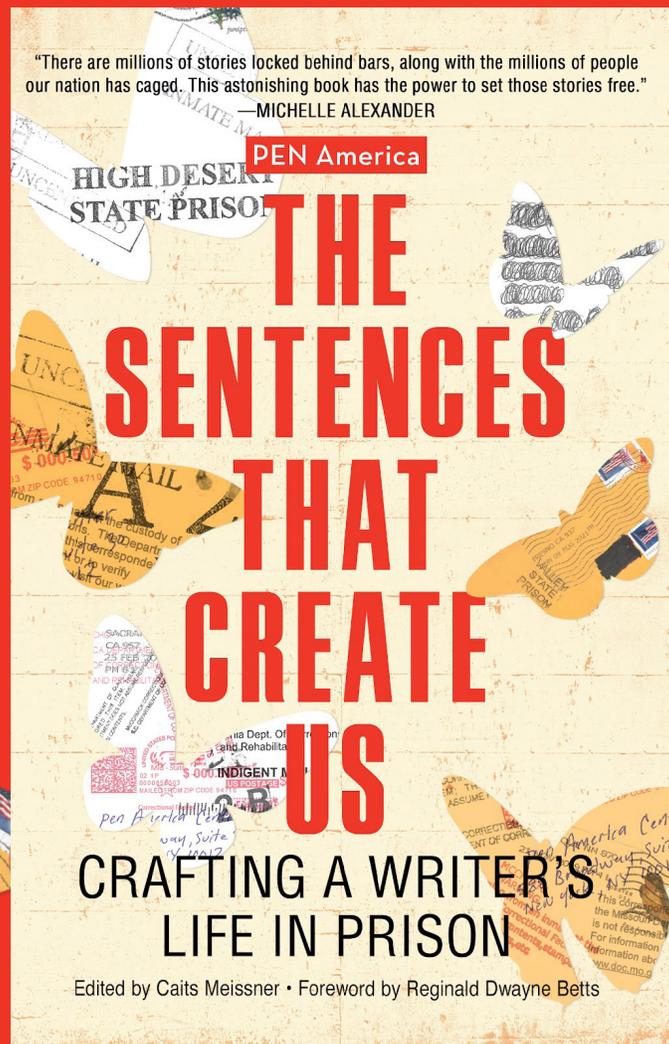
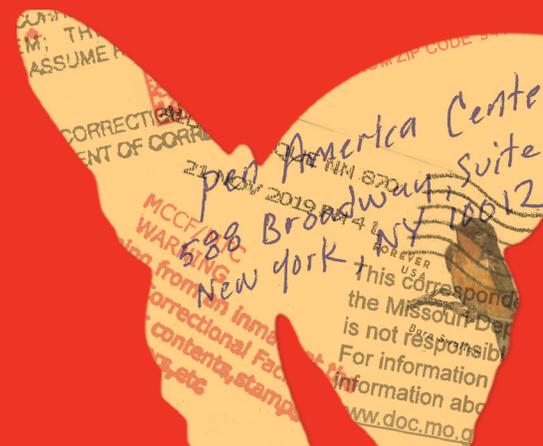


# WRITING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE



*The Sentences that Create Us, Crafting a Writer's Life in Prison*  
Edited by Caitis Meissner





## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide was designed for writing groups, individual writers, and for mentor-mentee pairs in PEN America's Prison Writing Mentorship Program. It was created to help you dive deep into the text to find the support, resources, and inspiration you are searching for, and to discover new gems along the way. Follow the prompts that resonate with you and use them as a springboard for discussions, personal reflections, journaling, or as a companion to help you engage with the book.

This guide is organized in eight sections, designed to complement different facets of your life as a writer. You can pick a section that you feel curious about, or one that brings up feelings of resistance. Approaching your reactions without judgment and trying new things could help you feel accomplished and can even spark creative breakthroughs.

## ABOUT THIS GUIDE'S AUTHOR

Rachael Zafer is a writer, educator, and social change consultant. Rachael has led hundreds of classes and workshops in prisons and jails in Michigan, Illinois, New York, and Colorado, and she provides creative and technical consulting to nonprofits and institutions across the country. She is the author of discussion guides for more than 25 books, including *We Do This 'Til We Free Us* by Mariame Kaba and *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson. You can learn more about her and write to her directly on her website: [www.rachaelzafer.com](http://www.rachaelzafer.com).

# HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE



**Choose your own adventure and explore one or all of the prompts and activities:**

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Identify powerful moments along your journey as an artist. Celebrate your strengths and accomplishments. Reflect on your passion for writing.
- 02. I want to develop my writing practice** ..... 7  
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- 03. I want to try writing in a new style** ..... 9  
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Distill your interests and gather resources. Pitch your writing. Sustain your writing practice.

# I WANT TO FEEL MORE CONFIDENT IN MY WRITING.

## A. EXPLORE YOUR GIFTS.

In “**Gift Culture: On Collaborating through the Walls**” (page 216), Spoon Jackson offers the advice to “Believe deeply in the worth of your own gifts.” Reflect on the many gifts you have received, cultivated, and offered to other people, and how these gifts have helped you along your path as a writer.

- > Make a list of the gifts you have received and cultivated, from books and pens to relationships and skills. What gifts sustain you and give you life? What gifts have helped you learn and grow?
- > What gifts have you offered to other people? How have these gifts been received?
- > In what ways would you like to offer your gifts to others? How do you hope others will receive these gifts?

## B. SEIZE THE MOMENT.

What are some of the moments that have defined your life as an artist? Explore your memory and your personal archives to make observations about your journey as an artist.

- > Create a timeline of moments that are meaningful to you as a writer. Your list might include times you turned to writing during challenging times, experiences of sharing your writing with others, favorite memories, or powerful readings.

**“BELIEVE DEEPLY IN THE WORTH OF  
YOUR OWN GIFTS.”**  
—SPOON JACKSON

- > In “**Writing the Poem of the Moment**” (page 261), Ellen Bass writes, “One of the most basic and useful poetic structures is the poem that takes place entirely in one moment. The moment may last just

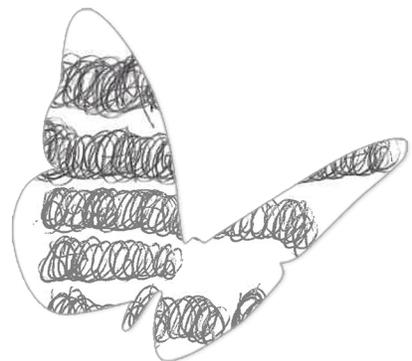
a few seconds or some minutes, but the poem stays rooted in one time and place.” Choose one moment from your timeline and write a poem. Try to stay rooted in the time and place of that moment.

- > Examine the container of your poem and then stretch its boundaries. Try a poetic form you are less familiar with, such as a quatrain or a ghazal, and write a second version of your poem in this new form, continuing to stay in the same moment. Read “**On Poetry**” (page 2) by Luis J. Rodriguez for descriptions of different poetic structures.

## C. BUILD A FIRE.

In “**The Price of Remaining Human**” (page 167), Thomas Bartlett Whitaker cautions, “If you don’t have your motivations and expectations properly calibrated, you will flame out, exactly like most of the writers I’ve known over the years. If this isn’t a passion, if it’s not something you feel to be as necessary to survival as breathing, none of this will seem worth the trouble. And it won’t be.”

- > Think of your passion for and dedication to writing as a fire. Engage your five senses to explore this fire. Where does this fire burn and what does it look like? What does it smell like? What does it feel like to sit near and tend to this fire? What sounds does it make? What might it taste like?
- > When you are confronted by challenging moments or setbacks in your writing, what metaphorical logs will you throw onto this fire? What can you use as fuel to keep this fire burning? Are there threats that could extinguish the fire? How can you protect your commitment to writing?



## I WANT TO DEVELOP MY WRITING PRACTICE.

### A. MAKE A PROMISE.

In “**A Writing Life in Community—from Inside Out**” (page 288), Randall Horton shares, “Before going upstate, Pat Parker made me promise I would never stop writing. No one had ever demanded a promise like that from me.” Consider how your own writing practice would benefit from a promise—to yourself or to other people.

- > Have you ever made a promise to yourself about writing? What happens when promises about writing are forgotten or broken? Is there a reward for keeping this kind of promise?
- > Have you ever stopped writing? If yes, what happened during that period of time? If you’ve never stopped writing, what helped you continue to write?
- > Make one promise to yourself about writing—one that you strongly believe you can keep. Who can support you in keeping this promise to yourself? How will you remind yourself of this promise?



### B. UNBLOCK WRITER’S BLOCK.

In “**The Most Important Thing (and a Few Other Rules)**” (page 171), Curtis Dawkins offers, “Here’s one more rule: there is no such thing as writer’s block. That is only ‘fear of writing badly’ masquerading as something that sounds official. Every writer writes badly every day—it’s the only way to get to the center of things.” Explore the fears that keep you from writing every day or writing what you want to write.

- > Have you ever claimed to have writer’s block? What does this type of block feel like? Where does this block come from?

- > Who decides what makes writing good and what makes writing bad? How do you make this decision about your own writing? Try approaching the labels of good and bad with curiosity when you write. Notice if this changes your feelings about writing.
- > When do you feel overwhelmed by the practice of writing? Write a list of affirmations about yourself as a writer that you can turn to when you experience feelings of overwhelm, judgment, or fear.

## C. LISTEN TO YOURSELF.

Sarah Shourd writes about supporting herself while exploring difficult topics in “**On Dramatic Theater**” (page 75), “I was developing a writing practice that combined research and observation with going inside myself and listening, creating a container from which I could tap into the memory of my own prison experience, while synthesizing the stories I’d been gathering from prisoners across the country. Through this, I discovered that it is essential to have boundaries around your writing practice. At the end of a writing day I’d recover and try to reset (easier said than done) by finding ways to unwind (meditation, talking to a friend, exercise) so I’d be able to sleep.”

- > What feelings or sensations come up when you write? How can you practice Shourd’s practice of going inside yourself and listening? What helps you to process what you have just written about?
- > What boundaries do you have around your own writing practice? Make a list of commitments to yourself that includes ways you will prepare for and rest after writing.

**“HERE’S ONE MORE RULE: THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS WRITER’S BLOCK. THAT IS ONLY ‘FEAR OF WRITING BADLY’ MASQUERADING AS SOMETHING THAT SOUNDS OFFICIAL.”  
—CURTIS DAWKINS**

## I WANT TO TRY WRITING IN A NEW STYLE.

### A. CATCH A LITERARY TERM.

Flip through the index (beginning on page 314) and choose a literary term that catches your attention. Go to the corresponding page number and read more about the term. Follow the practice exercise, prompt, or author’s advice.

### B. TWIST YOUR OWN WORDS.

Select a piece of writing that you are currently editing and transform its structure.

- > First, identify the heart of the piece—the idea that is most important and resonant to you. Set your piece aside and make a list of the many ways that you can express the same idea. What styles of writing make you feel curious or excited? Could the same central idea be expressed in a nonfiction article or a graphic narrative? Could you tell the same story with a personal essay, a short poem, or a screenplay?

**“WHEN DOING A ROUGH DRAFT OF A CHAPTER OR SHORT STORY, TRY TO GO ALL THE WAY THROUGH TO THE END, FUELED BY PASSION AND A NEED TO GET THAT STORY ON THE PAGE. JUST WRITE.”**

**—RYAN GATTIS**

- > Choose one of the new structures from your list and write a first draft, following Ryan Gattis’ advice in **“On Fiction”** (page 16), “Try not to edit while you’re composing. When doing a rough draft of a chapter or short story, try to go all the way through to the end, fueled by passion and a need to get that story on the page. Just write.”

## C. CAST AN ANCHOR.

Alexa Alemanni writes in, “**On Screenwriting**” (page 75), “Though there are many ideas for story generating across this book, here is a super simple entry point: Start with a thematic word that means something to you: *friendship, money, loyalty, loss, forgiveness, adulthood*, and so forth. Ask yourself what you want to tell your audience about that word. For example: *Friendship is the only way to be happy.*”

- > Generate a list of words that resonate with you at this moment in time. Select one of the words at random or choose one that you feel excited to write about.
- > Write a single statement about the word you chose from your list. Next, outline several ideas that would tell stories illustrating this statement. Select the idea that inspires you and write a first draft of a piece, anchoring your writing around the core statement you developed.



## I WANT TO TALK ABOUT MY WRITING WITH OTHER PEOPLE.

### A. HAVE A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR.

Pick one of the essays in this book and imagine that you have the opportunity to have a conversation with the author. What did you appreciate and learn from their writing? What questions do you have about their process, their experience, and their growth as a writer? What do you want to tell them about your personal experience as a writer?

### B. WRITE TO YOUR ANCESTORS.

Tell your ancestors about who you are as a writer. Read “**A Letter to My Ancestors**” by Raquel Almazon (page 277).

- > Write a letter to an individual or group of ancestors. You might choose someone you know by name, or someone who you know existed but you have no known history about them. What do you hope to accomplish as a writer? What have you learned from them, passed down through generations?
- > Write a letter to your descendants, perhaps to people who have not yet been born. What do you want to tell them about your writing? What do you hope they will learn from your experiences? What do you want to share with descendants who identify as writers?

### C. TUNE YOUR ATTENTION.

In “**Attention to Memory**” (page 264), Jennifer Bowen writes, “Creative writing classrooms in prison are a community, one filled with friends and makeshift family. As such, it is a room in which attention is paid *to the attention that has been paid*. Is there any more crucial tool for a writer? Is there any more complicated place to refine that tool than prison?”

- > For several days, take note of where you place your attention. What people, emotions, experiences, and periods of time demand or receive your attention? How do you share your attention with groups of people?
- > How freely do you give your attention to other people? Who deserves your attention? What does it mean to cultivate reverent attention when in relationship with other people?
- > How can you turn your attention towards sharing your writing with others? How can you request and receive feedback in a meaningful way?

## D. CULTIVATE A GENEROUS CRITIQUE.

Prepare yourself to receive feedback and to share it generously with others. In “**Workshop Solitaire: Using Questions to Strengthen a Story**” (page 283), J.D. Mathes reminds writers to, “Never forget to be generous in giving and receiving criticism. In one case, the writer is sharing a creation that took a lot of effort and has emotional weight for them. In the other, the reader took the time to read and give feedback on the work (you do want to be a better writer, right?). Both demand respect.” Consider how you would like to give and receive feedback.

**“NEVER FORGET TO BE GENEROUS IN GIVING AND RECEIVING CRITICISM.”  
—J.D. MATHES**

- > Make a list of the questions you have about your own work. Review the list of questions in “**On Dramatic Theater**” (page 75) by Sarah Shourd and add any additional questions that resonate with you. Would it be helpful to share these questions with the people you have asked to provide feedback?
- > How can you open yourself up to receive unexpected or surprising feedback? After receiving a critique, how can you practice being generous with yourself?
- > Develop a code of ethics for sharing feedback with other writers. How can you keep your comments centered on writing and not on individuals? How will you offer generosity and respect along with your critiques?

## I WANT TO TRY WRITING IN A NEW STYLE.

### A. PRACTICE WITNESSING.

Susan Rosenberg reminds us in “**PEN Prison Writing: Then and Now, In and Out**” (page xxi) that, “Every single soul in prison, then and now, is a creative, full spirit, an individual.” She also shares, “To read, mentor, listen to, and embrace prisoners’ writing compels us to bear witness and brings us all closer to liberation.” Practice witnessing every person around you as a creative, full spirit.

- > Choose a person you care about, respect, or admire. How have you witnessed their creativity in action? How would you describe their spirit? Make a list of words that describe who this person is now and who they may be in the future.
- > Next choose a person who is more difficult to be around. What are some of the creative strengths this person has? How would you describe their spirit? Make a second list of words that describe who this person is now and who they may be in the future.
- > Compare the two lists. What similarities and differences do you notice? Was it easier to envision the potential of one person more than the other? How can you cultivate more appreciation for the creativity and potential of both of these people? What do you think would happen if you practiced this state of witnessing over a longer period of time?

**“EVERY SINGLE SOUL IN PRISON, THEN AND NOW, IS A CREATIVE, FULL SPIRIT, AN INDIVIDUAL.”**

**–SUSAN ROSENBERG**

### B. POOL YOUR RESOURCES.

In “**On Building Prison Writing Communities**” (page 234), Zeke Caligiuri writes, “We also grew to understand the scarcity of resources. In community, there can be a pooling of

those resources. We build collectives so that the mechanics of the writer’s life won’t get in the way of the writing (even though it still will). It’s not therapy, and it’s not magic either. It’s work. But it’s our work. We find fellowship with others who care about their work—or at least with others who believe that life is bigger than the labor these places expect from us, or the scraps they throw at us.” Consider the different types of resources that you have and the resources that you need.

- > Make a list of the resources you have access to that sustain your life as a writer. Consider physical, tangible, psychic, energetic, and other types of resources. How can you share these resources with other writers? What additional resources are you seeking?
- > Are you seeking to build or maintain a collective space? Write an invitation to people who could help you develop a writing group. How could a collective help sustain the work of writing for all of its members?

## C. CULTIVATE A BRAVE SPACE.

Casey Donahue writes in “**No Pen or Paper Required: The Art and Practice of Community Storytelling**” (page 245), “I define a brave space as one that is designed to invite community members into a process of self-selecting, incremental risk-taking. It takes courage to share true things about ourselves and to listen to what others have to say.” How do you define a brave space? What are you seeking from a community space? How can you help to cultivate a brave space for yourself and for others? Do you want to take any risks? What tools can help you take risks while maintaining safety? How can you encourage others to safely take risks?



## I WANT TO CLARIFY MY VOICE.

### A. APPRECIATE YOUR PERSPECTIVE.

Alejo Rodriguez writes in “**And Still I Write: Creative Expression for Self-Advocacy**” (page 195), “Be wary of writing or speaking like you think you’re supposed to or expected to write and think. Find your voice and live and breathe it. The most important part of impact storytelling is engaging a listener or audience—whether a friend, an ally, a decision maker, or an institution like a parole board—not the issue or injustice itself.”

- > How has your voice evolved? Write a recipe of the ingredients that have contributed to your voice as a writer. Consider including the languages, authors, music, art, and environments that have shaped your writing. How is this recipe uniquely yours? Who can help you determine whether or not your individual recipe is represented in your writing? How can you use this recipe to strengthen your work?
- > What does it mean to live and breathe your voice? What are the most important things you hope to communicate in your writing and your speaking? How can you affirm and remind yourself of these priorities?

**“FIND YOUR VOICE AND LIVE AND BREATHE IT.”**  
**—ALEJO RODRIGUEZ**

### B. DIRECT YOUR FOCUS.

Justin Rovillos Monson shares in “**Prison Writer**”: **A Meditation on Histories and the Sentences that Create Them**” (page 227), “The key to a plausible narrative—and perhaps freedom—is not an abundance of information, but focus. In other words: not every story will be told. In other words: redaction becomes its own language.”

- > What helps you prepare for focused periods of writing? What helps you to clear your mind and concentrate on the task in front of you? Write a set of instructions to help

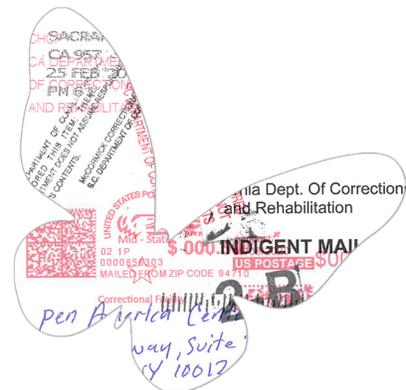
you direct your focus towards your writing practice.

- > Are there thoughts, other tasks, or elements of your environment that make it harder to concentrate on your writing? What actions can you take to set these aside in order to have more focus while you write? Revise your set of instructions to include these steps.
- > Review a piece of your writing and notice the ideas, explanations, or context that you have omitted. Do these omissions strengthen the entire piece? Is there any part of the story that would benefit from additional detail or redaction?

## C. CRAFT A STATEMENT OF PURPOSE.

Anderson Smith writes in “**Apple Is for Identity and Other Prompts**” (page 272), “Consider yourself, both individually and globally: *What do others have to gain from your humanity?*” Develop a statement of purpose that explores this question.

- > Spend a few minutes making a list of the reasons why you write. Review your list and circle 1-3 reasons that are most important to you.
- > Make another list of the messages, emotions, or ideas you want other people to receive from your writing. Add any actions you would like readers to take after reading your work.
- > Combine your lists to develop a statement of purpose. Explore how your writing helps you access and share your humanity with others. How can you use this statement of purpose to sustain your life as a writer?



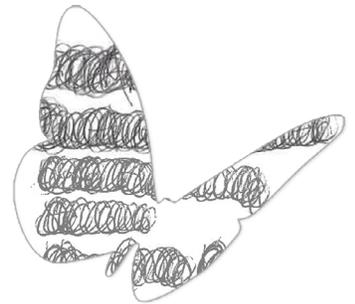
## I WANT TO EDIT A PIECE OF MY WRITING.

### A. APPLY THE IDEAS METHOD.

Vivian D. Nixon shares her IDEAS method, a formula for writing grievances that can also be applied to personal essays, in “**The Power of Grieving in Words**” (page 190). Review each step (Introduce, Data, Expound, Argue, Summarize) and the corresponding recommendations. How can this method help you revise a piece of your writing? Even if the method doesn’t clearly map onto your piece of writing, explore how each step could offer a new perspective. Can you strengthen a poem with data or expound upon your thesis in a memoir? Can you improve your introduction, argument, or summary?

### B. REVOLUTIONIZE YOUR REVISION.

Mitchell S. Jackson describes his approach to editing in “**Re-Vision**” (page 152): “Revision is seeing the work in progress. Revision is seeing the work in context. Revision is recognizing the parts of a text and how they work to form a whole. Revision is seeing what could and should and shouldn’t be there and conceiving of ways to make it so. Revision is discovering what’s right and imagining how to make it more right; it’s pursuing a new way of seeing and being. Revision is a philosophy; revision is revolution.”



- > Review a piece of your writing and clarify your vision. What are the many parts of this piece? How do they fit together to form a whole? What is working within the piece? What could be “more right”?
- > Ask a person you trust to read your writing out loud to you. Close your eyes and listen deeply. What emotions do you feel when you are listening to your writing? Do you hear anything that is not working well? Do you hear anything that is missing? Consider asking the reader to read your piece back to you again while taking a few notes about words, phrases, or moments in your piece that could be revised to help you reimagine the piece in a new way?

## C. CREATE AN EMOTIONAL JOURNEY.

Louise K. Waakaa'igan writes in **“Start and End with the Feeling of Home: How I Developed My Poetry Manuscript”** (page 205), “I knew I wanted to start and end my chapbook with the feeling of home. Ultimately, I chose an emotional journey as the timeline for the book’s structure.” Try this technique with a single piece of your writing.

- > Explore the emotional journey you hope your readers will experience while reading a piece of your writing. What do you want your readers to understand about you? What do you want your readers to understand about themselves? What do you hope readers will continue to think about after they have finished the piece?
- > Review the piece again. Does the structure of your writing support the emotional journey you hope your readers will have? What changes can you make to strengthen the resonance of your piece?

## D. CONNECT WITH YOUR AUDIENCE.

Sarah Shourd writes in, **“On Relational Theater”** (page 56), “Writing itself is relational; it requires solitude but is the opposite of solitary. Its purpose is to connect to something larger than yourself, and to help your audience connect to something larger than themselves—the stream of life, the world.” Reflect on how you would like to connect with your audience.

- > Map the connections that could emerge from a piece of your writing. How do you hope your readers will connect to you and your life experiences? What can you add to your writing that will enhance these connections?
- > How do you hope your readers will feel after connecting with you? What are the themes and ideas in your work that could connect them to larger questions and subjects they may not have thought about or experienced before?

**“WRITING ITSELF IS RELATIONAL;  
IT REQUIRES SOLITUDE BUT IS THE  
OPPOSITE OF SOLITARY.”  
—SARAH SHOARD**

# I WANT TO SUBMIT MY WRITING FOR PUBLICATION.

## A. STRENGTHEN YOUR SUPPORT TEAM.

In “**On Writing and Staging a Play in Prison**” (page 210), Sterling Cunio shares, “I was prepared to contact dozens of people before locating a single person willing to assist my endeavor—the key to being resourceful as a prisoner is unrelenting effort—so I contacted experts in areas related to the project and held faith.” As you prepare to send your work out into the world, identify what forms of support you may need.

- > What are some of the ways that you have supported yourself throughout your journey as a writer? What has helped you develop courage and energy to keep going? How can you support yourself during a period of waiting, knowing that you may not receive a response?
- > If you receive a rejection, what support will you need? What are some of the ways that you can support yourself? Is there anyone who can assist you with continuing to submit your writing for publication?
- > In “**As for the Rest of Us: How to Win a Fellowship with No Support**” (page 221), Arthur Longworth advises writers who are not accepted to, “Try to exercise grace. Use the experience as an opportunity to build your resolve and reset your commitment to write.” Write a list of instructions to yourself, reminding yourself of how to reset your commitments to yourself. Include a few affirmations about what you have already accomplished as an artist.
- > If your work is accepted for publication, how will you celebrate your success? Are there people you could help you celebrate?

**“THERE ARE TWO PRACTICAL CONCERNS THAT ARISE WHILE WRITING TRUTHFULLY: PROTECTING YOURSELF, IF INCARCERATED, AND PROTECTING OTHER PEOPLE.”  
—PIPER KERMAN**

## B. PROTECT YOUR WORDS, PROTECT YOUR PEOPLE.

Before submitting your writing for publication, consider what forms of protection you may need. What does it mean to protect yourself? Is protection physical, material, energetic, or spiritual?

- > Patrick O’Neil writes in **“On Nonfiction Memoir”** (page 41) that “Being guarded and vague does nothing for your writing, and your reader will not be emotionally invested in your story if you do not trust them enough to let them in.” As you review your writing, notice what kind of trust you have given to your readers. Are you being guarded and vague in your work? Are there ways that you would like to be more vulnerable as a way to offer more trust?
- > In **“Burn the Spot: On Writing about People You Know”** (page 185), Piper Kerman shares, “There are two practical concerns that arise while writing truthfully: protecting yourself, if incarcerated, and protecting other people.” Why does writing deep truths require protection? Are there any steps you can take to help protect your people? Are there any steps you can take to protect yourself?
- > Read **“Copyright Protection in Brief”** by Lateef Mtima, JD, and John R. Whitman, PhD (page 180). Do you want to pursue any copyright protections?

## C. REFINE YOUR PITCH.

Select 2-3 pieces of your writing that you’d like to submit for publication. Read each piece closely in preparation for your pitch.

- > Distill each piece of writing into a central theme. What is each piece about? How do these themes connect to each other? How do your personal experiences connect to these themes? Why does the world need to read about these themes and how does your unique point of view bring them to life?
- > Read Saint James Harris Wood’s instructions on writing a cover letter in **“On Publishing**





For more than five decades, PEN America’s Prison and Justice Writing program has amplified the work of thousands of writers who are creating while incarcerated in the United States. By providing resources, mentorship, and audiences outside the walls, we help these writers to join and enrich the broader literary community. Committed to the freedom to write in U.S. prisons as a critical free expression issue of our time, we leverage the transformative possibilities of writing to raise public consciousness about the societal implications of mass incarceration and support the development of justice-involved literary talent.

To learn more about our programs visit [pen.org/prison-writing](https://pen.org/prison-writing) or write to:

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