've found. Make imaginative, comical, or bizarre leaps and avoid obvious deductions. (Don't forget to check under the bed, in the closet, etc...)
- Write a long list of **concrete nouns**. Then, besides each noun write 3-4 ideas that come to mind, without worrying about logic. Chose one of these combinations and try to arrange a scene around what you've written.
Pyjamas → Cozy, warm, drowsy
Scene: A woman settling in for the night in her flannel pyjamas to watch a movie, but is interrupted by an amateur burglar.
- *Scene SHOWS tension through actions, dialogue, and imagery:* Look through your story and **find paragraphs that summarize** action, emotions, or conversations. Using that as a guideline, **write a scene by vividly depicting** the action, showing (instead of telling about) the emotion, or writing out the conversation.

Weak Verbs, Over-use of Adjectives and Adverbs, or Wordiness

- **Enhancing Verb Choice:** Using a section of your piece, make a list of common or passive verbs. Note especially when forms of “to be” are used. Think of verbs that would be more descriptive, powerful, or active and see how that changes the sentence.
- **Passive Verbs:** words in which the action is being done to the subject, rather than the subject doing the action.
 - Passive Voice: The cat *was bitten* by the dog.
 - Active Voice: The dog *bit* the cat.
- **Cutting Adverbs:** Look through a section of your piece and make a list of adverb-verb combinations (“went quietly”) and come up with ways to condense them into one vivid verb (“sneaked”).
- **Cutting Adjectives:** Look through a section of your piece and make a list of adjectives. Next to them, write one or two verbs that match. Re-write some of the sentences using those verbs instead and see how that changes the passage.
 - The *defensive* child *sat* down. → The child *slouched*.
- **Adverbs:** Go through your story and stop at the first adverb. Think of the adverb at the beginning of a **simile**. Then merge the sentence and simile, removing the adverb completely. Continue finding adverbs and trying to replace them.
 - He sipped his tea nervously.
 - Nervously → nervous like a schoolboy.
 - He sipped his tea like a schoolboy.

Figurative Language

- Make a list of activities you or your character enjoys. Pick two of them. Make a list of the important steps of activity A. Make a list of tools and terms associates with activity B. Now **describe activity A in terms of activities B.** (How is writing a book like drumming?)
- **Surprising Descriptions:** Pick an object and come up with a handful of words to describe it. Then write the antonyms to these words. Using the second list, write a short paragraph about the chosen object.
- Write a short list of **objects** or **abstractions**. Chose one and write its **autobiography** considering childhood, adolescence, early and late adulthood, and ultimately death.

Sensory Details

- Imagine a familiar object. Write **five observations from each of the five senses** (25 observations in all). Imagine it in as many different contexts to help.
- Think of a place that’s associated with being very noisy. In a short passage, describe it **using the other four senses**. Similarly, pick a place associated with being very smelly and use the other 4 senses to describe it.
- **Character Appearance:** Focus completely on one individual and describe them using as many senses as you can. Avoid the generic (tall, blonde haired, etc) by finding distinctive, even unusual details.