

The Rules of Writing Practice

Drawn from Natalie Goldberg's books, Writing Down the Bones and Wild Mind.

- 1. Keep your hand moving.** The basic unit of writing practice is the timed exercise. Keep your hand moving for the whole writing period—be it ten minutes or two hours. Keeping your hand moving enables you to separate the creator from the editor so the editor can't creep in and sabotage your efforts. No matter what happens, keep your hand moving. If the atom bomb drops, you go out writing.
- 2. Stick with first thoughts.** First thoughts are the way you first flash on something—what you really see, feel, think, and want to say. First thoughts are not orderly, “proper,” “politically correct,” or polite. But they are the place from which your writing comes alive. First thoughts carry energy. So whatever flashes through your mind, write it down. Don't worry if it's logical or if it makes sense.
- 3. You're free to write the worst crap in America.** We call it writing “practice” for a reason. We don't expect pianists, football players or opera singers to get good without years of training, repetition, and practice. It's the same thing with writing. You have to be willing to write a lot of junk before you write something good. You don't decide to be a writer, pick up a pen, and write *War and Peace*. Expecting that you will write a lot of junk for a long time gives you a tremendous amount of freedom.
- 4. Don't worry about punctuation, grammar, syntax or spelling.** That's not the job of the creator. It's the job of the editor and your third grade English teacher. Your job is to get your wild mind on the page without worrying about form, structure or “doing it right.”
- 5. Be specific.** Not car, but Plymouth. Not dog, but Yorkshire terrier. Not the flower in the window, but the geranium in the window. Not a codependent, neurotic man, but Harry, who runs to open the refrigerator for his wife, thinking she wants an apple, when she is headed for the gas stove to light her cigarette. Be careful of those pop-psychology labels. Get below the label and be specific to the person.
- 6. Don't cross out.** When you do writing practice, you're training yourself to put down whatever comes through you. Crossing out is the editor sneaking in. When you're in the middle of writing, you don't know whether something is powerful or not. Sometimes our mistakes end up being our best writing.
- 7. Lose control.** Let it rip. Say what you want to say, not what you think you should say.
- 8. Go for the jugular.** If something scary comes up, go for it. No one's ever died from writing down the truth. If you avoid the things that scare you, the things that have energy, you'll spend all your time being polite and writing around them. If you keep avoiding something in your writing, it will be obvious.
- 9. Don't hold anything back for later.** As Annie Dillard says in *The Writing Life*: “One of the few things I know about writing is this. Spend it all. Shoot it. Play it. Lose it. All. Right away. Every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place in the book or for another book. Give it. Give it all. Give it now. The impulse to save something good for a better place later is the signal to spend it now. Something more will arise for later, something better. These things fill from behind, from beneath, like well water. Similarly, the impulse to keep to yourself what you have learned is not only shameful, it is destructive. Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes.”

You can sign up for free weekly writing exercises (delivered to your inbox) & learn about Laura's writing retreats, “The Writer's Retreat of Your Dreams” and “The Writer's Retreat of Your Dreams Goes to Bali,” at lauradavis.net/writing-retreats/

Writing Prompts for Memoir

Basic Prompts:

- I remember...
- I believe...
- I've learned...
- I used to be, but now I am...
- Tell me the story of your name
- Where I come from
- What I'm made of
- Tell me about your people
- My foundation
- What I stand on
- Turning points
- A phone call that changed my life

Memory Enhancing Prompts:

- What food was kept in the kitchen when you were a child? Describe it in detail.
- Tell me about your first telephone and how it was used.
- Tell me about your first TV or another time something new entered your family life. This will vary depending on your age.
- Tell me about green stamps, coupons, or another way your family saved money when you were a child.

If you didn't grow up with a mother or father, substitute other significant adults in your life for the following prompts:

- Tell me about your mother's jewelry or something else she treasured.
- Tell me about what your father kept on his dresser. If he didn't keep things on his dresser, choose another place where he took things out of his pocket and set them down.
- Write about something that you saw when you were standing in a doorway.
- Write about something that happened while you were in a car.
- Write about something that happened when you were in a bathroom.
- Write about something that happened while you were on some form of public transportation.
- Write about something that happened in a kitchen.
- Write about something that happened in a backyard in the summer.
- Write about something that happened in a schoolyard.
- A story my family tells about me

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- A habitual story
- A story that is repeated over and over in my family
- A story I tell to new people in my life to create intimacy and reveal character

More Memory Enhancing Prompts:

- A story I tell to shock people
- A story I tell to fool people
- A story I tell about being hurt, abandoned or victimized
- A story that has helped me to survive
- The day (my mother was taken away, my sister died, John cornered me in the barn, the telegram came, I was fired, I got out of jail)
- What I wish I had said
- Tell me about someone who believed in you
- Tell me about a time you lost hope
- Tell me about a time you decided to try again
- Tell me about a time you hit bottom
- Write a letter saying goodbye to your youth (or fill in the blank...)
- Tell me about a subject your father/mother/husband/sister/minister brought up again and again. See if you can write it in his/her voice.
- Make a list of twenty people who are no longer in your life. Chose one person you no longer have in your life and write a portrait of that person. Repeat.
- Describe the clothing you wore during a particular time in your life. Write a story about the clothing that reveals character.
- A promise I made to myself

To Help Get A Sense of Perspective

- What I learned (the summer I was five, in the hospital, when Papa died, growing up on the streets, from winning the lottery...)
- What love has taught me
- What hate has taught me
- What silence has taught me
- How I survived
- What I've lost
- What I've found

*Laura Davis, The Transformative Power of Writing Practice
San Miguel Writer's Conference, February, 2018*

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