You . . .

You started learning to write—at the latest—as soon as you were born. You learned within hours to recognize an “audience,” and within a few days that expressing yourself would elicit a response. Your basic desires created the fundamental form of story—I want, I want, I WANT!—with its end in gratification (comedy) or denial (tragedy). Within a year you had begun to understand the structure of sentences and to learn rules of immense subtlety and complexity, so that for no precisely understood reason you would always say “little red wagon” rather than “red little wagon.” You responded to rhythm and rhyme (One, two. Buckle my shoe.). You matched images and explained their meanings (This is a giraffe. Dog is hungry). You invented metaphors (My toes are soldiers.). By the time you could speak you were putting together personal essays about what you had done and what had happened to you and forecasting fantasies of your future exploits. By the time you started school, you had (mostly thanks to television) watched more drama than the nobility of the Renaissance, and you understood a good deal about how a character is developed, how a joke is structured, how a narrative expectation is met, and how dramatic exposition, recognition, and reversal are achieved. You understood the unspoken rules of specific traditions—that Bugs Bunny may change costume but the Road Runner may not, that the lovers will marry, that the villain must die.
You are, in fact, a literary sophisticate. You have every right to write.

This needs saying emphatically and often, because writing is one of those things—like public speaking, flying, and garden snakes—that often calls up unnecessary panic. Such fear is both normal (a high percentage of people feel it) and irrational (statistically, the chances of disaster are pretty low). It is true that some speakers do humiliate themselves, some planes do crash, some snakes are poisonous. Nevertheless, people do learn to speak, fly, and garden. And people learn to shrug at their dread and write.

... and writing...

All writing is imaginative. The translation of experience or thought into words is of itself an imaginative process. Although there is certainly such a thing as truth in writing, and we can spot falsity when we encounter it in print, these qualities are hard to define, hard to describe, and do not always depend on factual accuracy or inaccuracy. Often what is most original, that is, imaginative, is precisely what “rings true.”

Aristotle said that when you change the form of a thing you change its purpose. For example, the purpose of an algebra class is to teach algebra. But if you take a photo of the class, the purpose of the photo cannot be to teach algebra. The picture would probably serve the purpose of commemorating the class and the people in it. On the other hand, if you wrote a short story about that class, its purpose might be (not to teach algebra or to commemorate the class, but) to reveal something about the emotional undertow, the conflict in or between students, the hidden relationships in that apparently staid atmosphere.

It’s impossible to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth in words, because words are of a different form than experience, and their choice is determined by the vast array of cultural and personal influences. Writers learn very quickly that a written incident is not necessarily credible because it “really happened,” and that convincing writing is in the writing and not in the facts. When you write about an experience, you put it in a new form and therefore furnish it with a new purpose. Part of the hard work and the pleasure of writing is discovering what that purpose is. You will never exactly “catch” an experience you have lived, but you may both discover and reveal new insights in the recasting of that experience.

All writing is autobiographical as well as invented. Just as it’s impossible to write the whole and literal truth about any experience, so it’s also impossible to invent without drawing on your own experience, which has furnished your brain. Your view of yourself, the place you live, the people you know, the institutions you live with, your view of nature and God or the gods will inform not only your dreams and daydreams, what you say, wear, think, and do, but also everything you write. What you write will inevitably reveal to a certain extent both what you think the world is like and what you think it should be like.
Between the two impossibilities—of perfectly capturing your experience in words and of avoiding it altogether—lies the territory that we call “creative.” Begin by writing whatever comes to you, recording your observations, trying out your ideas, indulging your fantasies. Then figure out what you want to make of it, what its purpose is, and what it means. Then work toward making it “work”—that is, toward making it meaningful for the reader who is your partner in the imaginative act.

... and reading ...

At the same time, you yourself need to become a reader of a writerly sort, reading greedily, not just for entertainment but also focusing on the craft, the choices, and techniques of the author; “reading the greats,” in novelist Alan Cheuse’s words, “in that peculiar way that writers read, attentive to the peculiarities of the language...soaking up numerous narrative strategies and studying various approaches to that cave in the deep woods where the human heart hibernates.”

When you study a piece of writing as a student of literature, you focus on understanding what is there on the page and how the parts fit together, in order to tease out the story’s significance. Reading as a writer involves all that but it is more concentrated, more active, and more selfish. It involves asking not only What does this mean? but also How does it work? Why has the author made this choice of imagery, voice, atmosphere? What techniques of language, pacing, character, contribute to this effect? As a writerly reader you pay close attention to the rhythm and flow of the language, to the way word choice influences an effect, to voice and point of view as means of building narrative—in Francine Prose’s words, “not only who was speaking but who was being spoken to, where the listener and speaker were, and when and why the event—that is, the telling of the story—was occurring.” This kind of reading becomes in itself an imaginative act as you put yourself in the position of the author to intuit the reason for her choices. Then the question naturally occurs: Can I use this effect, try these rhythms, create this sort of atmosphere? It is only one step further to imitation of such strategies, and to using imitation as way of developing your own skills.

Reader/writers sometimes become impatient with this process. “How do you know the author didn’t just want to do it that way?” The answer is: You don’t. But everything on the page is there because the writer chose that it should be there, and the effectiveness of the piece depends on those choices. The British critic F. R. Leavis used to observe that a poem is not a frog. In order to understand the way a frog works you must kill it, then splay out the various respiratory, digestive, muscular systems, and so forth. But when you “take apart” a piece of literature to discover how it is made, and then put it back together by reading it again, it is more alive than before. It will resonate with all you have learned, and you as a writer will know a little better how to reproduce such vitality.
... and this book...

My creative writing workshop exchanged a few classes with a group of student choreographers. The first time we came into the dance theater, we writers sat politely down in our seats with our notebooks on our laps. The choreographer-dancers did stretches on the carpet, headstands on the steps; some sat backward on the chairs; one folded herself down into a seat like a teabag in a teacup. When they started to dance they were given a set of instructions: Group A is rolling through, up and under; Group B is blue Tuesday; Group C is weather comes from the west. The choreographers began to invent movement; each made up a “line” of dance. They repeated and altered it. They bumped into each other, laughed, repeated, rearranged, and danced it through. They did it again. They adjusted. They repeated. They danced it through. Nobody was embarrassed and nobody gave up. They tried it again. One of the young writers turned to me with a face of luminous discovery. “We don’t play enough,” she said.

That’s the truth. Writing is such a solitary occupation, and we are so used to moiling at it until it’s either perfect or due, that our first communal experience of our writing also tends to be awful judgment. Even alone, we internalize the criticism we anticipate and become harsh critics of ourselves. “The progress of any writer,” said the great poet Ted Hughes, “is marked by those moments when he manages to outwit his own police system.”

*Imaginative Writing* assumes that you will play before you work—dance before performing, doodle before fiddling with, fantasize before forming, anything goes before finish something. This is not an unusual idea among writers and teachers of writing. (“Indulge yourself in your first drafts,” says novelist Jonathan Lethem, “and write against yourself in revisions.”) But it is easier to preach than to practice.

Nevertheless, most of the techniques that writers use are relevant to most forms of imaginative writing and can be learned by playing around in any form. So the first six chapters of this book talk about some techniques that are useful in any sort of writing or relevant to more than one genre, and suggest ways to play with those techniques. The purpose of these chapters is to free the imagination. The seventh chapter talks about ways to develop and revise your experiments into a finished piece. The last four chapters discuss what is particular to each of four genres, and how you can mold some of what you have written toward each of them.

Note: The word “genre,” can be confusing because it has two distinct but overlapping meanings when applied to writing. In the first definition it refers to the different kinds or forms of literature—nonfiction, poetry, fiction, drama, and so forth—and that is the way it is used throughout this book. In its second meaning, “genre” refers to certain traditions within fiction, as a western, detective story, spy story, romance, science fiction, horror, and so forth. These fiction genres are often discouraged in creative writing courses because they rely on set narrative elements that have less to do with good writing than with the expectations of particular fans.
The romance, for example, must have a plucky heroine, a handsome hero with a secret past, a dark lady, a mansion, a forest, and usually a flight through the woods in scanty clothing. Many instructors feel that whereas learning the techniques of good writing may help you write good genre fiction, learning the particular traditions of a given fictional genre will not necessarily help you write well or honestly in the tradition called “mainstream” or “literary.”

The tendency of recent literature is in any case to move further away from rigid categories, toward a loosening or crossing of genre (in the sense of literary form). Many writers are eager to experiment with pieces that blur the distinction between two genres or even follow two genre patterns at once. So “short short” stories may have elements of poetry or essay; the “prose poem” may be seen as a lyric or a story. An essay might be structured with a refrain. So Adam Thorpe ends the novel *Ulverton* in the form of a film script; columnist Maureen Dowd frequently writes a political essay in the form of a fantasy play; Michael Chabon and others write detective or science fiction with literary ambition and intent—“genre fiction” pressing at the bounds of “the fiction genre” with results that have been called “slipstream” or “interstitial” fiction.

So there is a lot of “do this” in the following pages, but a good deal more of “try this.” The overriding idea of the book is *play*—serious, strenuous, dedicated, demanding, exhilarating, enthusiastic, repeated, perfected play. It is the kind of play that makes you a superior swimmer or singer, a first-rank guitar, pool, polo, piano, or chess player. As with any sport or musical skill, a writer’s power grows by the practice of the moves and the mastering of the instrument.

Insofar as writing is a skill, it can only be learned by doing. Insofar as writing is “inspired,” it may pour out of you obsessively, feverishly, without your seeming to have to make any effort or even without your seeming to have any responsibility for it. When that happens, it feels wonderful, as any writer will tell you. Yet over and over again, writers attest to the fact that the inspiration only comes with, and as a result of, the doing.

... and your journal ...

While you use this book you will be writing one—a journal that should be, first of all, a physical object with which you feel comfortable. Some writers keep notes in a shoebox or under the bed, but your journal probably needs to be light enough to carry around easily, sturdy enough to stand up to serious play, large enough to operate as a capacious holdall for your thoughts. Think of it as a handbag, a backpack, a trunk, a cupboard, an attic, a warehouse of your mind. Everything can go into it: stuff you like and what you paid too much for, what Aunt Lou gave you and the thing you found in the road, this out-of-date whatsit and that high-tech ware. You never know what you’re going to need; absolutely anything may prove useful later on.
TRY THIS 1.1
In other words, write any sort of thing in your journal, and write various kinds of things:
• An observation
• An overheard conversation
• Lists
• Longings
• Your response to a piece of music
• A rough draft of a letter
• Names for characters
• Quotations from what you are reading
• The piece of your mind you’d like to give so-and-so
• An idea for a story
• A memory
• A dream
• A few lines of a poem
• A fantasy conversation
• Titles of things you are never going to write
• Something else

Your journal is totally forgiving; it is 100 percent rough draft; it passes no judgments.
Throughout Imaginative Writing there will be prompts, trigger lines, and ideas for playing in your journal. Here are a few general suggestions:

- **Freewrite.** Gertrude Stein called this “automatic writing.” Either on a regular schedule or at frequent intervals, sit down and write without any plan whatsoever of what you are going to write. Write anything that comes into your head. It doesn’t matter what it is at all. This is the equivalent of volleying at tennis or improvisation at the piano; it puts you in touch with the instrument and limbers the verbal muscles.

- **Focused freewrite.** Pick a topic and focus on it. Write for five or ten minutes saying anything at all about it—anything at all—in any order.

- **Brainstorm.** Start with the question *What if…?* Finish the question and then free-associate around it, absolutely anything that pops into your head—ideas, situations, connections, solutions, and images, no matter how bizarre. This is a problem-solving technique that can also generate energy for imaginative writing. If you need an idea, or if your character is facing a decision, or if you don’t know what your setting looks like—whatever the problem, whatever idea might be struggling to surface—brainstorm it and let your mind run free.

- **Using the world.** A journal is not a diary. Your journal may include your own feelings and problems, but training yourself to observe the outside world will help develop the skills of an imaginative writer. Make a daily habit of
recording something you experienced or noticed. It may be an overheard remark, an unexpected sight, a person who caught your attention, even a news item or something you learned in a class. Knowing that you are going to write every day will give you a habit of listening and seeing with writing in mind. A writer is a kind of benevolent cannibal who eats the world—or at least, you'll experience the world with an eye and ear toward what use you can make of it.

Make a habit, rather than a chore, of writing in your journal. If you skip a day, it's not the end of the world, but it may well be that, as with a physical workout, you have to coax or cajole yourself into writing regularly before you get to the point when you look forward to that part of your life, can't wait for it, can't do without it. You will know some of the patterns that help you create a habit. Write first thing in the morning? At the same hour every day? After a shower? With a cup of coffee? Before you fall asleep? Use your self-discipline to make yourself sit down and write, but once you get there, tell your inner critic to hush, give yourself permission to write whatever you please, and play.

TRY THIS 1.2
Here is a list of lists:

- Things on which I am an expert
- Things I have lost
- Signs of winter
- What is inside my body
- Things people have said to me
- What to take on the journey
- Things I have forgotten
- Things to make lists of

Pick any one of these items to generate a list in your journal. Pick a single word from your list and write a paragraph about it. Is this the germ of a memoir or a story?
Write a single line about each item on the list. Is this the start of a poem?

JOURNAL EXCERPTS

What follows is a series of snippets, generously offered from the journals of well-established writers, to indicate what a variety of entries a journal might contain. Some of these may be the germ of a story, novel, essay, poem, or play; some may never find their way into a published piece. Some are observations, some are fantasy, some are lists, names, an image, an action, a quotation. Some may suggest a kind of writing you wouldn't think to include in your own journal. Try it.
FROM THE JOURNAL OF: Ayelet Waldman

Old graveyard:
Delia Floyd
Mehitabel Witham
Joshua Horton
Seth Hewins
Sally Prince Holt
Jonah Fisher
Mehitabel Faulkner
Hepziabah Faulkner “I am ready”

Old man in walker—freckled pate, zipper cardigan, and black shoes two sizes too large. You could fit two fingers between his heel and the back of the shoe. They’re obviously worn, but not at all worn out. He must have bought them years ago, before his body began to shrink. Even his feet are smaller than they were.

FROM THE JOURNAL OF: Billy Collins

“People think there is no preparation to write poetry. Not like painting, or music. So in my kingdom, you would have to learn to play the trumpet before you would be allowed to write a poem.”

Kafka: “The meaning of life is that it will end.”

In America, we cannot seem to get enough of what we don’t need.

The mind needs to get used to something better than television.

as in music there are “rests” in poetry—obviously at the end of lines and stanzas but anywhere else the poet has sufficient control of cadence to give the reader no option but to pause.

“motives for writing: to continue to speak after you are dead and (from daniel menaker) to win the love of strangers.”

celery salt is an insult to the bloody mary

FROM THE JOURNAL OF: Cris Mazza (as a college-student, 19 years old)

But right then another arm-lock on my neck. The back of my chair was between us (I sitting, he standing), but I felt those shoulders over my own.

“I need to beat you up once a day for my only meanness—it’s the only time all day I have physical communication with someone.” Ha Ha.

“Me too.”

That was the real laugh, I mean, he really laughed. I don’t know why.

But he said we need each other.

Beauty too
intense to
be that of
a child,
too honest
to be that
of an adult
sprawled out
like a rag doll
someone had
thrown up
there.

not a crime—
a reality

I knew how she felt, the way my entrails were fluttering, the way I danced around inside when a slow-moving, slow-talking narrow-eyed man tried it with ME.

Yes, I overheard something. I wasn't listening though. I was thinking about something else. When his eyes hit, wham—like that—then I was part of it all right. I knew it. I had to help carry the AV equipment back for that reason.

FROM THE JOURNAL OF: Patricia Henley
“carry me” = take me
“levee hollers”—is/was this a common term? Did someone's mama and daddy meet at a levee holler?

Axe Jesus. A bumper sticker.

Jimmy’s grandpa has a jar of coins buried somewhere and a roomful of Elvis memorabilia. Or maybe it’s just music memorabilia.

Lucky was sent to live with Quakers at a boarding school in Pennsylvania when the schools were closed due to de-segregation. Arrangements had been made. She was seven years old. She had a suitcase from the goodwill and a cardboard box of books. She drank whole milk straight from the cow. Her own mother, when she saw her, seemed less and less like where she came from.

FROM THE JOURNAL OF: Philip Graham
There was no anger in her silence, like my father’s; rather, fear. And couldn’t fear be soothed into something else?

Those drawings were how she talked to me, a sign language caught on paper, shadings of her secret self I could spend my life translating.

I’d somehow engineered a strange reversal of personalities.

John Hawkes’s novel Sweet Willam: the grotesque rendered even more vivid by the elegance of Hawkes’s prose.

(continued)
the name of a malaria drug, Halfan

He’d twist himself into a little knot, try to coil himself so tight he’d finally feel something besides this damned airy floating. But he was never able to squeeze himself into pain; not even a tiny twinge: not even a hint of the lightest touch.

Most of the dead floated, traveling with the help of their own invisible wind. Only those newly arrived kept walking, an echo of the life they’d so recently lived... No blindness at all but a world alive with scent and touch, antennae exchanging encyclopedic caresses. It was all he’d ever hoped to accomplish in his lifetime: the afterlife was a virtual reality, beyond any technological breakthrough. There was nowhere he couldn’t enter, no person’s secrets he couldn’t uncover.

Those ants pushing and pulling away the smallest pieces of her cracker. But it was hers, and she cried out, but the ants ignored her. She cried out again, now in angry frustration, and began to crawl after them. Her mother scooped her up at her wails, but no soothing could quiet her. She had no words yet to explain to her mother, and the ants escaped. Following invisible designs inside herself, a picture she drew that I’d never see.

I wanted to bring her back, to have her arrive from wherever she was inside herself and see me at the table, across from her, waiting patiently.

the choppy, swaying gait of goats

He’d always believed that humans were some clever sort of larvae, firing off constructs—Stonehenge to the World Trade Center, knife to computer—that were bits of brain. And it was all leading to an artificial intelligence—that wasn’t artificial at all, being a product of brain—that would finally leave the larval stage behind and yet be its apotheosis, its crowning, transcendent glory.

TRY THIS 1.3
Take a notebook with you to any public place and make a list of the proper names you find there (a graveyard, a candy store, a restaurant, a street, a theater...). Write a paragraph of anything at all that these names, or one of them, suggests to you.

TRY THIS 1.4
Find five quotations you admire for some reason or other. Quote them in your journal. Write a sentence or two after each specifying what has attracted you to this particular combination of words.

TRY THIS 1.5
Listen, alone and intently, to a piece of music you care about. After listening for five or fifteen minutes, write anything the music suggests to you. If it has lyrics, don’t use the words of the song, but the images in your own brain, the words that paint your feeling. Don’t try to make sense, or even sentences; let the music dictate your words.
A word about your workshop . . .

Many of us think of the primary function of a writing workshop as being to criticize, in order to improve, whatever piece of writing is before us. This is, again, absolutely natural, not only because of the way the writing workshop has evolved over the years but because nothing is more natural than to judge art. We do it all the time and we do it out of a valid impulse. If you tell me you’ve just seen a movie, I don’t ask the plot; I ask: How was it? Art sets out to affect us emotionally and intellectually, and whether it has achieved this is of the first interest. The poet and critic John Ciardi said of literature that “it is never only about ideas, but about the experience of ideas,” and the first thing we want to know is, naturally, “how was the experience?”

But if the first thing you and your workshop expect is a writer at play, and if in order to play you banish your inner critic and give yourself permission to experiment, doodle, and dance, it doesn’t make a lot of sense to subject that play to immediate assessment. In any case it’s likely that the fragments produced by the exercises in the early chapters of this book will be read aloud rather than reproduced and read in advance. I’m going to suggest that for most of the time this book is being used, you avoid the phrases, I like, I don’t like, This works, This doesn’t work—and all their equivalents. It may be harder to forgo praise than blame, but praise should be a controlled substance too. Instead, discipline yourself to explore whatever is in front of you. Not What I like, but What this piece is like. Interrogate it, suggest its context, explore its nature and its possibilities:

- What is the conflict in this situation?
- This reminds me of…
- It’s like…
- I think this character wants…
- What if…?
- The rhythm is…
- Could this be expanded to…?
- The atmosphere seems…and so forth.

This kind of descriptive, inquisitive, and neutral discussion of writing is hard. It will pay off in the freedom that each writer feels to write and in the flexibility of critical response you’re developing in the workshop. In the later part of the course, when everyone is writing in a particular form and revision is the legitimate focus of the work, there will be a time to discuss not only what this piece is trying to do but also where and whether it succeeds. At that point, critique will help. This later critical function of the workshop is discussed further in Chapter 7, “Development and Revision.” Meanwhile keep in mind that even when you arrive at the point that criticism is relevant.
and helpful, there are a few basic protocols for the workshop that should always be observed:

- It is the obligation of each reader to prepare in advance, focusing on what succeeds in the piece, and where and why, then noting judiciously where improvement is needed, and why.
- The piece is under discussion. The author is not. Make sure your comments relate to the nature of the writing and not (even by implication) to the character of the writer. Separate the writer from the voice or character.
- Continue to interrogate the piece: What kind is it? What does it suggest? What is its apparent aim?
- The goal of the workshop is to make this piece the best that it can be. There’s no place for dismissal or disregard. On the contrary, the workshop is there to identify and foster the promise in every story, essay, poem, or drama.
- As the writer, your obligation is to listen attentively, take everything in, and keep your natural defensiveness in check. Your workshop leader may (or may not) offer you a chance to speak. But this is the least important part of the workshop process for you. The most important part comes later, when you get back to work. Then (and only then) you will begin to sort out what’s most useful.

TRY THIS 1.6
Make use of these prompts or trigger lines for easy freewrites. Pick one of them—quickly; don’t think about it too much—write it down and keep writing. Anything at all. Whatever the prompt suggests. Keep going. A little bit more.
- This journal is…
- My mother used to have…
- There was something about the way he…
- The house we lived in…
- In this dream I was…
- She got out of the car…
- The first thing I want in the morning…

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