



Expressive Subjects

**25 Writing Prompts
to Unleash Your Creativity**

Dr. Jon Parsons

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Jon Parsons, PhD



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“Once we believe in ourselves, we can risk curiosity, wonder,
spontaneous delight, or any experience that reveals the human spirit.”

– e. e. cummings

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Preface

How to Use This Book

SNOOPY FROM THE *PEANUTS* COMIC STRIP is a consummate writer, sitting on top of his doghouse in front of a typewriter, waiting for inspiration. All too often, he gets stuck in the opening paragraph of his novel. In one classic comic strip, Snoopy starts out with his usual sentence, “It was a dark and stormy night.” Lucy wanders into the scene and tells Snoopy this is a terrible opening line. “You need to start your story with ‘Once upon a time.’ All the best stories begin that way,” she says. And so Snoopy writes, “Once upon a time, it was a dark and stormy night.”

This book is not at all like Lucy. There will not be any simplistic silver bullet solutions to spawn the next Virginia Woolf or James Joyce. That’s not how writing works. But this is a book that could help Snoopy get past that first sentence, that first paragraph, and to get over the frustration of staring at the blank page that just seems allergic to text.

The pages that follow contain 25 writing prompts, all designed to help get the creative energies flowing. There is no single way to use this book—no specific order to follow. Just flip to a section that catches your fancy and give the writing prompt a try. Starting out, here are a few tips and pointers to keep in mind:

Find joy in writing. Many of the exercises in this book are decidedly light-hearted. Of course, lots of books are about serious topics and have a serious tone, and some of the writing prompts are indeed designed to inspire serious contemplation. Perhaps your

book is one of these, and serious topics need to be taken seriously. However, these writing prompts are a way to help you when you get stuck. The idea is to activate The Muse, to find a spark to reignite the creative fire, and sometimes the best way to do that is to step away from your specific topic and write something different and something fun. Writing need not be an arduous task, and finding joy in writing, even in writing something light-hearted, will carry over into your own project.

Keep a regular practice of writing and write something every day. Ideally, this writing is specific to your particular project, but that is not always practically possible. It is a busy world. People have bills to pay, kids to raise, and all the other details of life and work in a complex world. A regular practice of writing may be as simple as jotting down a haiku while you are on hold with the cable company, or keeping a journal of day-to-day events, or any kind of writing at all that means you put words to the page. That's where this book comes in: when you are stuck in writer's block on your specific book project, or when you may not have a lot of time, or when you just want a creative break. Most of the exercises in this book take just a few minutes and help you keep up that regular writing practice.

Creativity exists within constraint. There is an all-too-common misconception that the writing process happens by just sitting down and going at it, as though the words and the ideas are being channeled from some dimension of writerly nirvana, where prose flows from an eternal fountain. Sitting down and just hammering a book out may work for Hemingway, but for us mortal writers it is important to create a framework and a formal structure for writing. Your specific writing project needs scaffolding, even if that scaffolding is taken away at the end. The writing prompts in this book are likewise framed and structured in a formal approach to language that imposes constraint. These exercises are still free writing, at least in the sense that the particular content of the writing is entirely up to you. However, the form of the writing is set as a constraint within which you can be creative. Applying this same approach to form and content to your own book project will help you reach the finish line.

It takes a village. Writing is, in a practical sense, a solitary activity. You are the one putting the words on the page. You are the one with the ideas. You are the one whose name goes on the cover of the book. But there are no writers that ever, ever, write a book all on their own. Every writer needs someone to bounce ideas around with, every writer needs someone to take a look at the proofs, and every writer needs a support network to bring a book into being. Sometimes this can be family or friends, and sometimes this can be other writers, and sometimes this can be a good editor. It can be difficult to share writing with others, but getting straightforward and constructive feedback is the only way to improve and to get the project done. Reach out and share your writing, and be willing to have others share their writing for your feedback.

That's it. No more introductions, no more delay, no more Snoopy atop the doghouse. Flip to a page and get going. We are here for you whenever you need us, and welcome to your writerly community.

1

Short Prose

“Not that the story needs to be long,
but it will take a long while to make it short.”

— Henry David Thoreau

RANGING ANYWHERE FROM a single paragraph to a few thousand words, short prose is primarily distinguished by its brevity. Sometimes called the short-short story, the prose poem, the vignette, or the sketch, short prose has become increasingly popular in recent years. A brief prose work can create certain effects and concentrations of suggestiveness that a longer piece of writing cannot, and often in short prose the impact on the reader is more immediate and more intense than in a longer work. However, with this comes the challenge of being spare with words and details. As Thoreau tells us in the quotation above, by making the story shorter it may become more difficult to write. Some examples of famous short prose in English are Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour,” Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl,” and Samuel Beckett’s “Lessness.”

Because of the brevity of blog posts (or the brevity of attention span of blog readers) many bloggers have taken up short prose as a way to work expressively and connect with their audience. In general, blogging is a good way to help develop a regular practice of writing, and to work in a short form that can be extremely useful for getting the skeleton of a manuscript in place.

Most short prose is between 300 and 3,000 words, but short prose certainly does not need to be this length. I would contend that even a few sentences are a work of short prose, and in closing I offer, humbly, a very short prose piece as an example.

Lake Portage

Jed and I carried the canoe for a couple miles when we finally came to Lake Portage. It was disappointing to see it was all dried up—only beach rocks left over like once was an ocean rolling where we stood. The gulls flew overhead and there were crushed shells beneath our feet.

“I know,” said Jed. “I never really figured we’d catch any fish either. But the hike was worth it all the same.”

I thought it was a fairly fine line that Jed had cast, as I didn’t think he had a click to begin with, and there’s ten thousand clicks in a clue.

2

In Medias Res

NOT EVERY STORY NEEDS to start at the beginning, and sometimes it's useful for a storyteller to begin their tale in the middle of things. By starting a story with action or complication the audience is (hopefully) hooked from the outset and interested to discover how this initial action or complication came about, something a storyteller can fill in with back-story. This narrative technique is often called *in medias res*, a term coined by the Roman poet Horace, and can be found in many novels, poems, short stories, and films.

Perhaps the most famous example is *The Iliad* by Homer. The narrative begins in the middle of the Trojan War and complicates matters from the outset by telling of a division in the Greek camp—a quarrel between King Agamemnon and Achilles. It is then through back-story the reader learns the history of the principal characters, how they came to be at war with Troy, and the internal politics in the alliance camp that divides them.

You will probably recognize this same narrative technique in the *Star Wars* saga, which begins with episode IV as Darth Vader nears completion of the Death Star. The television program *Lost* can also be thought of as *in medias res*, with the plane crash in the first episode opening the action, and the back-story of the characters being explored as the series progresses. Each *Lost* episode also employs a kind of “in the middle of things” technique called a cold open. A cold opening provides a moment of drama or action, then

the rest of the episode explains that initial moment. This literary technique, of a cold open or *in medias res*, is a well-used method for framing and structuring narratives of all kinds and can be used for entire books, for chapters, and even for segments or paragraphs.

If you are interested in trying out a narrative that opens *in medias res*, don't worry about having to write an epic like *The Iliad* or a whole TV series like *Lost*. This literary technique also works well in shorter works like poems, drama, and short stories.

3

The Limerick

There once was a fly on the wall.
I wonder why didn't it fall?
Because its feet stuck
Or was it just luck
Or does gravity miss things so small?
(Author Unknown)

IN *THE BOOK OF FORMS*, Lewis Turco tells us that the limerick is “a quantitative accentual syllabic quintet turning on two rhymes: *aabba*.” This playful little form is probably easier to write than it is to decipher Turco’s rules. Here’s another example:

There was a young lady named Kite
Whose speed was much faster than light.
She left home one day
In a relative way
And returned on the previous night.
(Author Unknown)

If you read enough limericks you can intuit the rules of the form that Turco dissects in detail. The next one, borrowed from the

website “volweb,” has a few of the words left out, but you’ll probably be able to fill in the blanks.

There once was a pauper named Meg
Who accidentally broke her _____.
She slipped on the _____.
Not once, but thrice
Take no pity on her, I _____.
(Author Unknown)

You may also be interested to check out the online dictionary of limericks, “OEDILF” (www.oedilf.com). But be careful—it’s a vortex that you may never find your way out of!

An interesting aspect of the form of limericks is how they encourage salacious and naughty themes. The way the rhyme turns and the syllabic count carries an inherent humour. A challenge, if you are game, is to try and write a very serious or sombre limerick as an experiment in the interplay of form and content.

4

In the News

DO YOU EVER NOTICE when you look in the paper or turn on the five o'clock news that it's always stories of things going badly? It's always violence and crime, scandals and corruption, wars and fear. And while I think it's a good idea to be informed about world events and to know what is going on in your own community, I always wish there was some humour in reporting, something to lighten the otherwise gloomy and dismal mood. This writing prompt asks you to help address this shortcoming.

For the last few years I've been reading the satirical news site *The Onion* (I'm sure some of you will be familiar with their high-quality, hard-hitting investigative reporting). The writers on this website often take a story from the mainstream media and twist it into a joke, and sometimes they just flat out make up ridiculous stories and pass them off as news. So, following this lead, I've come up with a few headlines for news stories that never made the front page.

If you're interested in taking up this prompt, try to write a story to go along with a headline. Alternatively, you may want to write up a spoof version of a real news story or come up with your own make-believe headline.

ALIEN SPACECRAFT GIVEN \$250 PARKING TICKET,
BALMATRON SAYS “I’M NOT PAYING”

=====

GLOBAL WARMING LINKED TO BURPING,
BEER DRINKERS OF THE WORLD REACT WITH SHOCK

=====

PRIME MINISTER SAYS CIGARETTES “ARE JUST FINE”

=====

NEOLITHIC MAN FOUND FROZEN IN GLACIER,
REVIVED AFTER DEFROSTING
CAN’T GET ENOUGH HOT CHOCOLATE

=====

SCIENTIST DISCOVERS ULTIMATE SECRET
IN FORTUNE COOKIE

=====

GERBIL SAVES MAN FROM SHARK ATTACK

=====

ROSIE O’DONNELL ADMITS SHE’S ANNOYING

=====

POLICE LOOK FOR ENGLISH PROFESSOR SERIAL KILLER
CALLS HIMSELF THE “DECONSTRUCTIONIST”

=====

=====

ZOMBIE OUTBREAK REPORTED IN TORONTO

=====

MCDONALD'S GOES VEGAN
COWS BREATHE SIGH OF RELIEF

=====

ATLANTIS FOUND NEAR GREENLAND
PRESIDENT: "WE WERE HERE ALL ALONG"

=====

GOVERNMENT TO INCREASE ARTS FUNDING

=====

ANIMALS ESCAPE FROM ZOO
LAST SEEN IN LAS VEGAS

=====

5

Poetic Inquiry

POETIC INQUIRY IS NOT exactly a form of writing as such, but rather an approach to exploring and communicating ideas about something. To do poetic inquiry is to notice, to listen, and to be present with the subject, but it is not only writing poetry. It can involve photography, drawing, music, dance, writing, etc., or a combination of different artistic mediums.

Poetic inquiry is about unsettling what is often taken as commonplace, allowing a creator to re-imagine a particular situation or subject and look at it in a different light. The particular situation or subject does not have to be profound, and often insights can be gained from unsettling and re-imagining mundane, everyday things. The example I offer below—going to the laundromat—would probably be considered quite mundane to most, but it is a perfectly good subject for poetic inquiry and made me reconsider this apparently ordinary event.

If you're interested in giving this a try, I would encourage you to work with your own experience, with the simple things you do and take for granted. It could be taking a bus ride or going to the grocery store; it could be going for a walk in the forest or making dinner; any subject or situation you want. Ask yourself, what about the subject calls out for notice, and how can you represent it artistically? What other ideas are brought up by being present with

your subject? There doesn't have to be any conclusion or solution and you may be left with many more questions than answers.

A Trip to the Laundromat



empty

they look to be waiting for someone (anyone) to put in a coin
to turn them on

I don't mind being here but there's usually company

so it's strange to be alone with these machines

I wonder if they are watching me



I thought change comes only from within (who knew there was a machine for that too?). I put in a \$10 bill and the coins clatter down, some spilling out and

f

a

l

l

i

n

g

to the floor . . . rolling around my feet



The coins go into the slot and say *clink-clink* in a metallic accent.

(If at first your coin doesn't go down and you need to press the "return coin" button, scratch it on the metal panel beside the slot and give it another try. It may be a superstition, but I think it allows the machine to know the coin a little better . . . something like a first date)

Set the dial to "bright colours" OR ELSE! (Made that mistake before.) The water floods in and the machine comes to life, seeming somehow satisfied. Through the window I see the clothes go

EXPRESSIVE SUBJECTS

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Now wait. Wait more.

If you are thirsty, you can put some coins in the Coke machine



While I wait, a man shows up. He has clothes in one of the washing machines and is going to put them in a dryer.

He opens the door of the washer and notices that his clothes are soaking wet. The water and soap did not drain.

Perhaps he overloaded the machine. The machines don't like when you do that.

He swears under his breath as he puts them into another washing machine.

He has to pay for a whole load, even though he only needs a rinse and a spin cycle. He has to wait another half hour.

Does this man run the machine

or

does this machine run the man?



“BUZZZZZZZZ!” says the washer

put clothes in dryer

more coins

press button

smell of fabric softener

perforated metal cylinder

more coins

press button

wait

wait

wait

encased in steel (cosmos swirling) glass

is a world

waiting to be discovered

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jon Parsons is a writer originally from St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador. He has a PhD in English and has helped hundreds of students improve their writing by encouraging them to foster a regular writing practice. He has taught many creative writing courses and hosted writing retreats. He loves working with new and emerging writers to improve their writing and publish their books.

Check out Jon's other book *Everyday Dissent: Politics and Resistance in Newfoundland and Labrador* and connect with him on his website:

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Interested in joining a writer mentorship program and focused book writing courses? Check out Bookends Writing Academy:

www.bookendswriting.ca