

Writing Exercises

Christmas

Write a Christmas poem or story, fact or fiction, and tell us about 'The best Christmas ever ...' or 'The worst Christmas ever ...' If you wish you can choose another festival that falls between December 1st and 31st. Max. 750 words for your story, 24 lines for your poem.

Expertise

What expertise do you have that you could share with your own created character? For instance, in the film *Witness*, Harrison Ford hides with the Amish and helps them build a barn – he is a qualified carpenter in real life, and his expertise adds 'meat' to the character he plays.

Which of your skills could you pass on to a hero or heroine, or to some important supporting role in a story or play? Write a short scene – description or dialect as you prefer – where the character is using them. Such detail can make a character more convincing, and allows readers to learn something they didn't know.

Keep it to a max. reading time of 5 minutes.

Special things

Wander around your home and check out the things that make it special – the nursing chair you bought when you were expecting your first baby, the graduation photo on the wall, your grand-daughter's painting fastened to the fridge with a Smiley magnet. Explain the meaning that object has for you and what story it tells? Please share that with us now.

(Max. 200 words.)

Pets Etcetera

Do you have a pet? Live on a farm? Watch birds from your window? Think of any animal you have closely observed, and that you think you have some knowledge of. Describe it in language that is factual and non-anthropomorphic. (i.e. as an animal, not as a 'pretend' human being.) Now take a closer look at the animal under scrutiny to check the accuracy of your observation in writing against the animal's reality. 200 words max. – poetry or prose.

Child and Adult

Take a scene from your childhood that involved an adult. Write the scene first from the child's point of view, using third person narrative ('he' or 'she'.) Now write it again from the adult's point of view, using first person narrative. Consider carefully what difference this makes to the narrative, and where the difficulties occur in matching the two accounts. Max. 200 words.

Writing for a Magazine

Go to a newsagent and buy a copy of any magazine you'd like to write for. Determine what they publish, and what they might buy from a freelancer – you! Now come up with THREE ideas of articles or stories you could sell to them.

A Narrative with Nosh

You have been asked to contribute something to a fundraising cookbook to be called A Very Fine Spread. Pick a meal or some individual recipe that has a particular significance for you – e.g. baking Anzac biscuits with Grandma, cooking spag bog at college on a primus stove, or baking a birthday cake for the person you love most in the world. Story, poem or anecdote, comical or curious - set down your outline now for your 'narrative with nosh'. Max. of 500 words for the story, and make the recipe understandable.

Writing a Rant

1. Consider the things that get up your nose and drive you wild.
2. Pick that which you have the strongest feelings about.
3. Take 15 minutes to write about it. Don't hold back. Dip your pen into vitriol and drive it across the paper without regret, remorse or rue.
4. Allow for no more than three minutes' reading time. (That's about one and a half sides of writing on an A4 pages.)
5. Invest both your writing of the rant AND your reading of it with passion.
6. Don't worry about being politically correct. You are under the command of a superior officer here. Like the SS, you are just following orders ...

Nude Poser

You have been asked to pose in the nude for \$2000. You're a bit strapped for cash so you decide to say Yes. Now write four letters – max. 75 words each - as follows:

1. Letter to the editor of the magazine, accepting the offer and setting conditions, if any,
2. Letter to your significant other, who you know is going to be hopping mad, explaining why.
3. Letter to your spiritual leader – priest, rabbi, imam – confessing and begging for forgiveness.
4. Letter to your parents explaining why you are going against your upbringing.

Mum or Dad

Describe your own parent – max. 250 words - it doesn't matter which, and then describe another father or mother who is purely imaginary. Let your audience or readers guess which is the real person. (A Roger Hall exercise.)

New Year

Your writing exercise for January is to imagine the perfect writing situation for you and describe it in as much detail as possible. Where is it? What time of day? What sounds do

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you hear? What objects surround you? What are you using to write? What can you see when you look up from your writing? How do you feel? Try to explain why this situation would be comforting and productive for you. Max. 500 words.

Personal Ad

Write a personal ad. in up to 50 words summarising yourself and your life at present, and saying one or two things you'd like to change: not another person, but perhaps a different quality to your life, or some object you'd like to own, or a feeling you'd like to experience.

For example: 35 year old romantic male, reasonably happily married, enjoys music, a sense of mischief, but has miserable weekends, now seeks comfort from either a new house or a clearer idea of the future.

Or, if you prefer, consider how you would advertise yourself in a lonely hearts column. Think about it as introducing yourself as a character in a story that could become a romance or a thriller or a contemporary tale of morality. Remember, you're paying for every word, so keep it short and snappy.

Example

Over the hill ... to new horizons? Female who has lived not wisely but too well is hoping for new enlightenment in her Third Age. To find fame & fortune alone or with others, without forfeiture of friends, family or frolics.

Hat, Train and Water

Write a story of 100 words that includes the words 'hat' and 'train' and 'water'. Yes, it is possible to get it all in. Here's an example:

Daily she rode the train across the narrow gorge, normally a welcome break between the heavy demands of an abusive husband and a domineering son.

Today she was trapped with the obscenely fat man, puffing his cigar in spite of the No Smoking sign, and talking non-stop.

When the train jerked to a halt halfway over, he trampled her feet to get to the window, thrusting out his head, grumbling loudly about incompetence. Slyly she leaned across and released the handle. His own weight catapulted him down into the water. Calmly she tossed his hat out and closed the door.

Duet in dialogue.

Describe an incident between two people - a quarrel between lovers, perhaps, or between drivers who've crashed into each, or an anxious mother and a naughty child - entirely in dialogue. Make all responses between them direct speech only, as in a play.

Example

He: We've run out of pickled onions again.

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She: I've stopped buying them, Edmund.

He: But I love pickled onions.

She: I don't.

He: And there's no fig rolls either. You always buy me fig rolls.

She: Not any more.

He: We've got Tim-Tams, I see!

She: Yes, I'm partial to a Tim-Tam.

He: Well, that doesn't seem quite fair to me.

She: Life isn't fair, Edmund. I thought you'd have learned that by now.

He: And why didn't we get the Sunday News?

She: Because I changed it to the Weekend Herald.

He: Change it back.

She: No, Edmund. I've decided to spend my money on what I like, since you seem to do the same. Here are some bills I've been saving for you.

I never had any of those flowers or that perfume, and I certainly don't remember you taking me to the Café Royal for dinner. Good night, Edmund. Your bed's made up in the spare room.

Colour me red!

Come up with 25 synonyms/images for the colour red, e.g. apple, bullfighter's cape, fingernails, rose-coloured glasses, ketchup, etc. Although this is a kind of a cool exercise in itself, don't stop there. Try to use all, or most of the words in a piece of writing, whether poetry or prose.

If you liked this exercise, try it again with the other two primary colours: yellow and blue.

A pride of lions? A crash of rhinos?

What were the wordsmiths drinking when they came up with these terms? Sounds like anyone can write these things. And at OjoHaven.com they did. Witty readers suggested their own words that describe groups. Read a few then come up with one or two of your own:

- An absence of waiters
- An attitude of teenagers
- A brace of orthodontists
- A clutch of car mechanics
- A drove of cabbies
- A fidget of altar boys
- A flood of plumbers
- A giggle of little girls
- A quarrel of lawyers
- A groan of puns

Your turn!

How do you write?

Every writer is different, and so too, is every writer's writing process. Writing about and talking about your processes with one another can help you think about your own process more concisely and learn from each other's strategies. That's one reason for belonging to a writer's group.

So think about a piece of writing that you felt really good about – a writing success story.

Write about the process you used to craft the piece, the feedback you received on it, and the feeling of writing success. Why do you think the piece was successful? What was good about it? Who can you learn from that success will help you in future writing?

Good Advice

Start a 10-minute writing activity with this sentence, “The most important piece of writing advice I ever received was ...”

Now go back and rewrite it from yourself as a famous author somewhere in the future to a young and aspiring writer whom you want to benefit from those same good words. 150 words max.

First night away from home

Write 500 words about the first time you spent the night away from home. Write real. Later, you can go back and rewrite it as it might have turned out – basing something fanciful on what is factual.

Sense Impressions

Write lines based on any of these, some of these, or all of these as ‘sense impressions’:

- a glass of water reflecting the sun;
- a river babbling along in the sunshine;
- a mirror reflecting light on a bright day

Don’t mention by name the glass, the river or the mirror. Express the meaning by sense in two or three lines or phrases only.

Now describe the shattering of the glass or mirror, or the brook turning into a cataract.

Music can be heard over the breaking glass ... how would you contrast these two different sounds as they come at you?

Now the wind is blowing strongly – express that in one line.

The wind dies down, and stops – all is silent. Express that in a single phrase.

Flash fiction

Can you write a story of less than 300 words – flash fiction or a short short story – using words of one syllable only? When you have done so, consider what this does to the pace and energy of your narrative.

Example

It was a still dark night, the kind of night when you think of all your clothes still out there in the yard and how the frost has come and it’s as black as coal and you just know you don’t

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want to go out there and bring them in. You glance at Frank, who sleeps the sleep of the just. No good to wake him up and ask him to fish a few things off the line.

You can't wake Frank up when he's had good sex. You smile. You had good sex, too, but you're wide-eyed and watchful. Oh well. You'll have to run out there in your jim-jams when you wake up - or go to work nude.

Ha! That's a thought. You see in your mind's eye the face of your boss when his eyes first light on you. He thinks, "I've tried to get in that girl's pants for weeks and here she is, stripped and bare."

You grin. But he won't hack it, will he, your boss, if you do turn up like that? He's a man who's all talk, no action. And where has your mind gone to? You'd just as soon go to work bare than bring the clothes in and press them. What, waste that time you need for tea and toast?

You know you'll do what you do each day. Wear what's near to hand (on the floor) and not too creased or soiled. You'll put it on, spray some scent on wrists and knees, slash bright red lip gloss on your mouth and run for the bus, miss it, get to work late and flirt with the boss.

Get his hopes up, and make sure he won't have time to say, "Mo, you're fired."

Letter to the Editor

Write a letter to the editor of any local paper on a subject you care deeply about. Make it concise, clear and compelling. Let's see how many get published. Max. 120 words.

Love You ... Loathe You

As a beginning phrase, choose either 'The relative I liked most was...' or 'The relative I most loathed was ...' and explain why in 10 sentences.

Making Non-sense

Here's an exercise to lure you away from the need for everything in a paragraph or poem to make sense, and towards the pure, mysterious, playful qualities of words. Take a paragraph or poem of yours or someone you admire and remove all the nouns. Now take out a good dictionary and look up each word you removed and replace it with words that are seven entries away from the original word. Seven entries away is not far; often the replaced word will share the same root as the original word. You're allowed to change tenses, to make a singular word plural, etc. - and when editing you may even change the sequence of things. This exercise directs you to an unfamiliar vocabulary that breaks you of a dependence on the same words used again and again - and offers the wonderful element of surprise.

Chekhov's Notebook

Dramatist Anton Chekhov began by writing short stories. Like most writers, he kept a notebook of ideas, observations, character notes and descriptions. But he said he wouldn't use 'such images and scenes, which are precious to me and which for some reason I carefully saved up and put aside'. This self-imposed restriction meant he wrote sparse

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narratives, and could finish a story quickly – usually in 24 hours.

We've reworked this for you to write a 2–page story in one sitting. Start with a title, a first line and a character, e.g.

Title: Closing the Book

First line:

At 39 he still had the kind of good looks a man inherits from a pretty mother.

Character: Fading charmer and petty criminal.

(No, you can't use these – make up your own.)

To do this exercise properly, you mustn't care how it turns out. Rules: Write from memory only, without notes. End at the bottom of page 2 no matter where you're at. Do the story in three 5-minute intervals – beginning, middle and end – with a 5-minute break in between each section.

Time limit: 30 minutes

Exercise in Mood

The object of this exercise is to take an object, and let it carry changing moods between the same two characters in the same location. Let what you choose – bag, vase, lamp, or as below, a wooden African mask, become the symbol of the swing from one mood to the other.

Example:

The Mask (i)

She had made it the centrepiece of the room's décor. Serenely it smiled down upon them from the rag-rolled wall, the first thing she saw when she entered the room, the last thing she glanced at before she switched off the light and went to bed.

Sylvia particularly relished how on a clear bright day the shadows would darken in the brackets round the mouth, making it seem as if he – she always thought of the anonymous god as he – were broadly grinning. His white teeth of illegal ivory would gleam and his obsidian eyes would seem to wink in complicity at what she did and what she thought.

Often she placed a bowl of fruit or a vase of flowers beneath the mask. Weekly Sylvia would rub down the bold ebony face with a soft oiled cloth. When she finished she would tap his cheek with her fingers as if he was a favoured son. She stroked his hooked nose 'for luck' before embarking on any project, laughing as she did so at her own folly.

And she was lucky in those days. Sylvia had it all – work she enjoyed, a husband she adored, a child.

The Mask (ii)

They had already shared out the furniture between them and today they were moving on to CDs, DVDs, pictures and ornaments. The cardboard boxes labelled 'Jack' and 'Sylvia' were filling up rapidly. Jack had brought his sister along – as referee, thought Sylvia bitterly. Lillian sat quietly by and ignored the persistent bickering between husband and wife as they bargained who would end up with what.

At last they were done, except for the mask. Everything was taped and labelled and ready to go.

"You haven't been looking after this, Sylvia. Look, the wood's beginning to crack."

"So what?"

"I gave this to you for our first anniversary."

"Yes. No doubt she helped you choose it." Behind her the mask seemed to mimic the malevolent grimace Sylvia made as she hissed the words.

Jack sighed. "There is no she, Sylvia. You know that. I've told you over and over."

She was silent, feeling her pain. Then she muttered, "There's no luck in it any more."

"What? I can't believe you said that. Surely you're not that superstitious?"

She was staring at the mask now and her whole posture was one of defeat. She moved closer and put out a hand to touch the brooding face then quickly withdrew it as if she expected to be bitten. The teeth were stained and yellow and Sylvia had never noticed before how pointed they were.

It seemed to her the black wood had absorbed all the light in the room. The eyes were hooded and reptilian and as she turned back to face Jack she could swear they flashed bright malice at her. Sylvia wondered idly when she had given up placing gifts of fruit and flowers beneath the mask?

Before or after Joshua died?

Write a Love Poem

Whatever love is – and Prince Charles seems finally to have defined it with Camilla to his own satisfaction in his 3rd age – please make it the topic of a love poem no longer than 24 lines. Your own interpretation of 'whatever love is' will do, and you can choose your own form – rhymed or unrhymed. Make us happy and bring your poem along for sharing at either of the February meetings.

Call My Bluff

From your dictionary, choose a word – outrageous, strange, unfamiliar – not a word in everyday use. Write the word on a sheet of paper and pass it to the person on your left.

When you receive the word from the person on your right, make up a meaning for it. If you should happen to know the real meaning, make up a better meaning. Write your meaning on a sheet of paper and pass it to the person on your left.

When you receive the word and its meaning from the person on your right, read both and use the word in a line or phrase of poetry (with its stated meaning.) Pass on to the person on your left.

When you receive the paper from the person on your right, look up the real meaning of the

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word and add that. Pass on to the person on your left.

When you receive the paper from the person on your right, read the new meaning and use the word again in a line or phrase of poetry (with its real meaning.) Pass on to the person on your left.

Going round the circle, read your page aloud to the group.

Time limit: 20 minutes.

The Sun and Moon Game

Team A draw or cut out a big sun on a large sheet of paper you can pin up, or on a blackboard or whiteboard. You might like to cut a sun out from gold foil beforehand.

Write a word in the centre of the sun that is simple and somehow related to an idea presented to you by the thought of the sun.

The sun shows us what things are really like, so you are going to collect words that mean the same. So each member of the group now adds a ray to the sun by drawing a line out from that first word and adding a SYNONYM – continue around the group, or take extra turns if you are few in number, until you have as many words as possible that are close in meaning to the original word.

Team B draw or cut out a big moon on a large sheet of paper you can pin up, or on a blackboard or whiteboard. You might like to cut a moon out from silver foil beforehand.

Write a word in the centre of the moon that is simple and somehow related to an idea presented to you by the thought of the moon.

Things look different in the dark so you are going to collect words that mean the opposite of the original word. So each member of the group now adds a moonbeam from the moon by drawing a line out from that first word and adding an ANTONYM – continue around the group, or take extra turns if you are few in number, until you have as many words as possible that are opposite in meaning to the original word.

You may find a thesaurus useful for this game. Time limit: 15 minutes.

R.I.P.

How would you like to be remembered after you're gone. You have 25 minutes to write your own obituary. Max. 200 words.

The Five Senses

red blue green

yellow brown orange

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pink white black

Write five sentences about your allocated colour. Each sentence is based on one of the five senses: sight ... sound ... taste ... smell ... touch. You must include each sense in one sentence that invokes the colour you are writing about without once naming it. For example: if you were writing about purple you might mention watching the evening sky at that moment when blue is changing into black, a lover reading aloud erotic poetry while his beloved eats grapes, the scent of pansies in the rain, and her gown of royal velvet. Try it and see how you get on. 10 minutes.

Trumpets

Pretend it's you that the marketing department is building its latest campaign for. What is your USP (Unique Selling Point)? What are your special features? What makes you irresistible to the consumer?

In 100 words max., write an ad selling yourself as if you were a product or a service.

Valentine

Change your gender on paper and write a love letter. Time limit: 20 minutes.

Questions Writers Ask

Please consider the following and come up with at least one or two questions for each category. Don't worry too much about being original – the idea is to get a bunch of questions, the ones you most want answered, and turn them into actual documents. We will then use them as the basis of a survey we can send out to actual people for response, reaction and—hopefully, a reply! Let's assume our focus is New Zealand! We are, after all, New Zealand writers.

(You might like to split in four groups for this, or ask your questions over four weeks.) What would YOUR OWN QUESTION be as one of:

- “20 questions I'd like to ask a literary agent.”
- “20 questions I'd like to ask a magazine editor.”
- “20 questions I'd like to ask a publisher.”
- “20 questions I'd like to ask a bookseller.”

You can ask as many questions as you like. They will be collated and used as the basis of ongoing research to understand what it is that these important people in the book trade want from us as creative writers.

This is the Way to Do It!

Go and watch someone doing something familiar, like making pancake batter or fixing a bike chain that's come off.

Choose a simple and basic task, but please: choose something where you're sure the person

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knows what they're doing! The task should be straightforward.

Now write down without comment exactly what they're doing, a single sentence for each action that comprises the overall task.

Example

Jenny has taken a large bowl. In it she places milk, flour, eggs and a pinch of salt. Now she is using a hand-held beater to mix them all together.

(And so on and so forth.)

Don't concern yourself with why your 'expert' is doing this or that. Add no comments as to how s/he is tackling the job. Simply concentrate on what you see the person doing and record it step by step.

200 words max. And the simpler the task, the fewer the words ...