

# HOPE CONFERENCE

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## **About Me**

I have always written. I find it helps me process my life and experiences. It also helps me learn, grow and move forward. I have taken many creative writing classes. Currently I am taking my second playwriting class which is a real stretch and fun too. I taught a creative writing intro course at Bangor High School a couple of years ago. I work as a peer at Community Health and Counseling Services in Bangor on the homeless outreach team and have been there for three plus years. One of the first opportunities I was given when I started the job was to lead a writing group, and it's been going strong for three years now. That led to facilitating other groups as I enjoyed it so much.

# **The purpose of this workshop:**

- 1. Explore how we can use writing to gain insight about ourselves, and our experiences.**
- 2. Understand that writing for your own benefit does not need to be pretty. It can be messy as long as you can read it. It does not need every word spelled correctly or even every thought perfectly expressed.**
- 3. Use our creativity to think outside the box, explore different points of view, and imagine how things could be different.**
- 4. Practice a few exercises to see some possibilities for using a writing practice in our lives.**
- 5. Use personal writing to discovering what habitual responses and perceptions might be inaccurate and use that information to help us move forward in our lives.**

# BEFORE WE BEGIN

Understand that writing for your own benefit does not need to be pretty. It can be messy as long as you can read it. It does not need every word spelled correctly or even every thought perfectly expressed.

Many people in school learned that writing was difficult and had a lot of rules to do it correctly. That is true if you want to publish a particular piece or share it widely. Punctuation, grammar, logical sequences and clearly written points help make sure our writing is easily understood by others.

However, in our personal writing what matters is completely different. We can use this type of writing to express thoughts and feelings, figure out what is bothering us, and understand other points of view and so on. To do this well, it's very important not to censor ourselves or to get hung up about the quality of the writing.

You can always go back and make it better if you choose to, or want to. You could even ask someone to help you do that if you are not sure where to start, or how.

# PART ONE

There are endless ways to write creatively. You can start with the basic facts of an experience as you see it. For example, I ran out of gas on my way to the conference. I could write every detail I can remember. For example maybe I woke up late because I did not sleep well last night. Maybe I got a disturbing phone call right before bed and I could not stop thinking about it. Maybe my gas gauge has seemed faulty lately but I never went to a mechanic to find out. Maybe my boss said something that felt critical yesterday and I'm worried.

## LEVEL ONE EXERSIZE

So first get the basic details down on what seems like an ordinary experience. Most people have run out of gas at least once in their lives, whether you were driving or someone else was.

Use this example and write about it or another example in your own life. Use as many concrete details as you can. For example, I pounded the steering wheel and used colorful language. I called AAA or someone nice stopped at the roadside and offered assistance. This level is about specifics and facts. Try not to use judgments. Sometimes I imagine this is a police report. Or answer questions of who, what, when, where. Be as accurate as you can. This is the first level of practice.

**Write your Level One Piece. This is the place to be specific, detailed and includes all the facts you can remember. You can use the back of this page if you write large or fast.**

## PART TWO

The next level is to really figure out how you are feeling. I have found this is not as straightforward as I think. For example, I blame my boss for upsetting me the day before a big event. Or I am angry at my doctor because she refuses to give me something to help me sleep.

Or maybe I am most angry at myself for forgetting to fill up the day before as planned. Maybe it reminds me of other times I was careless and forgot something important. Maybe in my head I hear angry and shaming voices berating me for not doing what they thought I should.

Sometimes at this stage you think all these random thoughts and are not really sure what is upsetting you. Write all the possibilities down on paper, even if they seem dumb or confusing.

Sometimes, only after more time has passed I figure out what is underneath that maybe I did not want to look at. For example, maybe I like being dependent and wish I had someone to do the hard things for me. It's fine to write about that separately or to add this to the bottom of your writing.

Next imagine how you could open up this story. Perhaps imagine telling your boss that you think maybe she is piling too much work on you and that you are doing your best but you are stretched too thin. Don't just think about it; write it out as a conversation. Say what you wish you could tell your boss and imagine different ways that conversation could go. Maybe she will try to rush through the conversation because she is overloaded too. Maybe she will stop and listen carefully and offer ideas on how to improve the situation. Maybe her feelings would get hurt and she would feel you are criticizing her unfairly and she is just doing her job. It's okay to be outlandish and even to exaggerate. Have fun with it. Maybe she offers you a whopping raise and promotion. Maybe she says you are fired for having feelings about an event.

After you write multiple possible outcomes you might decide that you do need to discuss the issue in reality. Or maybe you will decide that your boss is

basically fair and respectful and you are really mad at yourself for forgetting to fill up the car and that your boss was not being mean and her comments were accurate and perhaps you were not taking enough care in a particular area.

This might sound like a lot of work over a trivial incident, but it can be fun and enlightening. There is no need to process everything this thoroughly or to only stick to things that make you feel badly. You can do this with good feelings too. Perhaps someone complimented you and you blew it off. Why? Was it uncomfortable for you? Or maybe you did not know what to say. Just go deeper. Just keep writing and thinking. Maybe you have been close to a family member, friend or colleague that buttered you up, but it was to get you to do something they wanted later. So compliments make you worry that this will happen again so you distrust them. Write more about that. Maybe you will decide to accept the compliment but reject the implicit demand that comes later.

Think of a recent event that happened to you. It can be small like your friend dropped by unexpectedly and you felt a flash of anger. This confuses you because you are lonely lately and you really like this person.

Maybe the anger comes from the fact that in your family you always call before dropping by, or that your house was messy and it embarrassed you to have anyone see it, or maybe you are hurt she forgot your birthday last week.

## **LEVEL TWO EXERSIZE-GO DEEPER**

This is the place to add emotions, reflect on possibilities. Look under the surface of the actual event or conversation you wrote about.

**Write your Level Two Piece. This is the place to be creative. Start with your level one story and rewrite it. Add embellishments, flourishes. Add feelings, judgments, worries or anything else you feel fills the story out. It does not need to be logical, factual or fair.**

# STUCK?

If you get to a place where you feel stuck it sometimes helps if you imagine it happening to someone else you know. Or you can switch roles and be the other person in a conversation. For example you could be the boss or the doctor and try to write from their point of view. Perhaps the doctor feels strongly that too many people rely on sleeping pills and you think they should be a last resort. Or you are the boss who perhaps thinks you have a lot of talent but sometimes rush through things.

Another way to get unstuck is to write about something that happened to someone else, maybe your best friend's boyfriend proposed to her. Maybe you feel badly because you don't even have a boyfriend or you have been dating someone way longer and you wish he would propose. Maybe you wonder what is wrong with you that he hasn't. Or wonder why you should be so jealous that she has such a smart boyfriend. Or maybe you don't know how you feel at all. Confused? Worried because you think he is mean to her, or irresponsible with money? Or has an addiction? Or maybe you worry she won't have time for you after they are married?

So, if you feel stuck you can take a different point of view or a short break to relax your mind and come back to it later. If those don't work, you can always decide to stop where you are and start writing about something else. If you do that, you can always decide to go back to it in the future and take a fresh look at it.

# Conclusion

Remember that this is supposed to help you and no one else at this stage. You can decide to share it if you want and you can ask for help with editing it, if you choose to share it. It is also worthwhile just to use it for your own benefit and to help you move forward in your life. In the end you may find you are beginning to know and understand yourself better. Don't be shocked if you find out you are a bundle of contradictions, strange impulses and tangled emotions. Human beings are incredibly complex creatures. However, the more you write in this way you will uncover patterns in perceiving, thinking and acting in yourself that you were largely unaware of.

As this happens you can decide to alter some things about yourself to get where you want to go. Maybe you notice you often automatically blame others without getting the facts. You might decide that this is holding you back. You could decide to get more facts in the future before you cast blame and see if that moves your life forward in new ways. Just remember the purpose of this kind of writing is not to change others. It's to understand yourself better so you can make the kind of choices that will give you the life you want.

The main purpose of this writing is exploration. Don't expect to wrap up everything with a bow or to always have complete understanding. Do expect to learn new things about yourself and others. The more honest you are with yourself the greater the value you can expect to gain from this practice.

Don't expect to gain clear and perfect answers from each exercise you do. Do not use this as an excuse to beat yourself up. If you notice that happening, perhaps that will be the first thing you want to change to move forward in your life. Sometimes things will seem vague and unfinished until later on down the road. Just keep writing and you will gain new insights in time.



# ADVANCED LESSONS

1. Write out an example that has not yet happened to prepare yourself for a challenge. An example would be doing a presentation or a job interview. This can improve our comfort levels with taking risks. We could write it out first like every possible thing goes wrong. Then we could write out as if everything goes way better than expected. In reality, most new experiences are somewhere in the middle.
2. Write out an example and go back and look at what you had control over and what you did not. For example, I had control over my response but I had no control over what the person said, did or how they reacted. This helps us to gain a realistic sense of where our personal responsibility begins or ends.
3. Write out an example of you choosing to do something everyone warns you is a big mistake. How do you quiet those warning voices and what they think is best for you? Do you try to convince them this is a great opportunity? Do you look for outside support? Do you give up easily or try to prove them wrong? Looking back are you full of regret or proud that you tried something hard?