PEN AMERICA

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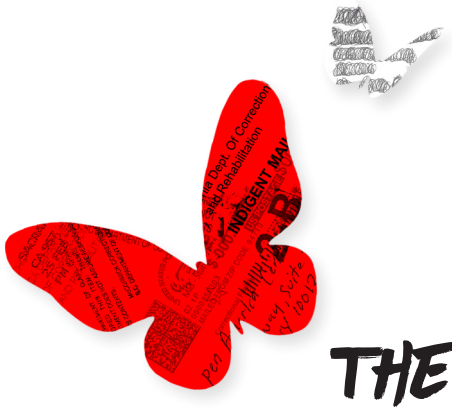

THE Freewrite PROJECT

A Writer's Workshop Curriculum Guide

PEN AMERICA

How To Write Like Yourself

You may think that "good" writing has to sound like a 19th century novel or a history textbook. Many of us were coached in school to bury our voice in favor of a supposedly universal one that was "good." In truth, nothing could be more wrong.

When we write in our own voice we convey meaning most clearly to our readers. Your voice encapsulates where you're from, what you've lived through and gives others a sense of yourself. Even if you're a journalist or writing non-fiction essays, your voice matters. Readers want to hear from you—not a computer, not a writer they've already read, not a false version of the author.

However, it can be challenging to unlearn all of the coaching we've received that tells us it's better if we don't sound like ourselves. We can additionally become stymied by grammar concerns and other conventions that ask us to be too concerned with the rules, and less concerned about creative freedom. This section is designed to help you cultivate your personal voice as a writer so you can tell your most truthful story—whether it's about yourself, someone else or an exterior event or place.

It can be challenging to change our writing style, and if you're used to writing in a voice that's not your own (most of us imitate until we embrace and settle into our own style), it can be confusing to try to hear yourself. Here are some tips to start cultivating your voice:

1. Pay attention to yourself when you're talking. What are some common things you say? You can also ask friends for common, everyday words that you normally use in a conversation.
2. Use a friendly and casual tone when freewriting or responding to prompts.
3. Imagine you're writing to a friend.
4. Try saying aloud what you want to write and then write it down.
5. Write about an event you feel defines you.
6. Journal or keep a daily diary. By writing to yourself in a private space you can begin to hear yourself more clearly. It also allows you to see how the same themes and ideas come up for you again and again. Perspective is also a key element of cultivating your writerly voice.
7. Write about a personal achievement that is significant to you.
8. Read your writing aloud to yourself. Don't rush. Stop and add or take away words as needed so that what you've written is what you want to say.
9. When applicable, you can start with a personal anecdote, something short, interesting or even amusing. This short story of something that really happened to you or a person you know can help you begin writing in a way that enables you to embrace your voice.

A short note: Editing vs. Feedback

We thought it would be helpful to offer a quick distinction on the two related, but notably different, terms. Sometimes new writers expect a workshop to feel something like an editing service, where members will mark up the paper with x's and rewrites. It's really not.

A workshop is not meant to correct mistakes, but to build your own understanding of the work you're creating. It's a sounding board, not a quick fix, and certainly not a copyedit. That's not to say you can't ask a trusted member to read through a piece that you feel is done to find any last minute issues before you seek publication. It's great to ask that, but generally it's not the best use of a workshop.

We keep saying it, because we mean it: a lot of people think revision is looking for grammar errors or making sure your punctuation is correct. But, real revision is not polishing. It's taking a close look at what you've said and thinking about: whether other people understand it, if it's true to yourself and your writerly intentions, if it's written in your voice and are other people as drawn into your telling as you want them to be?

In this segment, you'll find techniques for revision that will help you change your writing without throwing everything away. We know revision is particularly challenging when you only have one draft, which may be your situation. In order to use some of the strategies in this section we offer the following suggestions for revision that won't ruin your only draft:

1. Numbering of pages and numbering paragraphs so you can note, on another sheet of paper, which area of the text you want to add to, revise, move or take away.
2. Get extra paper and write single-sided so you can add pages and notes in between your current draft. Make sure to note that they were added with symbols of your own devising or a revised page number system.
3. If available, you can use post-it-notes to write marginal comments to yourself which can then be removed.

All of the editing strategies explained here can be paired with pages 21-23, 147-151, 152-162 in *The Sentences that Create Us* which talk about editing, what it is and how to do it. The top advice for revision and for taking feedback from others is: sleep on it! Nothing is better than getting space from your draft to see it with new eyes. If you've been working nonstop on something, start another project and come back to it in a week.

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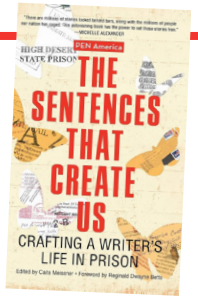
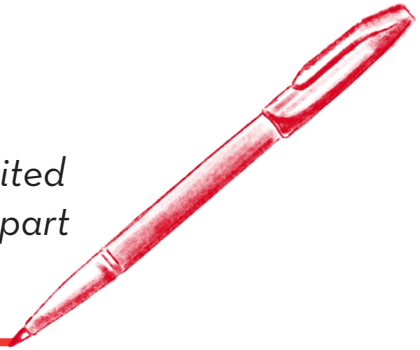


This curriculum was born out of The Freewrite Project, a program generously funded by the Mellon Foundation that leverages PEN America's book, *The Sentences That Create Us: Crafting A Writer's Life in Prison* (Haymarket Books, 2022) to support the self-determination of writers in prison to form incarcerated-led community writing groups.

The Sentences That Create Us, referenced across this guide, is a nearly 350-page road map for incarcerated people and their allies to have a thriving writing life behind bars—and shared beyond the walls—that draws on the unique insights of more than fifty contributors, most themselves justice-involved, to offer advice, inspiration and resources. If you don't have a copy, you'll want one—it is full of useful and inspiring information. You can order one for free from PEN America (if you're incarcerated, that is), by writing to Prison and Justice Writing c/o PEN America 120 Broadway 26th Floor North New York, NY 10271.

Dear Writer,

Welcome. We are so excited that you're joining us as part of your writerly journey!



Let us tell you right off the bat that this curriculum, as intimidating as it might seem at first blush, is not meant to be "taught" by an expert coming to bestow knowledge upon you. It is a resource made for writers by writers, designed to offer support and guidance for building a supportive writing community while incarcerated. This guide will offer suggestions on honing technical skills, developing a writing career, and most importantly, how to successfully and collaboratively engender a shared practice of creative experimentation and dedication to offering your peers useful feedback and support. Whatever your writing goals, you'll find in these pages an abundance of resources for writers who want to professionalize, as well as—and perhaps most importantly—those of us who love self-expression primarily as a process of spiritual, emotional, intellectual and psychological satisfaction. Wherever you are, we hope these resources will meet you there.

It is important to state that our goal is a bit different from the learning environments many of us were raised in, where rule-following and rote memorization is valued. Tossing the red pen out the window, instead we emphasize the development of a horizontal writing community that can foster individual and communal learning through creative risk taking, personal growth and collaboration. Creativity is much messier than you may have been led to believe in your previous experiences in formal schooling. We believe in the power of unleashing your creative spirit to tell stories that truly matter.

Of course, we are aware that while the imagination runs free as it pleases, the setting you are creating within is full of rules and regulations. We encourage you to be creative in the application of the materials within these pages. This guide is designed to support you and should be used as it best fits your needs and the limitations or opportunities of the facility you're in. Nothing in this guide is an

If your group is having trouble with feedback— either giving it or receiving it— consider taking some time to process. The following are suggestions that can help your workshop group recalibrate your relationship to feedback.

- Take a day for just affirmations and support. Spotlight individuals and invite three people to share something they like about that person's writing. Everyone should have a chance to be recognized, and various people should offer input and affirmations, making it a full-group effort.
- Take a day to talk about what feedback means to you, each person's background with it, understanding of its purpose, and preferred way to receive it. This can help everyone understand one another, and where they are coming from specifically, rather than a generalized understanding of what it means to give and receive feedback or criticism.
- Use the suggestions in this guide and write the sample questions and statement starters on cards that are placed on each member's chair. Some examples might be: Go around the circle and have people respond to those starters. These should be sentences that don't relate to any writing shared in the workshop. They are simply to practice constructing sentences in ways that center questioning, affirmations and positivity.

*Note: For those who want to delve deeper into these complex issues, a good resource is: The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the the Creative Classroom by Felicia Rose Chavez.

COMMUNITY

Even the most attention-averse person generally feels good hearing that something in their writing is working. Sharing this kind of support and encouragement is as much for revision as it is for building community, camaraderie, and support for the writer through their creative journey.

The chapter "Workshop Solitaire" by JD Mathes in The Sentences That Create Us also has suggestions for how to strengthen your narrative. It begins on page 283.

TROUBLESHOOTING

Feedback is admittedly a bit of an emotional minefield, and your approach, sensitivity and commitment to truth is worth investigating with time, curiosity and an open mind and heart. The tendency is for people to say, "I'm tough, I can take it!" We've already discussed how this kind of "tough love" feedback isn't effective. It is worth keeping in mind that especially inside, this kind of feedback can easily lead to unwanted power dynamics that are detrimental, and prevent equity and inclusion. This dynamic is sneaky and can inadvertently take hold when the majority of people have been conditioned to receive traditional "red pen" negative criticism. Many will have to unlearn the unconscious habit of deflecting positive feedback, which can cause a writer to feel worried that it isn't genuine, or because it makes them self-conscious. If this is the dynamic in your workshop, it is even more important to build in ways to learn to receive praise and support, so as to understand what IS working in their writing and encourage constructive revisions. Here are some suggestions to support yourself and your group:

- It is worth taking time, even a full session, at the start of a series of workshops to talk about each person's experiences and preferences, to assess personal and group understandings, and gain awareness of how particular types of feedback will land with individuals. What are people seeking in their writing journey? How do they respond to the term "feedback?" What have their experiences with feedback been in the past?
- An option is to integrate the preferred approach into a list of co-created shared agreements for your group. It doesn't have to be involved. It could be as simple as: "balance a suggestion with a compliment."
- Instead of structuring a workshop with one person reading, then silently listening as an observer while everyone else discusses the piece (a commonly accepted workshop method, but not the only one), the writer can instead first identify what they want feedback on for that particular piece. This empowers the writer and allows each group member to tailor feedback to address what they are struggling with in the work. For example, a person could ask for input on dialog or how well the setting is described.

"The editors of this curriculum understand how challenging and often discouraging it can be to build groups and collectives within the setting where you live.

irrefutable truth. Instead, we invite you to experience the guide as a collection of best practices from writers who have come from the same conditions where you sit, and have made fulfilling livelihoods of their passion for the written word.

A reminder to writers that this is a living text, which means that this curriculum is yours to work and play with to suit the needs, dreams and desires of your collective. It is only meant as a guide and a reference, and the materials can and should contribute to your process when there isn't outside facilitation to structure the collective setting—and even when there is one! Make good use of the information in this curriculum to support the organic growth of your unique writing community.

The editors of this curriculum understand how challenging and often discouraging it can be to build groups and collectives within the setting where you live. We also know there is genius to be found in the ways incarcerated communities grow from the structures and stresses of the systems they live under. In order to put this imagination to use, it is important to support each other as writers and artists and free thinking individuals. Find your people. Get creative.

We know you will take what is included in these pages and make something greater and more personal to your collectives' goals and needs than we could ever dream up. If what we provide can help to build successful collectives in correctional systems throughout the country then it has been a success. We invite you to share anecdotes, exercises and best practices as we continue to shape this guide towards its final draft. Who knows, some of your own material might make its way into the next iteration, credited of course!

Happy writing,
The Freewrite Curriculum Committee and **PEN America**

First Thing's First: Getting Started

WHAT DO YOU NEED?

At least one other person who writes or has an interest in starting to write.

This guide.

Pen and Paper.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

Whether you sit in a circle or scattered around the classroom, workshop is created simply when we come together to discuss each other's writing. It's where we learn to talk about writing and to know ourselves as writers, critics, and a member of a writing community. No one person is "in charge" of a workshop. Likewise, whatever guidelines your group sets apply equally to all participants.

New writers who join a writing community often tell us they were most nervous about sharing their work with others. These same writers, at the end of the session, often report that sharing turned out to be one of the most rewarding parts of the experience. The aim of workshop is to let the author know how their work is received by readers. In doing that, the hope is that we help the author clarify their own thoughts and intentions about the work.

KEY COMPONENTS

Of course, there isn't just one way to offer supportive feedback. But for those who haven't ever had supportive feedback themselves, the following list offers suggestions for how you can share insight while supporting, and being supported by, your fellow writers.

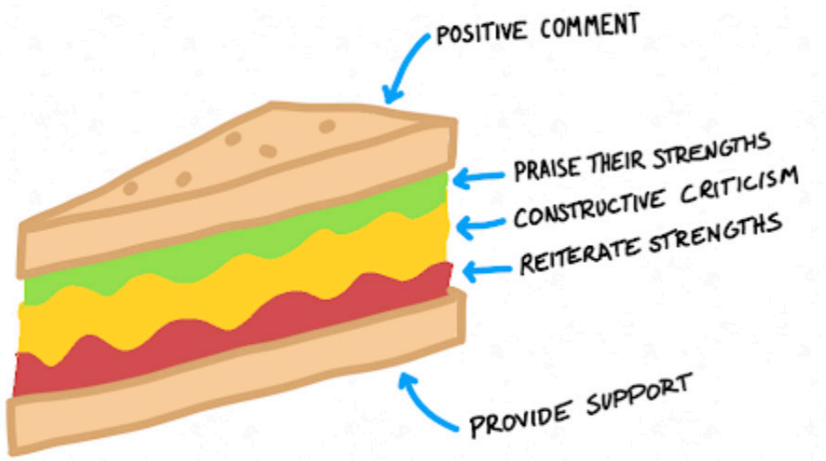
- **Whatever your thoughts are, they can be better received by framing them as questions.** For example, if you are confused about the character 'Frank' in a person's story you can say something like: "What was the character, 'Frank,' thinking about at this point?" Instead of, "Frank is confusing." More examples of questions that can be used in feedback sessions can be found in the Section One: Structure section of this guide.
- **Start each offering of feedback with a positive comment about the writing.** For example, "I really liked your voice in this piece. It is warm and welcoming. It makes me want to hear more." You can also frame points that need clarifying in a positive way. For example, if there isn't enough description about the setting, you could say something like: "I would love to hear more about where we are in this moment. What does this place look like or smell like? What else is happening there?"
- **If people are having trouble coming up with feedback, it is understandable.** Many of us went to schools where this kind of response was not given space or time. Asking yourself,"What stood out to you?" can help generate ideas. This question can also be a good discussion starter for the whole group. It's open-ended, so it doesn't force an expected answer.
- **Instead of sharing feedback verbally, workshop groups can also write feedback using the method above on paper, which is given to writers.** This allows the feedback to be taken back to the room/cell, where the writer can privately review it and soak in the praise and constructive criticism on their own time. This can be especially helpful for people if the positive statements are clear and central. Prison lacks positive reinforcement and to see something positive in writing is immensely impactful. Having written documentation of positive comments can be the motivation to stretch and grow in their writing, and reinvigorates the writer in purpose and practice. These are the same kinds of sentences you would say verbally, instead you write them down. Meaning, this feedback moves beyond making marginal notes on someone's draft. They are overall statements and questions that meaningfully engage with the text at hand.

Giving feedback is not just a gift to others, it's a gift to yourself. Reading and thinking carefully about others' work helps us become more sophisticated readers, writers and critical thinkers. Some writers feel that providing careful feedback, more than anything else, helped them grow. Giving careful, attentive feedback to someone else's writing teaches us what good writing is. Learning is a gift that no one can take away, no matter where you write from.

Getting and Giving Feedback

INTRODUCTION

The word critique gets a bad rap in our society. It is often misunderstood as harsh and negative. There is an old-school idea, commonly associated with "manliness," that somehow the tough criticism is the best. That is: if you don't tell someone all the things you don't like or that don't work about their writing, you're not actually helping them. But even tough words of criticism are just one person's opinion. If negativity breaks the writer's desire to write or warps their writing process, it can't be justified. Critique should not shut down the creative process, but offer specific and constructive ideas that are admitted as subjective and personal. To avoid the misunderstanding of critique as always negative and objective, we suggest using the terms feedback or comments instead. Having guidelines that offer examples of what supportive feedback looks like is also helpful. Once people become comfortable with offering feedback constructively, you will see more confidence in both offering and comfort in receiving feedback. You might even begin to crave it!



This guide proposes that feedback can and should be delivered in a way that builds confidence and invites curiosity. While pointing out areas that confuse listeners or readers, or asking questions regarding purpose or message is important, it is equally important to tell readers what positive attributes their writing contains. Receiving positive feedback is a blessing, and sometimes people, especially women or people who have not had their voice valued by society, also need to build the courage to express what could work better. It's helpful to remind the group that all feedback offered with generosity is a gift. Feedback is how writers come to know how their voices and stories are understood by others. The following section explores ways to offer feedback.

KEY COMPONENTS

Though each group will run workshop differently, here are a few basic guidelines that are helpful to follow. You can use them as they are listed here or you can use these as a starting point to discuss what norms will be helpful for your group:

- When we're in the room together, we're all writers and we support each other.
- The best way we can support each other is to be generous in our praise, generous enough to offer constructive criticism and generous in receiving others' response to our work.
- We try to talk about the way we experienced the work, not the way we'd "fix" it. (Ex: I felt confused by the alligator on the porch in the second paragraph, page 3).
- Refer to the work not the writer. (Narrator instead of John, the mother character instead of John's mom.) People can feel defensive if comments are directed to them as a person, rather than their writing.
- Ask questions of the piece, not the writer. (I'm wondering why the story jumps forward 10 years, instead of, Why did Tom skip a decade?)
- Begin workshop with positive feedback, then transition to constructive feedback after the writer has heard what's working well. Hearing positive feedback first helps people receive critical feedback receptively. By hearing the aspects of a piece that work and people relate to or appreciate, a writer can better orient themselves towards addressing those elements of their writing that aren't being understood or are distracting for readers.
- Initiate thoughts from classmates who seem engaged but shy about speaking up.
- Remember the most helpful thing we can do is offer one reader's response to the work. In the end, the piece belongs to the writer.

BEST PRACTICES

Round table writer's workshop builds community through shared experience. Further, writing workshops require vulnerability from respondents and writers, who work together with care and respect. The longer workshop participants work together, the safer it becomes to challenge each other. An added benefit of a longer term commitment: the more people come to know and understand each other across differences of perspective and experience. Finally, workshop offers the common shared goal of art-making.

The essay "On Building Prison Writing Communities" by Zeke Caligiuri in *The Sentences that Create Us*, beginning on pg. 234, supports further thinking about how to structure groups and cultivate writing communities and can be read as a companion to this overview.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

The list of questions below are models that you can use wholesale or as a basis to create your own questions that aren't confrontational but inquisitive.

- What is the piece about?
- What is the situation and what is the story?
- What stood out to you?
- What sensory details did you experience?
- What did you vividly see, smell, hear, etc.?
- How did the piece make you feel?
- How does the language reflect the mood or message of the piece?
- How might the language interfere with the mood or message of the piece?
- What confused you?
- Where in the piece did you feel engaged?
- Were there places where your mind wandered?
- What's something the writer isn't saying that needs to be said?
- What's hidden in the piece?
- Is there a turn or a "volta?" This is a dramatic shift in the meaning or emotion of the piece? Said differently, it's the place where you often feel your stomach shift. Where we hear the audience murmur surprise or appreciation. Is that here? Where?
- Were there characters that came alive for you? In what scenes? Why?
- What do the characters want? Is the character's "want" driving the story?
- What does the narrator want? What's in the way? Are the obstacles formidable enough? How might they be made more formidable in the next draft?
- Do you relate to the narrator/main character/protagonist?
- Do the characters stay in character?

TROUBLESHOOTING

Conflicts can easily arise when in the act of giving and receiving feedback. Sometimes people can get defensive if other people don't understand their writing. Other people can be unintentionally aggressive when talking about another person's work. In order to avoid conflicts, you can use open-ended questions that help reader and writer understand the strengths and limits of a written piece of communication.

Although there are a number of ways to write your way through a block, the following exercise can be particularly useful:

1 **STEP ONE:** Grab a clean sheet of paper and place it next to the story you're working on.

2 **STEP TWO:** Close your eyes, put your hand on your stomach, and breathe into your belly softly so that you feel your hand rise and fall on your stomach. Do this five times to help reset your nervous system. Other ways to reset your nervous system include yawning, or breathing in the kind of stuttering, fast inhale of breath we do after having a good cry.

3 **STEP THREE:** Read the last page you wrote. It might be helpful to smile a little as you read it (your body associates smiles with joy, and joy is very good for creativity). As you read, hold your pen/pencil over your blank paper ready to write. When you finish reading your last page, give yourself your writing prompt by saying out loud, "What's Next?" or "Why is this important?"

4 **STEP FOUR:** Write on your blank sheet of paper. It may be helpful to place the page you read out of your sight so you can focus on what you're writing and not what you already wrote. If what's next doesn't come to mind, ask the question again, "What's Next?" or "Why is this important?" Keep asking the question until you write. It's important to write whatever comes to mind. Even if what comes next has nothing to do with your story, even if you're just writing, "I want something amazing to come next!" or "This is important because..." The important thing is to KEEP YOUR HANDS MOVING, keep writing and write down as many different things that can come next as you can think of.

5 **STEP FIVE:** After 5 to 10 minutes, stop. Read what you've written. Choose one idea about what comes next that you like. If you haven't written one you like, choose one that moves the story forward. Return to your story and write through the idea. If you chose "Why is this important?," circle three reasons that speak the loudest to your heart.

6 **STEP SIX:** If you haven't written an idea that moves the story forward, take a break (for at least an hour). Exercise, meditate, watch TV, or talk to a friend. After your break, choose a writing or visual prompt unrelated to your story and write for as long as you want. When you're finished, take a break from writing for today. Forgive yourself if you feel like you've failed. It can be helpful to say it out loud, "I forgive myself because I know I'm doing my best."

When You're Stuck

While writer's block can often be addressed in general through freewriting, sometimes writer's block afflicts a particular piece of writing only. It may be a piece that is emotionally challenging to write, or one that details events distant in time and space, or any one of a million other reasons. If you're experiencing writer's block with a particular piece it can be helpful to engage in some of the following activities. While there is no guaranteed way to clear our mental hurdles, these exercises can assist in tackling the challenge of writing.

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

"When I have something big, or challenging, to work on, I like to give myself a break. I know that sounds counterintuitive but most of us—including me!—are really hard on ourselves. And being hard on myself about getting started or diving in when I am already worried or stuck only makes it worse! So I try to give myself a pep talk or do something kind of sideways to the writing itself. Maybe I'll read a book that inspires me. Or take a walk. Or talk about the project with someone I care about... sometimes, I talk about it with myself! That might sound crazy, but when I can just have a conversation in my head with myself about what I am working on and what I want it to say, it can be super helpful. It's okay to take a day or two to think and develop. Try to take the pressure off. But we don't want to do that day after day because it can drag on quickly. So I usually say, okay, today is a break. Tomorrow I write, even just a sentence."

– Annie Buckley

More advice on drafting–that is, getting initial words down on the page–can be found on pages 59-61, in Sarah Shourd's essay "On Dramatic Theater," of *The Sentences That Create Us* and on cultivating your unique voice as a writer on pages 199-200, in Alejo Rodriguez' "And Still I Write" essay.

- Are there any risks: linguistically, emotionally, plotwise?
- Is there a surprise? In plot, in language, in emotional or stylistic risk?
- How does the opening create an "exchange of expectations" between author and reader?
- Does the piece, as it evolves, meet these expectations?
- Does the beginning need to change?
- How is the memoir an exploration of change for the narrator?
- How might this change be made more clear, more developed?
- Are the scenes rendered in this draft the most important scenes?
- What needs to be dramatized still?
- What is the author trying to do?
- What basic orienting facts might be clarified or developed?
- What questions/urges do you have that the piece does not yet answer?

The chapter "Workshop Solitaire: Using Questions to Strengthen a Story" by J.D. Mathes in *The Sentences that Create Us*, beginning on pg. 283, can help you come up with other questions that are relevant to your writing.

You can also do it differently...

OVERVIEW

Another method to structure writing groups is "each one, teach one." While also a shared leadership model, "each one, teach one" offers more clearly defined group roles that rotate in each session of the workshop. For example, one person from the group will guide the group through a main exercise on one method, genre or other activity for a period of time during at least one workshop session, passing the title to another group member in the next session. This and other leadership roles such as preparing the opening or closing, leading freewriting or feedback sessions trades hands throughout the workshop series, ensuring that every participant has a chance to facilitate the role at least once, and perhaps more depending on how often the group meets, and how many people are in the group.

SHAPE

What this looks like in action and process can vary, according to the group's needs. A common opening to the workshop experience might begin with an intentional effort to honor the space and help people relax. Some open with a question everyone answers in brief, a meditation or a short reading one member of the group brings to share as inspiration. After the opening, the person teaching for the day could offer a focus on anything: poetry, freewriting, revision techniques or publishing advice, to name a few options. After the mini-lesson, the group might choose to read aloud their work to share, or engage in freewriting with the assistance of a prompt. Remember, the ingredients are yours to build your workshop recipe with, starting with the base commitment to rotation of facilitation.

KEY COMPONENTS

Below is a sample of activities that could potentially take place in a one and a half hour workshop using "each one, teach one:"

1. **Opening (10-minutes) -** Participant A
2. **Prompt and Freewrite (15-minutes) -** Participant B creates/finds prompt and keeps time. Encourages people to finish at the time
3. **Freewriting Share Out (10 minutes) -** Participant B leads sharing of freewriting
4. **Mini-Lesson (30 minutes) -** Participant C delivers the weekly content drawn from *The Sentences That Create Us*, methods outlined in this curriculum or other sources. Offers members skills and takeaway methods to employ in their writing.

- What's something that makes you smile?
- What's your favorite TV show? Why?
- What's your favorite book? Why?
- Think about the last time you felt disappointed. What happened? Who disappointed you? Now, write about the experience from the perspective of the person who disappointed you. Include why they did what they did, how they feel about it.
- Describe an injustice you've witnessed or experienced.
- Write about a society that believes prisons are evil. How does this society respond to a person who hurts someone else?
- Write an apology letter that only you will see to someone that you've wronged.
- Pretend that magic is real. Now explain why nobody believes in it.
- Consider a visual prompt: Find a picture that interests you. A picture is a moment in time. Start your freewrite by describing the moment the picture shows you, and then continue writing about what you imagine happens next.

Prompts can also be found throughout *The Sentences that Create Us*: pgs 5-6, 256, 258-260, 266-267, 269-271, 273-274, 276, 278-279, and 281-282.

IDEAS FOR FREEWRITING EXERCISES

Set a time limit: Set a timeframe between 5 and 20 minutes.

Choose a writing prompt: We've provided a set of examples to help get started.

WHAT IS A WRITING PROMPT?

A writing prompt is a pre-generated topic about which to write. Writing in response to prompts is a great daily practice to build your writer's muscles. Below are 20 examples you can use.

- Write about the last disagreement you had with someone. Who was it with? What was it about and how did it end? What did you want and what did you learn?
- What do you want your friends to know about you?
- If you could have any superpower, what would it be? Why this power?
- What was your favorite game or toy when you were a kid? Write about an experience that involves this game or toy.
- Finish this sentence, then keep writing: "Fire crawled across the grass toward the house, and ..."Finish this sentence, then keep writing: "People in hell don't want ice water; they want..."
- Finish this sentence, then keep writing: "It was a long fall, but I was out of options. I jumped. The wind whipped at my clothes, and..."
- Choose a poem you know by heart or you take from a book. Write down the last line and continue either writing your own poem or begin a story opening inspired by the line.
- Make a wish and write it down. Now start a story where you regret making this wish.
- If you were a tree, what would you say?
- Write about a place you want to visit. Why do you want to go there?
- Write about a piano player who just had the worst performance of his or her life. How does the musician feel? What happened? Who does the piano player call?

5. **Train the Trainers (15 minutes) -** Participant D - Since roles rotate in this model, this role is to assign and select who will lead each component in the next meeting, and to facilitate the transfer of knowledge–what each role does–within the group. For example, the person who led the freewriting week 1 will tell the person leading the freewriting in week 2 how to prepare for the role and explain their responsibilities for the next workshop.

6. **Review and Close (10 minutes)** - Participant E leads a review of the material. Lessons discussed are summarized and assignments for next group are issued.

BEST PRACTICES

This method demands fully collaborative and open planning before sitting down to workshop. Groups should dedicate time specifically to meet and decide what each group member wants to lead a mini-lesson on. At the minimum, each group should decide on an agenda to try for the first meeting, with one person responsible for leading each portion of the workshop. After the first workshop, the group can assess what the group would like to change and modify for future workshops. While specific topics will change each week, having a regular pattern can help participants feel comfortable, so it is recommended that workshops adopt a predictable format.

TROUBLESHOOTING

While it can be tempting to simply let people choose a week to present, without committing to a specific topic this can make this method less useful. Without a clear goal for mini-lessons, the group runs the risk of going all over the place and not actually offering participants a deliverable. Before people choose a week to lead a mini-lesson, it is advised that the group peruse the Methods section of this guide and pick one method that resonates with them. This is only if there is not a topic a person is clearly well-versed in and comes to the group already prepared to teach to others.

The group will also need to establish a clear method for determining who facilitates what and when. This process should be developed early and kept throughout the project so as to not waste time in the sessions on trying to figure out who's doing what. Keep in mind that the rules are always flexible. It is helpful to alternate and give everyone a chance to facilitate, but it is also helpful to honor each person's process to determine when they feel ready. An option for someone who is quite nervous to facilitate might be to support someone else in facilitating first, like an assistant or a shadow role, to get a sense for how it feels in action.

Lastly, it's mighty helpful to have an official timekeeper. This person helps the group stay on track and prevents lessons from taking over the entire workshop. Mini-lessons should always comprise just a portion of the workshop time, but without a mindful eye on the watch, exercises can easily risk time-creep. The timekeeper should, like all the roles, rotate for equity.

Starting

Rituals are deliberate openings and closings to a workshop experience that serve to foster trust and safe space. Opens and closing can include: check-ins (where participants share how they're feeling about their work or other things), meditation (where the group collectively focuses on mindfulness, conscious breathing, and/or sensory awareness) or creative prompts where people share stories or thoughts (see below).

The following section offers suggestions for how to conduct openings and closings.

INTRODUCTION

Creating a habit or ritual to open and close the workshop can help everyone make the shift from the space outside the workshop to the creative community of the workshop. Openings give space for each member to share briefly and/or to take some quiet moments to reflect on the goals of being in the writing space together. Closings can give people time to reflect on what was learned, shared and/or accomplished that day.

Openings and closings can be different for each workshop, but keep in mind, both are meant to be brief: no more than 4-8 minutes. If all engage, it best serves the group to limit that sharing to a word or movement, one minute or another expressed limitation so as to ensure enough time for other aspects of the workshop.

Whatever method your group uses, openings and closings should invite and recognize every member equally in the workshop. To this end, writers are encouraged to participate but also have the ability to "pass," if they wish. Some people take longer to feel ready to share. Other people may not feel ready to share if they have had a rough day. Enabling a pass gives people the option of returning each week without fear of forced participation.

KEY COMPONENTS

Pick and choose which works best for your group, and feel free to vary it depending on moods and circumstances. Different people can select or create an opening and closing activity each day for variety, and to give everyone a chance (see the "each one, teach one" model in Section One).

KEY COMPONENTS

- **Helps end writer's block:** Freewriting can dissolve writer's block. Feeling creatively stuck can often be a reflection of stress that our writing isn't good enough or we don't have something worthy to say. Being unable to write, even though you want to, can also be due to fear that our writing will not be as perfect as we want. Expectations for ourselves and our writing can cause us stress, which limits our ability to think creatively and "just start." All of these constraints can be alleviated by freewriting because the stakes are intentionally lowered. Here, the goal is not producing perfection or even something good. The goal is just to get words on the page.
- **Build writer's muscles:** Writing demands complex mental processes, which we can think of as mental muscles. Just like other muscles, writing muscles need exercise to be strong and confident. Just like other kinds of exercise, the more you write, the easier it will become, and the better you will become at it. The more you face writer's block and write anyway, the better you will become at writing through blocks.
- **Critical and creative thinking:** Freewriting teaches a vital skill: the ability to turn your judgment on and off. It is true that critical thinking, or making informed judgements about information, can make great writing. In turn, it can feel counterintuitive to switch off our critical minds. Creative writing, however, demands a balance between judgment and simple observation, and acceptance of what can be contradictory and irreconcilable realities. Freewriting allows writers to draft with no judgment. This can help draw out realities we don't consciously admit to ourselves. It can also inspire our imagination beyond the limitations our conscious minds perceive to be true. This way of writing can generate content that can then be critically assessed during the revision process.
- **Idea generation:** Freewriting creates a library of your own voice and stories that you can access later. A notebook of freewriting exercises from writing prompts can offer writers material during fallow times like lockdown, staff shortages, or time in solitary when there is little stimulation to generate content. The smallest glimmer of an idea in your freewriting collection can turn into a novel. Each small paragraph you write during freewriting is a gift to your future self.

For more on this point, see Curtis Dawkins' essay "The Most Important Thing (and a Few Other Rules)" starting on pg. 171 in *Sentences*.

Creating Writing

Freewriting is an exercise in which you write—freely, as the name implies, the goal is to keep the hand moving—about what you're thinking about that day, or any topic used as a prompt, for a set amount of time. During freewrite, you may jot down any thoughts that come to your mind. Don't worry about grammar, spelling, or punctuation. Freewriting is about getting ideas out, not producing a polished piece of writing. Write as much as you can without stopping during the freewrite period.

If you get stuck, you can copy the same word or phrase over and over or start practicing descriptive writing by explaining what is going on around you in detail. Allow yourself to write freely and unselfconsciously. Once you start writing with few limitations, you may find you have more to say than you first realized.

A single gem of a thought might arrive in the text that you can pull out and expand on in a more intentional piece of writing. Your flow of thoughts can lead you to discover many new, and sometimes even surprising, ideas you want to write about. Freewriting may even lead you to discover another topic entirely that excites you.

IDEAS FOR OPENERS

- Share your name and a word that expresses how you are feeling today.
- Share your name and everyone responds, ie, 'Juan' and everyone says, 'Hi Juan.'
- Share something that inspired you this week.
- Share your favorite author, or one that you are currently interested in.
- Share the name of a text (book, poem, article, etc.) that has had an impact on you.
- Everyone joins in taking five conscious breaths together. A nice way to do this is to use your hand or hands. Start by closing one hand into a fist. Take a deep breath in, hold it for a pause, then let it out and open one finger. Repeat this for each finger until your palm is open. Notice how you feel. Participants can close their eyes or gaze at one spot to support this practice.
- If it is available, listen to a part of a song. Invite everyone to move to the music if they want to. This is a way to shift out of the experience of outside the space and into the moment.
- Share a movement or gesture. Everyone repeats the movement or gesture.
- Share three rhyming words. Everyone repeats each person's rhyme.
- Do a few stretches together, as if waking up in the morning. These can be individualized or one person can share some stretches for others to follow. This also helps shift the focus from outside the space to focusing on the work at hand.

More warm-up exercises are detailed on pages 85-86, the first two pages of Andy Warner's essay "On Graphic Narrative" in *The Sentences that Create Us*.

IDEAS FOR CLOSERS

- Each person can say thank you or congratulations or another word of support and recognition.
- A quick way to wrap up class when there is limited time is to simply gather in a circle and each person shares a word to express how they are feeling. This can also be done at the start and repeated at the finish so that folks can see how the workshop may have shifted feelings.
- Ask someone in the group to reiterate what everyone is hoping will be accomplished before the next workshop. For example, if you have all decided to read a particular essay, reiterate that. Or if you have selected a few people to present next time, reiterate who will be sharing. This closes out the day and also reminds everyone of what is coming next.
- Offer a sentence that each writer completes, such as "One thing I'm taking with me from today is..."

COMMUNITY

Opening and closing activities build community by giving everyone a moment in the sun, so to speak, not just to talk about their work, but outside of their writing, as a person, and as a valued member of the group. Secondly, the opening and closing activities help the group gain a sense of how the work is landing with everyone. Sharing a feeling at the start and at the end, for example, offers a sense of the impact of the work on each person. These moments of connecting beyond the page offer an opportunity for the group to build community and camaraderie, to prepare mind and body for the workshop, and, at times, to share a laugh or movement or quiet space.

TROUBLESHOOTING

The biggest issue to be aware of when thinking about how to open and close the workshop is time. Even though engaging in opening and closing activities can really support a powerful experience in the workshop, there is rarely enough time to accomplish all of the group's goals. Also, people are understandably protective of their workshop time, so they may be resistant to doing anything else. Here are some ways to address the issue of time:

- Keep it short! These can take 2 minutes and should always be under 10 minutes, more like 5.
- Mix it up! Try something different each time. Let all members take a turn selecting them. Have fun with it.
- Be inclusive! One of the main goals of this is to give everyone a moment to simply be present, whether to say their name, to share a quick rhyme, or to take a shared breath—to goal is to be recognized, welcomed and engaged.
- It's helpful for everyone to come with an open attitude and to be sure to share the purpose of these opening and closing times: shifting from "out" to "in," and building community.
- Try reflecting on how these are working once in a while. Maybe use the opening and closing times one day to ask folks how they are working, and what they might want to try differently.
- If openings or closings begin to feel too rote, it's okay to take a break from them to see what happens organically.