

DAY 2: HEARING VOICES, FOLLOWING VOICES

Today's session brings an array of voices and speakers into focus. The goal is to let the voices come forward without rushing the story forward too. Resist the impulse to rationalize, organize, and make sense. We won't be speedy and random as we were on Day 1, but we should still be guided by openness and receptivity.

Today we use a single tool—an exercise I call Image Fringe. We use it repeatedly, in alternation with writing periods. When you read through it the first time its many steps may seem cumbersome, but as you repeatedly cycle through it, the steps should streamline. Day 1 involved many short, fast, timed structures to maximize the amount of stuff we could get onto a page. Today we'll let go of that speed and drop into a steadier gear. I recommend setting a timer for each of the writing sessions—it's a useful way to dismiss the voice that rationalizes stopping before you're done. The exact durations are up to you.

Procedure

First Writing

(15-25 minutes)

At the end of Day 1, you created three prompts for yourself from three sets of culled images. Choose the most appealing prompt (appealing because you have a feeling for it or appealing because you don't understand it so it's strange and inviting) from your list, and write the scene (or monologue, etc.). This is an improvisation. Don't delete, revise, or start over. Pay particular attention to the sonority of the voices you're bringing forward. Try to let them occupy your ear. Let the sound lead the sense. Let them say whatever they want. Indulge.

Image Fringe Exercise

When you are done, choose one of the voices from what you just wrote, and do the Image Fringe exercise for them. (The exercise is detailed in full after these instructions.)

New Prompt & Write

Using the speaker you just did the Image Fringe exercise for, choose a new prompt from your set, or write yourself a new prompt that carries forward some elements of the last writing session. Modify so you can weave that speaker into the prompt, if needed. If you are writing a new prompt, glance back through your pages from yesterday, looking only at the items you circled. See if anything wants

to be incorporated or adapted. Then follow your prompt without questioning it. Pay attention this time to the sound of the different voices responding to each other. Even if you're writing for a single voice, think about the way they respond to their own thoughts or the voices in their head which they attune with or oppose.

Choose a new character from the scene you've written and do the Image Fringe exercise for them. Repeat the cycle at least 3 times, maybe more. Embrace the idea that the work of bringing each successive voice into focus makes room for a new, different voice to articulate itself. You're building an array of voices on an expanding stage. Let it have range.

Image Fringe

(full exercise)

This exercise proceeds via radiation, linking ideas to concrete images to temperament and trait. It is especially useful for drawing a minor or unconsidered character into greater vividness and potential for relation.

Set a timer and spend two complete minutes visualizing your character in actionless, silent, but living presence, perhaps in the scene in which they first appeared to you.

Interview

Set a blank piece of paper next to you. Choose a question from the list of interview questions below, then close your eyes and, in your mind's ear, ask that question of your character. Let the character answer the question. Listen to their voice. Take your time. Then record key words or phrase of that character's response. Don't write down everything—just catch scraps. Write those scrap words anywhere on the paper; let it be scattered; resist organization. Move on to a new question and repeat. Use as many questions from the list as you'd like.

Whom do you address yourself to; who is the audience for your being and your actions?

How do you show yourself to your audience?

How does your idea of audience trip you up or derail you?

Visualize the embodiment of its criticism. Describe.

Visualize the embodiment of its adoration. Describe.

What do you want to learn?

What fears are always braided into what you think about?

What darkness are you capable of?

What lightness are you capable of?

What guides you in crisis?

What is a mood you recall from your childhood?

What kinds of things did you love to do as a child?

Who do you love?

Who do you deplore?

What do you love?

What do you deplore?

What is a world that's lost to you?

What is a world you want to find?

Radiation (the fringe)

After you have filled a page with a scatter of these keywords and phrases, take a different colored pen and circle a small set of words or phrases that interest you. Radiating out from each circled word or phrase, in an idea-bubble kind of mode, record specific actions or verbs that relate to that idea. Then choosing an action, radiate out further to specific objects or images that relate to that action. You don't need to force these objects or images to be within the world of your play. You don't need to worry about the whole chain relating to each other. The action relates to the phrase. The object relates to the action. The idea is to arrive at a concrete image that bears a trace source relationship to the honest reflections of a character. The linkage may never be visible to another reader, but it will lend your images force.

key words—>actions/verbs—>images/objects

After you've created several of these radials, choose a constellation of four images or objects from your whole sheet:

Assign each to image one of these functions:

- a keyword for the character's way of identifying/understanding/locating themselves
- a preoccupation or rooted way of thinking that influences their way of seeing

- a clue to one of their reflexes of reaction/response to a certain kind of situation
- a keyword for a vocabulary they possess, an expertise, deep knowledge, or affection

Write a short stream-of-consciousness passage to get to know this character. Play with using the constellation of assigned images/objects as both fodder and limitation. I enjoy this exercise as a way to generate character attributes. For example, I did this exercise with a minor character of mine and one of the interview scraps I circled was “the soft forest floor,” which, through the process of radiation, brought me to the idea that he wanted to be a kind of shock absorber for someone else in the play, to blanket and soothe them and also to help them sneak away. It’s a way of stimulating a new connection or a new way of seeing your character’s temperament or history or way of being in community.

New Categorically Different Voice

(suggested 15–20 minutes)

After you’ve taken yourself through this cycle several times, read over what you’ve written. If you still have mental energy and time, invent one totally new voice, something that hasn’t shown up in your notebook or writing. Let this one be categorically different from the others—perhaps nonhuman, or nonspoken, or non-whatever the voices you’ve coaxed out hold in common. Or perhaps look at the list of excellent names you made, or your timed write about the voices you were going to gather in the piece (from Day 1). Write something for this voice without any pre-planning—no prompt, no recourse to your trawl lists. To help restart your perspective, write in a language category you haven’t yet tried today—stage directions, dialogue, monologue, projection script, voiceover, phone tree prompts, footnotes, program note, signage...

Wrap Up

Read over everything you’ve written. For the last five minutes of your writing day, write a note to yourself about what you care about in what’s emerged so far. Ask yourself what demands your honesty as a writer and thinker in the thing that’s emerging.

Share

Two scenes/passages that appeal to you, but feel disparate from each other. As you choose them, think about what kind of range or continuum they suggest, and perhaps about other points on that

continuum you could write into. Make notes about the space between them and share those notes too, if you would like.

Response

Make a list of questions. Some should be for your podmate as a writer, some should be for the voices as characters. Shuffle them all together. Give them to your podmate without noting which category each question belongs to.

Reminder not to give or seek praise in your responses. Praise, especially when received early in a process, can interfere with our own judgment of our work, can skew decisions about what's kept and what's left behind, blocking us from perceiving delicate new ideas or ways of writing that still need time to come into themselves.