

— WHAT HAPPENS —  
**WHEN I WRITE**

*Writing Tips and Prompts to Delight and Inspire You*



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The writing life is immensely personal and as different among writers as the people living it. It's impossible to look at another writer and see exactly what the writing life will look like for us.

That's not to say we can't learn from the writing lives of others, though. Often, when we're staring at the blank page or stuck with too much life and not enough writing, the way we begin to imagine ourselves writing again is to see how others are doing it.

It's in this spirit that I invited eight writers, all fellow members of The Redbud Writers Guild, to join me with a brief explainer about how their writing and writing life works, along with a prompt to help you try yourself. Some of these prompts are about the writing process, others are about the writing life. All of them are honest and beautiful and inspiring. You'll have to keep reading to see for yourself.

When I invited these writers to join me, I offered my own version as a model for them to see what I had in mind. So I'll begin there, with what happens when I write, to give you an idea of how this workbook will unfold. I encourage you to try all nine prompts in your own writing life ... to see what happens when YOU write!



## 1. When I write ...

I usually look for connections between the things around me that might not otherwise be obvious. Once I'm paying attention, suddenly a conversation with a friend, an online article, and a TV sitcom all might contain a similar thread, and that's the topic waiting for me to write about.

I like to think it's a version of the Baader-Meinhof Phenomenon, or Frequency Bias, where something I recently learned or paid attention to suddenly appears 'everywhere.' For me it happened when I started noticing red Chevy Equinoxes all over the road *only after I started driving one.*

You might also just call this practice "following your curiosity," or allowing something interesting in one part of your life to give you the eyes and ears to find it in other parts.

### Now you try it.

When something piques your interest this week—whether in a sermon, a discussion, or even a story told over dinner—make note of it. Write it down, even. Then pay attention to see how that theme shows up in other areas of your life, and write those down too. (If nothing shows up, then you might have to go looking a little, but trust the process.)

Once you have three or four things written down, do some free-writing about the connection between them. Be creative. Don't edit yourself. If you sense even the weakest thread, pull on it and see what unravels.

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## 2. When I write ...

I sometimes feel like there's an invisible wall between me and the sea of white in front of me. I often need help unlocking the tangled mess of what's in my heart and mind before I can befriend a blank page.

Listening to music, reading poetry, looking at artwork in a book or museum, or taking a walk under the cover of trees almost always helps me. Observing and immersing myself in art that I didn't create somehow helps to untangle and pull out thoughts and emotions word by word.

It can feel counterintuitive to focus on another person's artwork or stanzas, but in many ways, all of our unique stories and expressions give us reflections of one another.

- One person's painting of wilting flowers reminds me of what I (or my characters) am longing for in my own life.
- The canopy of trees whose leaves clap for us with the help of the wind, reminds me that I'm not alone and have something to say about that.
- Music pulls at my heartstrings, and another person's song about love or loss or beauty shows me how to write what's inside my heart with honesty and bravery.

### Now you try it.

Give your eyes a break from your own page, offer your mind a break from your own efforts to organize its contents, and focus on the work of someone else. Pick one of these art forms and allow yourself to get lost for a while.

Let the words or colors wash over you as if your only job is to observe, think, and feel what you see or hear. May the company of another's song, poetry, canvas, or the trees guide you.

***Tasha Jun** is a melancholy dreamer, a biracial Korean American storyteller, wife to Matt, and mama to three. As long as she can remember, she's lived and stood in places where cultures collide. Writing has always been the way God has led her towards home and the hope of shalom. She's currently writing her first book on identity and belonging, due to release in 2023. [Subscribe to her newsletter](#) or find her on [Instagram](#).*



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### 3. When I write ...

I begin by laughing. I've long known that my creativity increases when I'm playful. A buoyant mood veers my brain from that flat, straight road of linear production onto trails friendly to unusual correlations and innovation.

Even if my day's assignment takes me into dark or difficult issues, laughing before I engage my pen helps me be nimbler and more inventive in how I address them. Research bears this out; those who practice improvisational comedy generate more creative ideas. Laughter taps different neural pathways than stress and anxiety do—better pathways, prone to a mental roominess that lets ideas flow.

*For most of her life, Pacific Northwest naturalist, photographer, and award-winning author **Cheryl Grey Bostrom**, M.A., has lived in the rural and wild lands that infuse her writing. Her work has appeared in a variety of publications, two non-fiction books, and now a novel: Sugar Birds, released in August 2021.*

### Now you try it.

So what's my humor go-to? Puns. They get me every time. And judging by the huge online community of punsters, I'm not alone. If, however, wordplay isn't for you, find something to make you laugh before your write—even if no "pun in ten did." LOL!

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## 4. When I write ...

the "Muse" does not frequently come when bidden. Some days the words flow freely, but too often, I have stared at an empty screen, my cursor blinking at me mockingly. On such days, when words are sluggish to come, it can be hard to know where to start, hard to know how to get past the brain block or the distractions. It's even harder to follow Anne Lamott's oft-quoted writing advice to "keep your butt in the chair."

In such moments, I close my laptop and pull out a notebook and a pen. Slowing down to the pace of the flow of ink from my pen is often enough to focus my mind.

If this alone doesn't help, I set a timer for fifteen minutes and start with where I am.

*What does my body feel like in the chair? What does that coffee smell like, now lukewarm in my mug? Where do those thoughts lead that seemed too distracting to consider before?*

Anchoring myself in the physical space around me and on the thoughts at the forefront of my mind gives me a place to start, and sometimes surprisingly attunes me to a topic or theme I need to devote more time to, well past my timer's ring.

### Now you try it.



If you normally type to write, leave the technology behind for a few minutes and write with pen and paper. Pay attention to where you are in this moment, and try to describe your physical space with as much detail as possible. Resist editing or forcing what you're writing into a coherent piece. Just keep the pen moving and follow where your thoughts and observations lead.

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*Diana Gruver writes about discipleship and spiritual formation in the every day. She is the author of Companions in the Darkness: Seven Saints Who Struggled with Depression and Doubt. Diana lives in Pennsylvania, where she can often be found singing in the kitchen with her husband and ever-curious daughter. You can connect with her at [www.dianagruver.com](http://www.dianagruver.com), or on [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#).*



## 5. When I write ...

I often turn to poetry for inspiration. Using only a few words, poems convey deep meaning, crafting language in original and unexpected ways. Poems are creative, and challenge me to consider different possibilities and perspectives. In addition to the fresh vision poetry offers me in my own writing, I also read poetry because it reminds me of our shared experiences as humans living life together on this planet. And finally, I delight in the beauty of the verses, and find reading poetry to be both therapeutic and calming as well as provocative and thoughtful.

*Prasanta Verma is a nonfiction writer and poet who longs to inspire you with words. You can follow her on IG @prasantaverma and subscribe to her writerly newsletter via her website <https://prasantaverma.com/>.*

Poetry offers rich lines like these:

- Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness (Keats)
- And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow / Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings (Yeats)
- Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, / the world offers itself to your imagination (Mary Oliver)
- Notice how each particle moves, / Notice how everyone has just arrived here from a journey (Rumi)
- The frost performs its secret ministry / Unhelped by any wind (Coleridge)
- Let the cricket take up chafing / as a woman takes up her needles / and her yarn. Let evening come. (Jane Kenyon)

## Now you try it.

Try this fun little exercise while reading poetry for inspiration. Find a poem to read. Choose 6-10 words from the poem. Next, start writing a new poem, incorporating the words from your list into your new poem about any topic. Give yourself 10-15 minutes to write your new "found" poem. It doesn't have to rhyme. Poetry is often unstructured and free. It doesn't have to be perfect. The idea is to develop imagery, metaphor, or a sentence you might not otherwise have uncovered. (Note: If you end up posting or publishing your "found" poem, remember to always give credit back to the original poet.)



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## 6. When I write ...

I try not to rush the process. Experience has taught me that my best writing comes as a result of letting things marinate. So, when I receive a writing assignment, I read through all the details carefully, making note of the topic/theme, related Bible passages, etc. Then, I tuck it all away into the back of my mind and go on about life.

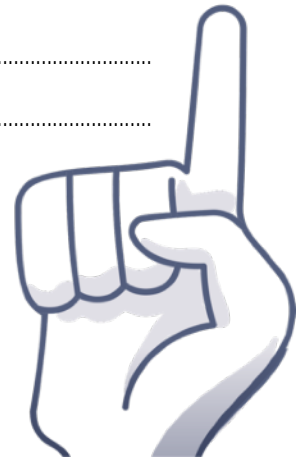
After a while, ideas start to find their way to me. Sometimes, it may be a line from a television show, a random image in nature that catches my eye, or even the recollection of other information I've filed away in my mental library. As the ideas come to me, I jot them down. After an appropriate period of time, I finally sit down with my notes and begin to write. Usually, the piece mostly writes itself! I have to caution you, this method works best when you're not working on a short deadline.

*Nilwona Nowlin is a redemptive artist, someone who uses the transformative power of the arts to help bring individuals and communities closer to God's shalom. She writes in multiple genres, but fiction is her passion. Nilwona is also a chaplain and minister in Chicago. You can connect with her at <http://nilwona.com/> and on [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#). Check out her TEDx talk [here](#).*

### Now you try it.

The next time you have a writing deadline that's more than a week away, try letting it marinate. Keep your eyes and ears open for ideas, and be sure to jot them down! (While this works best with longer deadlines, you can try to modify your timeline for shorter deadlines.)

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## 7. When I write ...

I rely on the techniques of good storytelling. Just because I write non-fiction doesn't mean I can't tell stories. Narrative non-fiction employs good storytelling to offer an important takeaway.

While strong characterization, dialogue, and context are important, the key is in the details. Details are what help a writer to heed the advice "Show, don't tell."

Be specific. For instance, compare these two sentences:

1. I walked to my truck that morning and drove to work.

2. The sun had barely made an appearance and it was in that in-between time of faint light peeking through the darkness that I wearily shuffled out to my beat-up red pickup truck, wondering yet again if those worn-out tires would get me to work before the shift bell rang.

Both sentences get me to my truck and off to work. But which one tells you more of the story? Obviously, #2 with more details:

- It's barely morning – crack o'dawn.
- I'm tired and not all that eager to go.
- My vehicle is an old truck with worn tires.
- I do shift work and can't afford to be late.

We communicate more clearly when we use the right words – not just “I walked to my truck,” but “I wearily shuffled.” Descriptive words.

But to provide details in your non-fiction story you must be a person who chooses to notice. To slow down and be attentive to life. And then to filter those details through your own mind so that you can portray them realistically, empathetically, or critically to others.

Our readers don't want us to tell them how to feel something or even what to feel. They want us to help them experience the situation so vividly that the lesson or emotion is naturally awakened within them. Good writing draws a picture for us and pulls us into the scene.

## Now you try it.

This prompt will help you develop detailed storytelling in your own writing:

1. Write about a recent experience in which you learned something new. I don't want to hear about what you learned; I want to actually experience it with you.
2. Draw me into the scene from the very first words with vivid descriptions of sights, smells, sounds. Help me be there with you – setting the scene not only of where you are physically, but also what you are feeling and thinking currently – where you are emotionally and spiritually as you begin to receive something new and unexpected.
3. Show me the breakthrough or lesson or “new thing” as though you were writing a story. Don't preach but help me understand why the lightbulb went on in your mind and heart.
4. Finally, reveal an intersect between what you learned and what God says in the Bible. (This is what makes your story appropriate to use in a blog, devotional or speaking presentation.)

*Lucinda Secrest McDowell is a storyteller and seasoned mentor who engages both heart and mind while “Helping You Choose a Life of Serenity & Strength.” A graduate of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and Furman University, McDowell is the award-winning author of 15 books including Soul Strong, Life-Giving Choices, Dwelling Places, and Ordinary Graces. She's also a member of the Redbud Writers Guild and AWSA, co-directs the annual spiritual retreat reNEW – retreat for New England Writing & Speaking, and blogs weekly at [www.LucindaSecrestMcDowell.com](http://www.LucindaSecrestMcDowell.com).*



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## 8. When I write ...

I want to quit. Sometimes I do. Sometimes I swear off for the day and sometimes I swear off writing forever.

But! Eventually! **I remember who I write for**, and I drag my battered ego and every one of my fears and all of the negative voices in my head back to my computer and we all sit down and I write.

I know how courage and honesty works. If you can do it, I can do it. If I can do it, you can do it. If my only spiritual gift is going first, so be it. I will go first. I will write for the women who were brave enough to go before me, and I will write for the women who will be brave enough to come after me, and Holy Spirit-willing my words will be one more drop of creative water in this mighty river.

*Sarah Guererro is the author of Break Through: Disarmingly Joyful Ideas About Fear, Guilt, & Shame in Motherhood. As a woman of mixed ethnicity, she's learned to feast on Jesus' goodness in the in-between places. She lives with her husband and four children in Austin, Texas. You can learn more about Honesty is My Gift, Sarah's monthly newsletter/essay, [here](#).*

## Now you try it.

Think about your ancestors, women whose stories weren't or couldn't be told, and think about the women you know whose stories need to be told, and maybe imagine some women coming after you. Write with and for and through them and marvel at your place of belovedness in this great cloud of witnesses.

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## 9. When I write ...

God has always poured words into me as a way to understand my sojourn through the world. I have not always honored that gift. When I transitioned from my first career into my natural place as a writer, I embraced the childhood wish I'd forgotten, living to write.

With age, I become increasingly certain about many things. Among them is an appreciation for the wisdom of Socrates, who wrote,

*True wisdom comes to each of us when we realize how little we understand about life, ourselves, and the world around us.*

**When I write**, like American author Flannery O'Connor, I do so to discover what I know. For me, writing is a journey, and of this I am certain; I may think I know where I will land, but seldom am I right.

Writing is the one thing I can't not do—you read that right, scribo ergo sum. I write because I am. Writing is the method by which I process information in the world, and in part, the way I learn most profoundly.

I can never predict when a scripture, a sermon, or seemingly random experience will ignite something within me that I am bound to pursue. Once it happens, I am drawn deeply into a dance, part research, part worship, part quiet listening, and then to the page. Often, my greatest revelations come in the early morning, walking the dog, squeezing in a run, islands of peace in a noisy, littered day.

**When I write**, I commune with the Divine. I surrender myself to listen for the still small voice, which I believe is God within me, calling me not to know, but to be open to discover. I bow humbly before the blank page, and so it begins.

**When I write**, I accept the dare. Are you willing to learn? Are you willing to stand the test? Are you fearless? Are you afraid? The process excites me precisely because it is entirely beyond my control. *Beyond my control, but entirely divinely ordained.* Often, I find myself testing what I believe, knowing that by faith, more will be revealed, and I will be better for the journey. I grow each time I fill a page.

**When I write**, I join generations of men and women known and those whose names will never be known to us, who have surrendered themselves as instruments of the Holy Spirit. According to author, Catholic priest, and former president of Gonzaga University Fr. Robert J. Spitzer, S.J., Ph.D., our job is to follow this sense of being drawn, and to exert the effort to put words into what our heart already seems to know. The Holy Spirit will take care of the rest.

**When I write**, I honor God, actively practicing gratitude for this underserved gift. From something I wrote nearly 10 years ago, I offer this encouragement as a prayer,

"I am thankful that I was able to write my pleas, my prayers, talking myself through my fear using my faith. I do not believe that Christians are never afraid. I believe that we have been given resources to walk through our fears to the throne of Grace, to find our rest and refreshment and refuge there. Listen to what my wise friend wrote about writing yourself out of the dark, I write and

About **Chelle A. Carter-Wilson**: *Each of us is the Perfect Image of God in every moment, even as we exist in a liminal state. I am an unflinching advocate for social justice...like Jesus. My ambiversion allows me to be in the world, but not quite of it. I write to discover what I know and what I don't. Having made peace with uneasiness and most of my fears, my capacity for swearing, when necessary to get the reader's attention, epitomizes my commitment to the precise word for every situation. Find her at [Chelle A. Carter-Wilson](#), [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#).*

scratch at all the complicated inside-outness of my own head. The words, no the writing the words down, they help make sense. I draw my own road map in reverse. It happens and then I write it.

"That is what we writers do. With our words and lots of Grace, we light our candles in the darkness, and then we are less afraid. Thank You Lord for worship through the words. It is my reminder, even in the scary times, that God is good."

This is my worship. **This is what happens when I write.**

## **Now you try it. What happens when YOU write ...**

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