

Bonus Writing Exercises and Prompts

Below is a list of writing exercises with a more social justice orientation.

Short writing exercises/prompts

5-15 min.

- **The portal.** Pretend there's a portal located somewhere in this room that can take you to any time and place for 24 hours. Where/when would you go, and what would you do there?
- **Take a philosophical stance.** Write a response to the following statement: "Nothing that has happened will ever happen again."
- **A sense of place.** Nothing happens in my neighborhood except...
- **Tales we tell ourselves.** When I was little, I actually believed...
- **Regrets and misgivings.** One thing I wish I could take back...
- **Alternate dimensions.** If I could change one element of reality, it would be...
- **The brainscape.** If each of my ideas and feelings were a color, today, my brain would be...
- **Identity theft.** If you could spend a day (or a week, a month, a year) living someone else's life, who would you pick, and why?
- **The stories that make us.** Tell us the story behind a story you cherished as a child. Was it a fairy tale? Something from a book? A story a family member made up just for you? What did you love about it? What sort of meaning does it carry for you today?
- **Six-word memoir.** In only six words, describe who you are or how you're feeling today. *(For this exercise, it's helpful to provide examples. I found some great one's in Georgia Popoff's wonderful book, Our Difficult Sunlight: A Guide to Poetry, Literacy, & Social Justice in the Classroom & Community. If you don't have access to that book, there's a plethora of these things—good, bad, and ugly—online.)*
- **The true story of...** When you grow old, someone decides to write a biography of your life. What appears on Page 248?
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More sustained writing exercises

These exercises can be adapted to last an hour, one whole (two-hour) IJH session, or several visits.

- **A thousand untold words.** Bring in a series of photographs from magazines, the insides of picture frames, or stock sources online (you may also use personal photographs, if you're willing to let students take creative license with them). Scatter the photographs on a table and ask each student to pick one. Students will then write the story that the photograph *isn't* telling.
(Supplies needed: photographs, pencils/pens and paper)
- **Six-word memoir, lengthened.** Elaborate on the six-word memoir exercise mentioned above. Once students have their original six-word memoir completed, start asking them more specific questions.

Ask students to answer the following (or any such questions of your own design), in the form of six-word memoirs:

- Who were you when you woke up this morning?
- Who will you be when you go to bed tonight?
- Who were you in the happiest moment of this week? This month? This year?
- Who were you on your first day of kindergarten?
- Who do you expect to be on your last day of school ever?
- Who were you the day you took a big risk?
- Who were you the day you made a mistake?
- Who were you the day you made someone proud?

Each of these six-word memoirs can be transformed into first lines for poem stanzas. Once students have completed four or five six-word memoirs, have them fill in four lines after each, elaborating on the experience they describe in the memoir. Depending on age level and experience, you may wish to create guidelines for these, such as, "Each line has to engage with one of the five senses. One line must have a metaphor in it," etc.

- **Note to self.** Ask students to write a letter to a certain aspect of their personality: stubbornness, generosity, faith. If they're up for it and if time allows, they can draft a letter in which that personality trait writes back.
- **Jealous love.** Ask students to write a poem (or a story or an essay) about someone they admire, but are jealous of.

- **Judgment day.** Ask students to write a poem (or story or essay) about a time in which they judged someone. Have them be as detailed, as thorough, and as merciless as possible. What adjectives did they use to describe that person? Did they express their judgments out loud, or just to themselves? The next time your group meets, or perhaps even later in the same lesson if time allows, have students write a poem, story, or essay from the perspective of the person they judged. How would that person describe him/herself? How did that person feel when (s)he was being judged. Did (s)he even know?
- **Litany of gratitude.** Ask students to make a list of seven things they're grateful for. They should then pick 3-4 of these things to elaborate on in poem, story, or essay form. This exercise can also be nice when paired with a litany of things students wish to change.
- **Controlling your destiny.** Ask students to write a poem, story, or essay about the time in their lives when they felt most scared, sad, or betrayed. What was the situation? How did they respond? Then, have them write a second version of the poem, story, or essay in which they empower themselves to act differently. How does the story change?
- **Rap session.** If students aren't feeling like putting pen to paper, you can engage their sense of poetic rhythm by asking one student to bang out a beat on his/her/their desk. Everyone follows suit, until you're all banging the same beat, in unison. Then, decide on a vowel sound or a simple word that's easy to rhyme (*example: book, cow, late*). As you pound out the rhythm on your desks, go around the circle, and have each student speak a rhyming line to the beat.
- **Being there.** Ask students to think about the most interesting place they've ever been. It can be a church, their grandmother's home, Lithuania. Whatever works. Have them describe that place in as much detail as possible—engage all the senses. Then, have students pair up and interview a partner about the location they chose. Each student then must write a scene that takes place in their *partner's* location.