

DAY 1: COLLECTING & SUPPLYING

Overview

Today is for gathering materials. The first hour of this day is a slog of tiny, fast exercises. Think of it like building a pantry or supply chest. We'll make lots of lists, do memory-recall exercises and timed writings, activating our language brains, plundering our imaginations and gleaning a little from the environment we're in too. We'll then improvise some writing. The culmination of Day 1 is a set of writing prompts we make for ourselves out of constellations derived from these lists. Then from all this matter, we'll grow people, voices, and scenes on Day 2.

Note on Tempo

In the list exercises, try to work at speed, taking whatever comes to mind. These are oriented toward the vast holding of ideas that are in reserve at any given moment. Let it spill.

In the timed writing exercises, try to write at a more relaxed, thoughtful tempo, but don't let yourself stop writing. Some timed writings will ask questions you won't know the answer to yet since you're starting from scratch. Just go to the edge of the unlit space and call the question into the vagueness. If you don't get an answer back, it's probably because you're just judging yourself too harshly. Remember everything can be jettisoned, so just get stuff onto the page now.

Hour 0–1.5

The warmup is about speed. Don't overthink it. Accept the wrong answers that come to your mind-hand. It's a warmup but also a chance to trawl your language and image brain. It's punctuated with occasional reflective timed writings that then feed back into the language and image roll.

Warmup: Word Brain

(approx. 15 mins; use a timer)

1 min: Write a list of all the verbs enacted by the space you're in. These might be actions people are doing if people are in the space with you, but try to think about what the walls, the floor, and the air are doing too.

1 min: Write a list of words beginning with the letter B.

1 min: Write a list of names you could give an elderly pig.

1 min: Write a list of words pertaining to any process of repair.

1 min: Write a list of words from the specialized vocabulary of a particular trade, hobby, game, or area of technical knowledge—go with the first one that comes to mind.

5-minute timed writing: Articulate what you've learned or come to think about humans lately. Scale is up to you—humanity in general, subsets, types, or a particular human (maybe even yourself). Don't use this time to judge; this is not necessarily a moral question. Just try to articulate something about mechanism or habit.

1 min: Write a list of verbs that counteract, jam, or dissolve the behavior you wrote about in the last prompt.

2 mins: Vacancy.* Pens down. Attend to the room you're in. Stretch or drink water.

*(*On vacancy: I borrow this word from Erik Ehn, who prescribes a period of vacancy in the middle of a writing day when he leads silent writing retreats. Likewise, K.J. Holmes told me once that she always places a period of rest in the middle of (dance) class.)*

Generators: Event/Site

(approx. 15 mins)

The first four lists ask for types—generics; only the fifth list is specific

Lists: Place/type

(approx. 10 minutes)

List 10 types of places in the natural world (that is, names humans give to particular natural phenomena)

List 10 types of space constructed by animals

List 10 types of spaces architects will have to problem-solve in the future

List 5 spaces of vastly different scales from each other

List your 4 favorite places in the world (as it stands today)

Generator: Site/Figure/Process

This generative exercise is good for thinking about landscape or setting as a container for both ephemeral activity and deep-time processes. It's also a nice body meditation to bring your attention

to your day. Read through the script of the exercise and then complete. Do actually close your eyes and try to conjure each element from your visual-proprioceptive mind.

Close your eyes and scan your body's skeletal structure—as if you had a roving camera gliding through the interior of your body. With your mind's eye, give attention to the curving surfaces and structures you encounter. Find a spot in your body to zero in on, say, perhaps the arch of your foot and the angle at which it meets the ground or a shoe, or the upward swoop of the lower jawbone.

Look at the shape in your mind's eye as a line drawing—just an abstract curving line in space.

Now think of a place in the natural landscape, a place not built by humans, that shares some feature of that shape. Open your eyes and write down the name of that place. Then close your eyes again.

Someone appears in that space. Who appears if you think of that space as a location in an allegory?

Open your eyes and record the figure, then close your eyes again. Who appears in that space if you think of it as a location in a true crime TV show? Open your eyes and record the figure, then close your eyes again. Who appears in that space if you think of it as a location in an illustrated alphabet book? As a Book of Hours? Open your eyes and record the figure, then close your eyes again.

Something happened here a long time ago, or will happen over time, far into the future. Some process that takes years to complete, not moments. What happened or will happen? Open your eyes and record the process, then close your eyes.

Now consider a different kind of process, either one that unfolds over a different timescale, or a process influenced by different agents of change. What else has happened here or will happen over a long duration? Open your eyes and record that second process.

Repeat this loop three or four more times. Alternate your location between human-built and naturally occurring spaces. Each time you repeat, change the story type for each location three times. Here are possible story types to apply—you can add your own to the list:

- a segment on a morning tv show
- a true crime documentary
- a survival narrative
- an anecdotal natural history
- a fairy tale
- a gothic tale of the supernatural
- a teenage romance
- a piece of longform journalism

2-3 mins: Vacancy

Generator: People

(approx. 10 mins)

Timed writing: Think about the voices you will bring together in your play as a kind of cast. Write for 7 minutes about the group of voices you might assemble in this emerging thing. Write about the feeling of listening to them. Write about the way they speak. Think about tone, electricity, intimacy, intensity. Think about roots, sources, funds of knowledge they might draw on. Think about what variables are open for you as you create the parameters of your cast. What other variables might you open?

List: Write down the full names of 3–5 people, real or fictional. Let them have excellent names. Write even more names if this appeals to you.

Generator: Images

(approx. 10 mins)

An image (as considered here) is something simultaneously distilled and resonant—a picture with enormous potential energy. It could be a figure of the imagination or an actual visible thing. There's crossover between image and object, and between image and activity in place. We'll look for both.

Activity in place

List ten images that use this basic template: An X in Y doing Z. Examples: a scientist on a boat scooping up whale poop with a net (heard that on a real radio story). A turtle in a vegetable garden laying eggs. A biker on a bridge dodging stopped cars. These can be things you've seen or heard about, or scenarios you conjure in your imagination.

Resonant objects

List five or six objects you've encountered in the last 24 hours, and for each, note something about its energy, appeal, or affect. Then list three objects you've thought about and maybe read about but never seen in person, and for each, note something about its energy, appeal, or affect. The scale is open: an object might be tiny—a thimble—or enormous—a subterranean fungal network.

Break—Change Your Place In The Room

Seriously, take a break and then go sit somewhere new to refresh your thinking and energize your body.

Generator: Memory Recall

I use this Lynda Barry exercise all the time to trawl for forgotten details from my own experience. See her awesome books *What It Is* or *Syllabus* for variations on this exercise and more.

Randomly pick an item from this list:

mop
other people's mothers
baby
cow
moon
glove
log
night
coat
hill
west
candy

Then write a list of the first ten scenes involving that word that spring up from your own memory. Your list can be shorthand—record just enough detail so you know what you're talking about.

Choose one that surprised you—that bubbled up out of a moment you don't think much about, perhaps.

Then on a blank piece of paper, draw a big X, corner to corner, across the entire page so it's quartered into triangles.

X-page notes: Put yourself in the scene in your mind's eye. Then use the X page to scatter recall notes that roughly organize the scene in space in a sensory way. Imagine your position is the center of the X. Write what's in front of you, to the sides of you, behind you. Don't write in sentences or paragraphs, just doodle remembered details all over the page. If you're not using a handwritten page, use "in front of me" etc. as headers. Turn yourself around inside the remembered scene; for six minutes, record whatever comes to mind in a disorganized way on the page.

Timed writing: Now spend 7 minutes writing what happened in the scene. Begin with the words "I am" and write the scene in the present tense.

Take a break.

Hour 1.5–3

Trawl

Look back over everything you recorded wrote down so far. With a different color pen than you've been using (or using the highlighter if you're working on screen), circle anything that appeals to your imagination. Circle whatever has resonant stuffness to you. The circles in the second color create a subset that your eye can easily find by just glancing over your notebook.

Trawling is useful in an instrumental sense—this list will plundered for parts. But this exercise is also a tool for noticing where your interest lies, an early signal from the percolation of new curiosities. Use this to tell you something about what the you of today is energized by. If you want to, you might even look over your trawl, and write yourself a note about what interests are strongest for you this morning, what this map of mind tells you about the you of today.

Timed Writing

(20 mins)

Someone tells a story about someone else. Who are they talking to? Let their audience feel physically present in the telling even if mostly silent.

—Incorporate an interruption from outside the story/storyteller.

—Find a moment or two to shift perspective. Ruminant on some tiny detail in the storyteller's present tense. Zoom out to the storyteller's sense of what's actually true about the world.

—Incorporate at least six things you circled from the day's lists.

Set a timer and write for a full 20 minutes. Don't rush, but don't allow yourself to stop either.

Wrap Up

Trawl (2)

Look back over what you've just written, and circle appealing details or passages from the story told about someone else. Then re-read all your circled items from the day—your trawl.

Sets

From those items in your trawl, on a fresh page, create sets of 3 or 4 items. The items in a set don't need to have an obvious relationship to each other. Put them into a set together because something about their proximity stirs your interest or curiosity. Create at least three sets.

Prompts

Write three prompts for yourself that are derived from three sets. You'll use these as a starting point tomorrow. These can take the form of scene prompts that could incorporate multiple voices, or storytelling prompts like the timed writing we just did. Don't be afraid to be literal. What is a prompt? Well, for example, if your set of four items is pine barrens + terrible cloud + Alice Elizabeth Biggs + tendency to be defensive, your prompt could be: a scene in the pine barrens under a storm from a terrible cloud, in which Alice Elizabeth Biggs gets defensive about everything her friend Piney says about being barren. Or: Alice Elizabeth Biggs listens to a public service announcement about the defensive value of pine barrens for uncontrolled wildfire while a terrible cloud of ash moves toward her home. Or: write the story of Alice Elizabeth Biggs' dream about the pine barrens and the terrible cloud and let her be pre-emptively defensive about all the imagery in it that seems overly sexual toward the wrong people. I'm just making stuff up, stringing some things together. That's the point.

Share

Share with your pods: a selected list of 10–15 things you circled. Think of it like showing someone the pebbles you brought home from the beach.

Respond

What mood does this constellation of things evoke for you? What is surprising to you in combination here? What associations does this list or any particular thing on it prompt?

If you're responding to yourself, give yourself a break before you write your response. Maybe look at the list right before you go to bed, or first thing tomorrow morning. Approach it generously, as if it was presented to you by someone else.