

*Writing in Five:*  
*Prompts to Get You Moving*



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# *Writing in Five:*

## *Prompts to Get You Moving*

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### *Why Prompts?*



That's a good question. Who needs more prompts? There are many writing prompts around, and when we decided to write this ebook, we had to ask ourselves that question. We use prompts in our teaching and post a weekly prompt on our website each Tuesday. Based on comments from students and readers, we've seen how a different way to think about a life issue or a fresh idea on a topic seemingly unrelated to our writing is often the catalyst for getting our pens moving on the paper or our fingers flying over the computer keyboard. Some days we all get stuck, and a writing prompt comes in handy at that point.

When you need a little nudge in your writing, we hope you'll find these prompts helpful. They are taken from our lives and our thoughts, and we love sharing them with you. If any of these are especially helpful, please let us know so that we can develop more in a similar vein.

#1

My partner works on a desk he made from a wood door and six metal legs left over from another project. Whatever is under that desk--a piece of paper dropped, small dirt clods that fell from his shoes, an overflowing trash basket--are not easily seen.

My desk, on the other hand, is made from a large piece of etched glass that I bought for \$10 from a hotel that went out of business. The glass is supported by two old filing cabinets that I've spray painted black with my favorite Rust-oleum Hammered Finish. I see everything under the desk--my legs, my shoes, my mother's legacy brass waste basket, the cords to the surge-protected power strip, the wooden floor. In short, if it is under my desk I see it.



*Prompt:*

Most of us put a psychological barrier between ourselves and others that is similar to my partner's solid oak desk. Others can see the surface, but that's all. If we keep the surface complicated enough or interesting enough few bother to go deeper, to seek to understand the "real" us.

A. Write for five minutes about ways that you put up a barrier to the real you. How do you make yourself opaque to others?



B. Imagine, as you write for the second five minutes, that you have replaced that psychological barrier with my clear glass desk. Now others can see below your surface.

Write about one trait you have that most others don't see. What is the trait? How do you hide it? Why do you hide it? What would happen if others saw this part of you?

- C. If this inspires you, write about the person you'd like to see this trait in you. Who is the person? Why do you keep this trait hidden from that person? Describe the other person.

## HINT

Reach deep inside yourself when you write, but don't stop to edit or be critical of what your words look like. This writing prompt is just meant to get you writing and thinking about your life.



#2

Just outside my window, I see a carved teak spirit house that was made in Bali, dark

bristle fibers of coconut husks form its multi-inch thick roof. A few weeks ago, the roof had that shaggy look I associate with early summertime. In the spring, the local bluejay favors the roof material for its nest. I see the jay pecking and pulling on the material and then flying off only to return for more minutes later. Once the mating season is over and the nests built, I go

out and give the roof its annual haircut, trimming the edges until they are once more even. Fortunately, the husk material is abundant so the integrity of the spirit house is never threatened.

- Prompt:* A. Have you ever wished you had a trait that someone else has? Perhaps the person is generous, empathetic or happy. Maybe the person knows how to make you feel good about yourself.



Whatever the trait, let yourself be like my jay. Take as much of the trait as you need and imagine incorporating it into your own personality. Then write how you would handle a situation from your past differently now that you have this desirable trait. Write for five minutes.

B. If this inspires you, write for an additional five minutes about the benefactor of this marvelous trait. Assume this is the person you admire and she (or he) has generously given you as much of the trait as you want. Who is this person? Why do you want the trait from this person?

## HINT

At the end of your writing, immediately move to a vignette or chapter you've been working on or want to write for your memoir. Keep the flow of words moving.



#3

We had house guests recently and took them over to Santa Cruz for the day. The weather was perfect, neither too warm nor too chilly, although the wind had a bit of an aggressive attitude. We drove onto the pier and ate lunch at our favorite restaurant with its second-floor location that provides an excellent view of the waves on one side and the famous Beach

Boardwalk on the other. Viewing sea lions was our anticipated dessert treat.

Over the past forty years, we've taken children and visitors to this wharf to peer down through large openings in the pier that let us enjoy the lazy behavior of the massive sea lions. These creatures heave themselves out of the water and onto crossbeams connecting the pilings. The restless ones soon slip into the ocean and resurface, flipping their tail against the surface of the water to help propel them back onto a crossbeam. Their barking sounds reverberate thanks to the water. We always hear them before we see them.



This time, as we made our way along the pier, we heard little noise. Along with other casual visitors, we looked into each of the openings and did finally see one sea lion. Assuming they were out for lunch, we made our way back to the car, disappointed that these impressive mammals weren't around to show off. Then we remembered that the last time we were in Santa Cruz, almost a year ago, we found a number of sea lions

lounging on a rubber raft tethered to the wharf. With our friends following behind, we made our way to the edge of the pier and found all the sea lions happily ensconced on a new wooden dock, built just for them.



I love watching these creatures. Their motions and postures are the essence of the scene. One liked to hold her head high, reaching for the warmth of the sunshine. Every once in a while, she'd open one eye, look around, and then close it. Were we keeping an eye on her or was she watching us?

*Prompt:*

- A. Think of one person you will include in your memoir. Write about the motions and postures of that person. What does he or she do that is distinctive? Write for five minutes, describing the actions of the hands or the head or even the feet. What physical behaviors, not features, make this person unique?
- B. If this prompt inspires you, then next write about your own motions (twirling your hair around your index finger when you're nervous; drumming your index and middle finger on the nearest piece of furniture when you're unhappy) and postures (slouching when you don't want to be seen, sucking in your stomach if there is an attractive man nearby). It is the small details you add to your memoir that create you as a memorable person.

## HINT

Memoirists rarely think to describe themselves. Just because you know yourself doesn't mean your readers do. Make yourself as vivid, even more vivid, than others in your story.



#4

Sometimes a writing prompt is suspended in time and place. Years from now, this may seem like an odd one.

But for those of us who saw the footage of the Deepwater Horizon in flames and who followed the BP Gulf oil spill of 2010, we will always remember checking the Internet for current information, watching the nightly news, and

even talking with friends affected by this massive oil disaster that, by some calculations, released more than 200 million gallons of crude into the ocean.



Looking at photos of the BP Gulf oil spill, I was amazed at how a fairly small escape point could end up with a surface area of more than 2500 square miles. When I closed my eyes, I tried to imagine my words spreading across a sea of paper.

*Prompt:* A. Think of a time when you were especially angry or unimaginably happy. Both are strong emotions.

Relocate that feeling inside you. Then set your timer (or note the time) for exactly five minutes. Pretend there is an unexpected opening at the source of your feeling. Just as if you are having your own personal emotion spill, write as if nothing could stop you. It doesn't matter if you write well. Just write. Let the words gush out. Make your pen or your fingers on the keyboard keep moving. Don't stop to think.

B. Then after five minutes, try to cap your words for two minutes. Keep the emotion inside just as if a large dome were resting over the opening. Let the pressure build. Then, quickly remove the imaginary cap and let your words and emotions erupt again for another five minutes.

C. Look back now at how your thoughts and feelings have spread out on the page or pages. Read what you wrote and see if any of this emotional content has been left out of your memoir. Just beginning your memoir? Then now is the time to consider that emotions are an important part of your story. Many writers keep emotions buried and as a result the people they write about seem two dimensional. A free-writing exercise is not meant to produce perfect prose. However, it might be a source of ideas for writing about emotion.

# HINT

Read what you have written out loud. Go to a room where no one will hear you, if it makes you feel more comfortable. Hearing our words helps us understand what works and what doesn't work.



#5

I've been reading *Wikinomics* by Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams.

The subtitle: *How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything* got me thinking about ways in which collaboration might be used by memoir writers. "Come on now," you're probably thinking. "A memoir is about me." And you'd be right. But give me a

couple more minutes. As you may know, Kendra Bonnett and I wrote the collective memoir, *Rosie's Daughters: The "First Woman To" Generation Tells Its Story*. Mass collaboration? Hardly. However, more than 100 women agreed to share their life stories with us, and I view that as one form of collaboration.

There are many other examples. Do you know the memoir *Satellite Sisters' UnCommon Senses*? Five sisters decided to write a collective memoir. They choose five themes--their own five senses: A Sense of Connection, A Sense of Self, a Sense of Humor, A Sense of Adventure, A Sense of Direction. These became the chapters, and each sister wrote about all the themes. They didn't have to agree or disagree because each reflected on what aspects of her childhood and siblingness contributed to that sense in her.

A friend, Betty Auchard, in writing her second memoir, asked her brother to come and spend time with her so that the two of them could remember many of the details of their early life. Betty felt she would benefit from hearing more stories about their dysfunctional family that

led to the years that their parents put the two siblings in an orphanage. The name of the orphanage became the title of her memoir, *The Home for the Friendless*. Betty did not relinquish her role as author by involving her brother. Instead she used the collaboration to write a more powerful story.



Here's a third example, to show the wide range of collaborative work. Leslie Gilbert-Lurie wrote *Bending Toward the Sun: A Mother and Daughter Memoir* with Rita Lurie, her mother. Leslie's own story is bound up in her mother's life of hiding from the Nazis in an attic in Poland for almost two years. Although her brother and mother both died in that attic, Rita survived and eventually had a family of her own in California. But even in survival, she passed on the emotions of fear, apprehension, and guilt to her daughter. Then Leslie, not realizing she had acquired these emotional responses to life's everyday situations from her mother, passed them on to her own daughter. The memoir is the result of a decade-long collaboration between these two amazing women who explored how the experience of one generation is passed along to the next and the next until an awareness is sought and found.

*Prompt:* A. Consider small-scale collaboration in memoir writing and how even that might change the process for you. As a prompt, think of a family story from your childhood, or a trip you took with your partner, or a special story when one of your children was young. Instead of writing the story alone, as we usually do, ask



another person to write the vignette with you. One person might contribute details while the other one writes. Perhaps each of you write the same story but from two perspectives. There are many ways to use collaboration to enhance your story and make it better.

Here are a few suggestions:

1. Make sure everyone involved agrees to spend the necessary time together (in person or on the

- phone) to discuss the story.
2. Have a plan of what to do if anyone involved doesn't provide the material by an agreed on date.
  3. Be respectful of the other's opinions and memories. Rarely do two people remember a story in exactly the same way.
  4. Have fun.

## HINT

Of course, collaboration doesn't work for all stories. However, it might give you a new experience that will carry over into your solo writing.



#6

“Step back to write up close.”

Let me give you the background for that statement. We've just put our home of the last thirteen years on the market. Because I'm a writer, I told the broker that I'd give her suggestions for the description of the place. The features are easy --

number of bedrooms, number of bathrooms, guest cottage, amount of land, total number of rooms, etc. Anyone can put together the list of features.

I wanted to write about the benefits of this property. I thought that would be fairly easy to do. We live on 10 acres in the country and have savored every one of the 4772 days (and counting) we've been here. But the more I wrote, the more I saw my problems.



First, a 2-sided 11 x 17 brochure with many photos would only have room for a limited number of words.

Second, even pockets full of words wouldn't necessarily mean that a potential buyer would understand the incredible impact of the property.

It was precisely because I am so close to the meaning of this place that I couldn't develop a clear theme and message. Awareness of this caused me to step back. I needed to give up many of the small details, the little pleasures, in order to share the essence of the home and land with potential buyers. I needed to see the land as they might see it and help them to imagine more--all within the constraints of a four-page brochure. Then, once I decided on the image I wanted to build with words, I could go back and provide details about a smaller set of points that would create the message.



I finally was able to do that -- to take someone on a walk through this place in a way that highlighted the benefits of living here. I may not get a brochure that looks the way I've written mine. The broker will have her own opinions. But the experience helped me focus on a situation that most memoir writers have. We know the story

so intimately that it is difficult to find the appropriate theme and message that will enable a reader to “see” the life we have experienced.

*Prompt:*

- A. Think of one event in your life. It can even be something recent and doesn't need to be something you intend to include in your memoir. For example, think of a family holiday. Sit for a few minutes and imagine it as if the event is a movie replaying in your head. Think about the planning for the event or perhaps just skip to the beginning of the time or holiday.

Try to remember all the details -- the people, why everyone was together, when the event took place, who said what, the location, etc. For five minutes, make a list of all the details you can remember.

- B. Without looking at the list of details, stop and think about the meaning of the event. Why did you choose this specific one? What does it show about your life or about the people in the event? Why is it important? Focus on what you want someone else to know about the event. Do you want a person to experience the happiness you felt? The scariness? Do you want to convey the sense of love? Or perhaps a discovery of low self-esteem? In other words, what is the theme that you want to make sure the reader knows about the event? Write for five minutes about the theme. Hold the reader in mind. Try talking to the reader and explain why you want to share this particular story.

## HINT

When you write, you should be aware of your theme and message. A theme is universal--coming of age, survival, spiritual journey, mother-daughter relationship, etc. The message is specific--what you want the reader to take away from your story.



#7

This afternoon I looked out the kitchen window and saw the largest California Mule Deer buck I've ever seen on our property, much larger than one we named Buckminster Fuller (of geodesic dome fame) and called Bucky. When a male deer does show up here, an unusual event in its own right, he is almost always alone. But part of today's treat was that the doe and new fawn arrived moments later. The three grazed peacefully for a short time in an open area. Then the buck moved on to the olive trees, standing on his hind legs trimming an olive tree while the doe and fawn cleaned the ground of *Grevilea Robusta* leaves. We joke that the deer are our gardeners.

I may never see the three of them together again. Yet, I'll always remember how special they made this afternoon, a little moment captured in the scrapbook of my mind with pictures and words.



*Prompt:*

A. Think of someone who was only briefly in your life but who made a difference or gave you a new perspective.

An aunt you only saw a few times? Someone you sat next to on the bus one day? A childhood friend who moved away after a few months? Write for five minutes about the person. Give a physical description as well as the who, the role, and how you knew the person.

B. Now write for five minutes on why you remember that person. Was it something she or he said to you? Was it a kind gesture? Was there a connection that made you more aware of others? Perhaps the dialogue is what you remember. Perhaps it is the emotions of the moment. Try to remember the essence of the experience and write about that.

# HINT

Describing the person first may help you remember details of the special moment. Don't always rush to write the story. Let it unfold as you tell different parts of the event.



#8

I'm incredibly lucky to live in the country. I have watched and learned about many animals that I previously only knew as names. I've seen a wild boar defend her piglets. I've listened to the frogs from the moment they arrive in January until they finally leave in late May or June, as they did this cool year.

I've heard the owl in the eucalyptus tree with his "Whoop, whoop." Perhaps the most fun was studying the mountain lion's paw print that was on top of the imprint of Kendra's tennis shoes. Kendra had come over for lunch in a rain storm. Minutes after leaving, she rushed back in and pulled me to the wet path. Obviously, the mountain lion had walked the same path during our lunch and had stepped where Kendra had walked.



But it is the California quail that has provided an insight for this prompt. Through my study window, I watch the quail family each year. I love the spring season when the family dashes across the driveway. One parent leads the way with chicks close by.



The other parent, meanwhile, hops on the tallest rock around. That parent is vigilant and does not leave until all the young ones are safely accounted for. This same activity, one parent leading the way and the other bringing up the rear once all the chicks have moved on, is repeated day after day. Sometimes I watch them peck for food and other times they seem in a hurry to get some other place. In a fairly chaotic scene, there is order.

*Prompt.* A. The quail remind me of the importance of both the opening and the closing of a story. There are several openings and closings -- to a vignette, to a chapter, to a book. Reflect on a story of vignette you want to write.

Imagine a strong opening that will make a reader want to keep reading. Write for five minutes. Focus on a single sentence or a single paragraph. Try several different openings. You might begin with dialogue. You might begin with a description of the scene. You might show action. There are many ways to create powerful openings. For this prompt, don't worry that you are creating the perfect opening. You are playing with possibilities.

B. For five minutes, write a possible closing sentence or paragraph. Once you have done one, try two or three more. Again, play with possibilities. Don't get hung up on the exact words. Your conclusion needs to make sure that all the words of the story have made it to their destination.

## HINT

Pull several memoirs off your shelf and read just their opening and closing paragraphs. What works? What doesn't work?



#9

A few weeks ago, I drove over to the beach. The hard sand is always the easiest place to walk, but it means you have to watch for waves, especially with an incoming tide. I took off my shoes to enjoy the feel of the damp, cold sand. As I looked back, I saw my footprints, the mark of where I'd been.

Our lives are like that too. We leave our mark on parents, on children, on friends, on colleagues, even on strangers.



*Prompt:*

A. Write for five minutes about the footprints you have left. Think of just one year or one situation or one person who has been changed by you, just as the sand is different after we have walked on it.

B. Footprints aren't always in a straight line and made by one person. Sometimes we cross back over our own paths and other times we intersect with others. Write for five minutes about a time when your life path intersected with another person's path and how that changed you.

## HINT

Think about the look of your footprints when you are walking, when you are running, when you are dancing. Our lives are influenced by the pace we set. What types of footprints do you leave?



we'd like you to consider something different.

## #10

You may have wondered about the cover to this ebook. We chose it for two reasons. Yes, these prompts may help you along your writing path. But there was another reason. When you are writing about a person in your memoir, you usually describe what happened from your perspective. And, indeed you should. But for this prompt,



*Prompt:* A. Remember a family gathering. It might be a birthday party or a holiday celebration. Pretend that you wake up the morning of the event and put on the shoes of someone else who will be there. Now you are that person for the day. Walk around for the next five minutes as if you are that person. Try to walk in the same way. Talk the way the person talks. Laugh as if you are that person. Be that person.



B. Now write for five minutes about the family gathering, but write it from the point of view of the person whose shoes you are wearing. Keep the imaginary shoes on while you write.

C. Evaluate how being in the other person's shoes changes the story.

We hope you've enjoyed these *Writing in Five* prompts. We also have a series of *Writing in Five* videos. Each brings you one nugget of advice about writing from a well-known author including: Anne Lamott, Annie Dillard, Stephen King, Ernest Hemingway, Rita Mae Brown, Ray Bradbury, Elmore Leonard, Mark Twain, William Zinsser, Natalie Goldberg, David McCullough, and more.

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