

# DAILY WRITING PRACTICE

## What is a daily writing practice?

It is not simply a routine, a schedule, or a word-count goal. This is practice in the sense of something you do for yourself to hone your art, like piano practice. It might also be practice in the sense of a religious practice, an activity that is private but worthwhile in its own right.

## Julia Cameron and Morning Pages

Julia Cameron first described Morning Pages in her book *The Artist's Way*. She recommended them for all artists, not just writers, as a tool of “creative recovery.”

- “Morning Pages are three pages of longhand, stream of consciousness writing, done first thing in the morning. \*There is no wrong way to do Morning Pages– they are not high art. They are not even “writing.” They are about anything and everything that crosses your mind– and they are for your eyes only. Morning Pages provoke, clarify, comfort, cajole, prioritize and synchronize the day at hand. Do not over-think Morning Pages: just put three pages of anything on the page...and then do three more pages tomorrow.”

For Cameron, it was important to do them first thing in the morning and long-hand. Many writers have adapted it for their own purposes, like *750 Words*.

- “I still don’t understand why the pages must be done in the morning. I write so much better at night.” Let me be clear: good writing is not the point. Think of your pages like a whisk broom. You stick the broom into all the corners of your consciousness. If you do this first thing in the morning, you are laying out your track for the day. Pages tell you of your priorities. With the pages in place first thing, you are much less likely to fall in with others’ agendas. Your day is your own to spend. You’ve claimed it. If you wait to write pages at night, you are reviewing a day that has already happened and that you are powerless to change.”
- Pages must be done longhand. The computer is fast—too fast for our purposes. Writing by computer gets you speed but not depth. Writing by computer is like driving a car at 85 mph. Everything is a blur. “Oh, my God, was that my exit?” Writing by hand is like going 35 mph. “Oh, look, here comes my exit. And look, it has a Sonoco station and a convenience store.

Cameron also emphasizes the therapeutic qualities of morning pages:

- Pages clarify our yearnings. They keep an eye on our goals. They may provoke us, coax us, comfort us, even cajole us, as well as prioritize and synchronize the day at hand. If we are drifting, the pages will point that out. They will point the way True North. Each morning, as we face the page, we meet ourselves. The pages give us a place to vent and a place to dream. They are intended for no eyes but our own.

## Natalie Goldberg and the Timed Writing Exercise

Natalie Goldberg is the author of *Writing Down the Bones*. She teaches a lot of writing workshops all over the world and the foundation of her method is the timed writing exercise.

- The basic unit of writing practice is the timed exercise. You may time yourself for ten minutes, twenty minutes, or an hour. It's up to you. At the beginning you may want to start small and after a week increase your time, or you may want to dive in for an hour the first time. It doesn't matter. What does matter is that whatever amount of time you choose for that session, you must commit yourself to it and for that full period:
- 1. *Keep your hand moving.* (Don't pause to reread the line you have just written. That's stalling and trying to get control of what you're saying.)
- 2. *Don't cross out.* (That is editing as you write. Even if you write something you didn't mean to write, leave it.)
- 3. *Don't worry about spelling, punctuation, grammar.* (Don't even care about staying within the margins and lines on the page.)
- 4. *Lose control.*
- 5. *Don't think. Don't get logical.*
- 6. *Go for the jugular.* (If something comes up in your writing that is scary or naked, dive right into it. It probably has lots of energy.)
- These are the rules. It is important to adhere to them because the aim is to burn through to first thoughts, to the place where energy is unobstructed by social politeness of the internal censor, to the place where you are writing what your mind actually sees and feels, not what it thinks it should see or feel. It's a great opportunity to capture the oddities of your mind. Explore the rugged edge of thought. Like grating a carrot, give the paper the colorful coleslaw of your consciousness.

# THREE TIMED EXERCISES FROM NATALIE GOLDBERG'S WRITING DOWN THE BONES

## WRITE ON A TOPIC

#1. Tell about the quality of light coming in through your window.

Jump in and write. Don't worry if it's night and your curtains are closed or you would rather write about the lights up north — just write. Go for ten minutes, fifteen, a half-hour.

#2. Begin with "I remember."

Write lots of small memories. If you fall into one large memory, write that. Don't be concerned if the memory happened five seconds ago or five years ago. Just keep going. Everything that isn't this moment is memory coming alive again as you write. If you get stuck, just repeat the phrase "I remember" and keep going.

(VK: I left a comment on an Instagram video of how it reminded me of the 80s TV series Street Hawk. That prompted me to write about the series in my diary. I wrote about the sleek, black motorcycle, about how excited I felt when the intro music hit, about how my friends and I would count "5, 4, 3, 2, 1!" and pedal our bicycles like hell for the next 30 seconds as if we had Street Hawk's Hyperthrust, and about how the program kindled my lifelong love affair with motorcycles. It was fantastic! Another "I remember" experiment led to an epiphany that turned into this article.)

#3. Write about something from three sides.

Take something you feel strongly about — positive or negative — and write about it as if you love it. Go as far as you can, then flip over and write about the same thing as if you hate it. Then write about it perfectly neutral.

#4. Write about a color.

Choose a color — for instance, pink — and take a 15-minute walk. On your walk notice wherever there is pink. Come back to your notebook (or Word doc) and write for 15 minutes.

#5. Write in different places

For example, in a laundromat, and pick up the rhythm of the washing machines. Write at bus stops, in cafés. Write what is going on around you.

#6. "Give me your morning."

Breakfast, waking up, walking to the bus stop. Be as specific as possible. Slow down in your mind and go over the details of the morning. (VK: This is the easiest prompt to write on. If I'm drawing a blank no matter how hard I try to think of a topic, I just describe my mornings. Sometimes it leads to articles like this one.)

#7. Visualize a place that you really love, be there, see the details. Now write about it.

It could be a corner of your bedroom, an old tree you sat under one whole summer, a table at McDonald's in your neighborhood, a place by a river. What colors are there, sounds, smells? When someone reads it, she should know what it's like to be there. She should feel how you love it, not by your saying you love it, but by your handling of the details.

#8. Write about "leaving."

Approach it any way you want. Write about your divorce, leaving the house this morning, or a friend dying.

## WRITE ON A TOPIC CONTINUED

#9. Write about:

- swimming
- the stars
- the most frightened you've ever been
- green places
- the closest you ever felt to God or nature
- reading and books that have changed your life
- physical endurance
- a teacher you had

Don't be abstract. Write the real stuff. Be honest and detailed.

#10. Take a poetry book. Open to any page, grab a line, write it down, and continue from there.

Natalie's friend calls it "writing off the page." If you begin with a great line, it helps because you can start writing right off from a lofty place. "I will die in Paris on a rainy day... it will be a Thursday," by the poet Cesar Vallejo. "I will die on Monday at 11 o'clock, on Friday at three o'clock in South Dakota riding a tractor, in Brooklyn in a delicatessen," on and on. Every time you get stuck, just rewrite your first line and keep going. Rewriting the first sentence gives you a whole new start and a chance for another direction — "I don't want to die and I don't care if I'm in Paris or Moscow or Youngstown, Ohio."

#11. What kind of animal are you?

Do you think you are really a cow, chipmunk, fox, horse underneath?

#12. What is your first memory?

#13. Who are the people you have loved?

#14. Write about the streets of your city.

#15. Describe a grandparent.

## LEARN A FORM: SHORT POEMS

Write a series of three short poems. You only have three minutes to write each one; each one must be three lines. Begin each one with a title that you choose from something your eye falls on: for example, glass, salt, water, light reflecting, the window. Three lines, three minutes. Continue doing this until that short thingink is a structure inside you and you can call it forth when that's the form you need. Especially in a short poem, all words are used economically and the title should add another dimension to the poem rather than repeat a word already used in the body of the short poem.

## THE ACTION OF A SENTENCE

First write down a list of any 10 nouns. You might prompt yourself to think of abstract nouns, as well as proper and concrete nouns.

eg bread, rage, Friday, bricks, worry, Perranporth, sunlight, fender, possibility, glass

Now think of any one occupation - nurse, gardener, chauffeur, tour guide, potter, soldier, teacher - and write down a list of 10 verbs to describe actions which a worker in that field might perform.

eg nurse: bind, soothe, dose, bandage, listen, argue, record, bathe, lift, inject

Finally look at the two lists together and see what noun-verb combinations seem promising/illuminating. Some metaphors might be adjusted, stacked, clustered or extended.

eg One Friday bathed and another bandaged the bruising weeks of term. The weekends just sat and listened.

eg A jumble of broken bricks recorded the point where dad's DIY project had come to a sudden and violent end.

eg The fender argued persuasively with my collar-bone.

eg Soothed by sunlight, her worries lifted.

This is an artificial exercise and not a recipe for writing, but in the process of combining words which may at first seem unlikely, new possibilities of vocabulary and syntax, voice and purpose may suggest themselves. Some of your sentences may suggest starting points for stories, memories. Choose one and write for 10-20 minutes.

## BONUS EXERCISE: SYNTAX

Try this. Take one of your most boring pieces of writing and choose from three or four consecutive lines or sentences and write them at the top of a blank piece of paper.

Okay. See each one of those words simply as wooden blocks, all the same size and color. No noun or verb has any more value than the, a, and. Everything is equal. Now for about a third of a page scramble them up as though you were just moving wooden blocks around. Don't try to make any sense of what you write down. Your mind will keep trying to construct something. Hold back that urge, relax, and mindlessly write down the words. You will have to repeat words to fill a third of a page.

Now if you would like, arbitrarily put in a few periods, a question mark, maybe an exclamation mark, colons, or semicolons. Do all of this without thinking, without trying to make any sense. Just for fun.

Now read it aloud as though it were saying something. Your voice should have inflection and expression. You might try reading it in an angry voice, an exuberant, sad, whining, petulant, or demanding voice, to help you get into it.