



## *Author Asks*

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13-digit ISBN (paper): 978-1-936747-03-0

- 1 How important is it to you to keep a journal?
- 2 How do you manage to look so closely at objects?

## *Writing Exercises*

### **Exercise A: The Walk Through**

To introduce this exercise I'd like to extend William Carlos Williams's famous credo about the practice of poetry "No ideas but in things" and offer this slight variation: "Ideas adhere to things." For some writers, gathering up the stuff of a new essay is the most daunting moment of all. It's a moment that either threatens to overwhelm with its many competing possibilities or one that hoards its goods and offers few satisfying entry points. This exercise, "The Walk Through," has jump-started many dull/overwhelming moments for students. It is satisfying for list-makers of all kinds—most writers are obsessive list-makers—and, additionally, it helps one enter the past in very concrete ways.

In the world of real-estate, the "walk through" is the time at which the buyers take a last, hard look—room by room, appliance by appliance—at the house they are about to buy. In its intense focus, the "walk-through" differs from the "showing," that first-look a prospective buyer takes at a house; one that shows only the general scheme of things, the lay out, the over-all floor plan.

"Walk-throughs"—those bounded and concentrated ways of seeing our environment—are available to us, daily. Here's how I've suggested writers take off on a walk-through: Enter, by way of memory, a familiar room from childhood, from a familiar point of entry. Often memory, or the act of trying to remember, lands us in the right in the center of a place or a situation and we have to piece the scene together from a hazy, unfixed angle. Enter through the front door, for example, direct yourself through the room and look around as you proceed, controlling the scene, as if from behind a camera. Moving slowly, you'll be able to recall actual objects in your path and you'll rely less on overall "impressions." As you walk through, be sure to turn your head; note various objects to the right, to the left, in front and in back; note objects on top of objects (vases on coffeetables, rings left by errant glasses on coffeetables,

things at your child's-eye level). Peer over things. Look down into things. Creep under things. Move pillows and search around in couch cushions (as you used to!). Note the colors of the carpet/wall/curtains.

You'll be stunned, I think, at how many actual objects exist in memory to be recalled and how many can be recalled in specificity. It's important not to censor "insignificant" objects out of your scene: each object leads to the next and though they may seem insignificant in the larger scheme, remember that each one serves as a bridge, carrying you forth in your walk.

When you have completed a room (and it may take a few sittings to do this fully) you can go back and include associated sensory information (the feel of the dust—or the lack of dust; the quality of light through the blue curtains; how exactly that stubborn ring on the coffeetable got there). I have found this exercise to be freeing because it upends the need to "have an idea" at the outset of writing. One is more likely to bump into an idea if s/he can provide little shocks of recognition or memory, or induce a kind of reverie. Walking through, you'll create many instances where you are startled by what you've discovered—sitting there all along somewhere in your memory.

You can vary this exercise in many ways. You might, for example, "walk through" all the literal closets of your past and look at/note down what you find there. Clothes from different eras, hidden objects—all these things, grouped by closet (or room, or car, or whatever organizing principle you employ for the walk through) will present you with a contained world for exploration. Likely you will want to linger on certain objects, the ones that have a story to tell, that have suffered neglect of some kind. See what happens. I've always found it exciting to know that the objects I'd lived with for so long, and forgotten about consciously, are in some very real way, still present and intact, waiting patiently to be found and recalled to mind, so that they might offer their stories.

### **Exercise B: On Reading**

Here's my dilemma: I want to be part of the discussion about how writing happens, though I don't want to talk much about "process." And I have no recognizable strategies, methods or exercises to offer. But given the opportunity to think aloud, in a space dedicated to writing and among others who care about writing—a chance for which I'm grateful—I hope to say something honest and of use.

First, I'll come clean: exercises never worked for me. Instead of opening up new pathways, they barred the door. Sidelong, enter-your-mind-through-this-darkened alley procedures never released much of anything interesting—some, but not much—for me. Planning or hoping for surprise, I was never surprised. Expecting the nothing-that-could-be-something, I blew the charade. Like at a party when told to "loosen up," I tightened.

And yet, I believe there are fruitful ways to behave if you intend to write, and that serious writers abide by certain essential practices. I believe these practices are natural, and intrinsic—so here goes:

I believe in reading. I believe that if you want to write, you'll want to read. Everything. Anything. You'll read physics (even if you can't.) You'll read Pliny. You'll indulge your quirky drives—towards almanacs, recipe books, travelogues, dictionaries. You'll be delighted by words like "kunstkammer" and follow etymologically along until you come to a full blown interest in how museums came into being. You'll read farm catalogs and learn about roosters and hog-rings and beekeeping. You'll read to feel the shapes of ideas and arguments and shadow-sentiments forming. You'll read to press into your muscles those shapes and you'll—as a matter of course—bring the sensation of that shapeliness to your desk as you write. You'll read sentences over 14 times. Copy the sentences. Love or resist them. Love and resist them.

You'll read to experience the force of another's sensibility. You'll read as catcher, as lover, as skeptic, as prey.

Often, writing exercises feel like speed dating to me: sit you down fast and follow the script. It's hard to get away from the fact that the very act of "getting you in fast" is product-oriented—marriage or manuscript. Note how the phrase "to come away with something," applied to work-oriented seminars and workshops for example, has replaced the direct yet mysterious phrase "to learn something." As "text" replaced "book." As "prospect" replaced "passion." Even exercises that propose to help in "getting warmed up" feel to me, utilitarian; there's a purposefulness underneath it all; the intention is to launch yourself into something better, more meaningful, of ultimate use.

The experience of not-knowing how a phrase, a line, a sentence happened, the openness, the blankness and anxiety with which one comes to the blank page becomes part of the writing itself. If a rich reading life is the ever-burning fire that warms us as we sit down to write, then tending the fire is not an exercise in wilderness readiness: it is a deep understanding that the wilderness is all around us.

I do not mean to enter into this discussion and claim some space by being recalcitrant, gad-flyish. I wish not to draw attention to myself by asserting an outsider's stance in this collection which works towards the generative and the helpful. I mean to be generative and helpful. I hope to push anyone engaged in writing and the trials of renewal into a kind of self-reliance, into a belief in the necessity of self-reliance, wherein the tasks of "finding" (a technique, a subject, a sentence's shape) is recognized as the writing itself. Not a run-up to. Not practice-for. I hope to keep alive the messiness and sheer anxiety of entering, to assert these as natural and essential.

When you read, you make your own forays. Then you become, in a lifetime, ever more engaged with, bewitched, vexed, stunned by those forays. One week you'll read this: "She was genuinely fond of us; she would have enjoyed the long luxury of weeping for our untimely decease; coming at a moment when she felt 'well' and was not in a perspiration, the news that the house was being destroyed by a fire, in which all the rest of us had already perished, a fire which, in a little while, would not leave one stone standing upon another, but which she herself would still have plenty of time to escape without undue haste, provided that she rose at once from her bed, must often have haunted her dreams as a prospect which combined with the two minor advantages of letting her taste the full savor of her affection for us in long years of mourning, and of causing universal stupefaction in the village when she should sally forth to conduct our obsequies, crushed but courageous, moribund but erect, the paramount and priceless boon of forcing her at the right moment, with no time to be lost, no room for weakening hesitations, to go off and spend the summer at her charming farm of Mirougrain, where there was a waterfall." Ah! How Proust lands the whole sentence so breathlessly on waterfall!

Then the next week you'll encounter this: "Once or twice in the past he had been faintly disquieted by Zenobia's way of letting things happen without seeming to remark on them—and then, weeks afterward, in a casual phrase, revealing that she had all along taken her notes and drawn her inferences." Ah! How Wharton casts the sentence so cleanly out ahead.

You'll read and note the precipitous dip and fall between them. Note the pace and the meanderings, the extensions and retractions. You might Copy-and-Compose, as the old textbook says. You'll read Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman together, measuring the flexing displays of superhuman strength and breath, up against the lean and taut sprint.

You'll think: whoa, those Olympic athletes make it look so easy.

Then you'll start stretching.

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## *Suggested Reading*

Vladimir Nabakov  
Wallace Stevens  
Emily Dickinson  
Abraham Joshua Heschel  
Gerard Manley Hopkins  
Virginia Woolf  
Marilynne Robinson  
Albert Goldbarth

Kate Breakey (Photographer)  
Lydia Davis  
David Foster Wallace  
Gogol

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