

# Bell Gully

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON

*Te Whare Wānanga o te Ūpoko o te Ika a Māui*



*The Bell Gully National Schools*

# writing festival 05

Victoria University of Wellington

20-21 August 2005

## **GETTING STARTED:**

## **FAVOURITE WRITING EXERCISES**

These exercises – invented, borrowed or inherited – have been passed on by writers connected to the 2005 National Schools Writing Festival as a creative resource for students and teachers around the country. Please make use of them in the same spirit. You are free to copy this text in whole or part for educational purposes only. Please acknowledge the writers (and the festival where appropriate) when you use them.



## CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Nick Ascroft	Laura Kroetsch
Jenny Bornholdt	Abby Letteri
James Brown	Anna Livesey
Linda Burgess	Bill Manhire
Lynda Chanwai-Earle	Kathy McCra
Nigel Cox	Lorae Parry
Stephanie de Montalk	Susan Pearce
Ken Duncum	Vivienne Plumb
Caroline Foote	Chris Price
Fiona Farrell	Marty Smith
Bernadette Hall	Damien Wilkins
Eirlys Hunter	

Each year we choose a theme and ask workshop leaders and guests to contribute something to the programme, so that participants have some additional resources to take away from the festival.

This year we asked them to discuss a favourite writing exercise, or something they have done / like to do to kick-start a new piece of writing. Without being prescriptive about style, we asked them to do three things:

- 1) Describe the exercise or trigger with sufficient clarity that it can be used by other writers or teachers of creative writing.
- 2) Explain why the exercise worked / works for you, why you think it is a useful or successful procedure for generating writing.
- 3) If you wish to, give an example of a piece of writing that was produced in response to the exercise or trigger: if it has been published, tell people where they can find it. Say what pleases you about it.

The following pages are given over to their responses. Hopefully there's plenty here to keep you inspired for the next 12 months!



## **Anna Livesey: With your words and my words**

There is one writing exercise I use with any class I teach — every time it produces results that are quirky and unexpected, a whole that adds up to more than the sum of its parts. I don't know the proper name of this exercise, but I think of it as 'tricking the class into writing a poem'. Like so many good exercises, this one came to me from Bill Manhire.

For the 'tricking the class' exercise, you need slips of paper, four or six per person. Each person writes two or three questions and two or three statements-that-might-be-answers, one sentence per slip of paper. The statements should not neatly match or answer the questions. The questions should start with 'how', 'why' or 'what'. The sentences are best if they are shortish. The slips are then divided into 'question' and 'answer' piles and shuffled. Alternating between question and answer, the slips are read out and laid on the table in the order in which they are selected. The resulting poem is held together by the question/answer form, but the content slews and jigs around, sometimes making serendipitous sense, sometimes making nothing, sometimes making absurd, but oddly real, connections. The poem can then be edited by group agreement, removing unsuccessful lines or rearranging things slightly.

I particularly like the way this exercise demonstrates that there is something mysterious about poetry. During the initial reading, it is clear that some couplets are good, interesting, zingy, and others are flat. This is puzzling to some pupils, as, given the random process, they don't expect anything good to come out at all. This exercise shows that good writing isn't all about hard work, and straining; it can also be about grace, a little nudge from some unknown source that puts a question and an answer together, without the writer(s) knowing how it happened.

## **Abby Letteri: Remembered Spaces**

Ten years ago I was in a writing group whose members regularly swapped ideas for writing exercises designed to bust through writer's block. One night a friend turned up and said, 'OK, here's what we're going to do: take out a blank sheet of paper and write the words, "My mother is standing...". Now just keep going. Write for about 20 minutes. See what happens.'

*My mother is standing at the kitchen sink.*

I no longer have that piece of writing — long lost on the scrap heap of messy notebooks, torn sales receipts, anything I can get my hands on when an idea comes. Last year, when I was struggling to find an opening for a childhood memoir, I suddenly remembered that exercise. Not only the idea of it or the feelings it evoked at the time, but the memory I'd stumbled on that night and the story it prefigured. I'd walked back into the kitchen of a house where I'd lived when I was 6 or 7 years old; the shapes, colours, smells and feelings of that place and time came vividly to me. One sentence opened onto a world.

*My mother is standing at the kitchen sink. Pale sun seeps through the window and stains the counter with splotches of dull light.*

Hosts of writing gurus will admonish you to 'write what you know'. This doesn't mean you have to abandon invention and stick to literal truth. Truth is slippery, and besides, if writers only write what they know first-hand, there'd be no science



fiction, no fantasy, not much great literature. What it *does* mean is that when your writing is informed by experience it carries an unmistakable air of authenticity.

*My mother is standing at the kitchen sink. Pale sun seeps through the window and stains the counter with splotches of dull light. On the counter are four little glasses of orange juice, three of them empty. My mother is crying.*

You may have no interest in writing about your own life, but these sorts of exercises are nonetheless useful. By going back into remembered spaces, you gain access to a deep pool of sensation, memory, emotion — people, places and things all fleshed out with texture, nuance and richness of character. Even the simplest details can be surprisingly evocative. Very useful material for a writer.

During an IML workshop last year, the poet and writer Mark Doty suggested a similar exercise. Think back, he said, to a house where you lived as a small child. Take time with the imagining, allow the fullness of memory to provide the details. Sketch the floor plan of the house, then choose a room. Go into that room and make a list of all the things you find — the furniture, pictures, books — whatever's there. Choose one object and begin writing about it — be specific — and see where it takes you. You may be surprised.

## **Laura Kroetsch: I Remember**

I did a poetry workshop at the IML in 2003 and the American poet running it, Shannon Welch, introduced us to Joe Brainard, whose *I Remember* is a book in which every sentence (or entry) begins with 'I remember'. Shannon had us, there were twelve of us, write a few of our own lines that began, 'I remember'. They could be about absolutely anything as long as they began with 'I remember'. We then went around the room reading them aloud, each of us adding a memory to the ones that went before. The result was both unexpected and good fun.

Later I got a copy of the book. It's a brilliant autobiography that is made up of 1,000 entries, each of which begins 'I remember'. It tells the story of a man, a gay man, who grew up in the States in the 1940s and 50s and later went to live in New York. He was an artist and a writer and he died in 1994.

What makes the book so interesting is that Brainard has taken a familiar poetic device, the list, and used it in a hugely inventive and intimate way. In the book every entry evokes a memory and the seemingly simple series creates a life. The book begins:

I remember the first time I got a letter that said 'After Five Days Return To' on the envelope, and I thought that after I had kept the letter for five days I was supposed to return it to the sender.

I remember the kick I used to get going through my parents' drawers looking for rubbers\* (Peacock).

I remember when polio was the worst thing in the world.

I remember pink dress shirts. And bola ties.

There are books I read as a sort of heuristic, they prompt me to write something, and *I Remember* is one of those books. Sometimes I read it, but mostly I just think about the phrase 'I remember'. I'm not sure this qualifies as an exercise, but



what I do is when I'm trying to write or just walking around, I do lists of 'I remembers'. As an exercise it puts images and sometimes moments into my head and sometimes those memories lead me somewhere else. I don't actually use the lists as lists, but as ideas, and when I'm finished the words 'I remember' are gone.

\*condoms

## **Bernadette Hall: Spilling the Beans**

a) Sit down and begin to write, by hand or on the computer. Let the words pour out of you in a torrent. Get them down fast, ignoring spelling, punctuation, logic, propriety, the mean little voice in your head that says, 'You can't.' Just do it, spill the beans!

Then put the words away for a few days. When you come back, they'll be the words of a stranger, fascinating and unpredictable. Don't throw them away. They are the germ of a poem. You'll need them if you get lost in the making process.

Go through, deleting every syllable that is not riveting. You'll end up with a bag of delectable words, phrases, lines. Play around with them. Lose yourself in the process. Trust your eye, your hand, your ear. Say the words out loud, see which ones spring together. Listen to the music.

b) I like this approach because it stops me panicking when I think that I have nothing to say. I have boxes of intensities, words, phrases, newspaper cuttings, scrawled-over sheets of paper. If I slow down and enter one of them, on a good day the making will begin. I prefer my work to be powered by the subconscious.

c) I recently completed a commission to write poems to accompany Llew Summers' Stations of the Cross sculptures in a book to be published in December. I stood and stared at each of the art works for a long time on at least three different days, weeks apart. I wrote copious scrawly notes. I typed these up, adding more free-range material. So this was a second dip into the subconscious. Finally I went through with a gang mower, cutting back and back to the essence.

All that remained of three pages of notes on the Twelfth Station, for example, was the merest breath of a poem. I beefed it up by theft, with a biblical quotation, and the architectural beauty of Roman numerals and different print styles. I considered the appearance of the lines, like sculpture; the way 'tree' chimed with 'me'. I liked the archaisms in the Isaiah translation, the expansiveness of not naming the victim or the perpetrators. The way the final question explodes out towards us, with our own twenty-first-century victims and perpetrators, which must be the whole point of the Jesus story. For better or worse, this is it.

## TWELFTH STATION

*Till ye be left as a beacon upon the top of a mountain. Isaiah XXX:17*

They have hoisted up a new flag  
a man hung on a tree.



'Why have you abandoned me?'

It pleases me that the text is translucent, like water. There is just enough material for the words to hold themselves up. All that surrounding space is waiting to be filled up with the feelings of the reader/viewer.

## **Fiona Farrell**

When bardic students — both men and women — attended the Irish bardic schools which flourished from pre-Roman times till well into the seventeenth century, their training was two-fold. They memorised the work of other bards, the teacher chanting and the students repeating the words in response. (The word for teaching in old Irish means 'to sing over'). The other half of their 'course' was spent lying on their beds in a darkened room composing their own verses.

That strikes me as ideal (as indeed do the working conditions of the highest-ranking graduates, the bards who travelled about the country with retinues of 24 men receiving honours and wealth in return for lyrics and satires so powerful that they could cause the death of kings and queens. Those were the days...).

I don't have any exercises to begin writing, other than a walk before beginning work each morning. Writing flows most readily when it is done as close to the point of waking as possible, in that state of mind that is relaxed and roaming freely. No radio, no newspaper clutter: just lying in bed leaving the subconscious to sort out difficulties or come up with new ideas.

Writing — or at least my kind of writing — emerges from an unharried mind. I would never have been able to do a writing course, as writing for me has always been subversive and private.

I write, I show what I have written to absolutely no one, I send it off to a publisher when it is ready.

I was a student for many years: read a lot, travelled, but wrote nothing other than essays and a couple of theses. That was the time of 'singing over'. The novels and poetry have been written since, alone in a quiet room.

So — what do I do? Get up, go for a walk, write. Every day.

If I'm stuck, I go and do something else: phone a friend, have a conversation about something completely different, go to a part of the library I haven't been to before, pick up a second hand book, plant carrots, make a cake... Let the air in, permit the random to occur.

Then I go back to the writing. And if it still doesn't work, I just leave it and move on to write the bit that I do know how to write, even if it's out of sequence. Write the ending, maybe.

The beginning of *Book Book* is an example: just allowing the random in, picking an old book off the shelf. It describes what I do exactly.



## **Jenny Bornholdt**

Song titles rescued me when I was having trouble writing after rather a long absence from my desk. I'd been listening to a CD called *Forgotten Peoples*, by Veljo Tormis — a set of six song cycles from the region of Estonia through Karelia and towards Finland. The titles of the songs — 'Waking the Birds', 'Sang the Mother, Sang her Daughter', 'Praising the Cook' (to give just three) — seemed to present great narrative possibilities, so one morning I listed them on a clean sheet of paper and proceeded to use them as starting points for poems.

I really enjoyed the process of writing the poems. I liked the slight oddness of the titles, which I guess comes from them being translations — this seemed to give me permission to head off in directions I wouldn't otherwise have taken, a kind of freedom to move. I think I've held on to this feeling and have been able to use it since in my writing.

The poems (I wrote 18 in the end), which I grouped together under the title 'Estonian Songs', were published in my book *How We Met*.

## **James Brown**

I think it can be useful to write in a voice other than the one you might normally use. To this end I sometimes hand out old film festival programmes and get people to write a dramatic monologue based on a character in one of the photos. This requires thinking about what the person might say as well as how they might say it. In a dramatic monologue the speaker should be talking to somebody specific, not themselves or the reader, which is an internal monologue.

None of the narrators in 'Guilty Spaces', 'Wolves', 'The Second Law', 'I can still remember the day I came home from school and . . .' and 'Outback' (*Favourite Monsters*) is me. 'Guilty Spaces' is a dramatic monologue (even then the speaker claims to be writing); the others are internal monologues. The narrator of 'Outback' was based on the, at the time, unknown killer of Peter Falconio.

As well as setting a subject restriction, I also usually set a form constraint. I like the rhyme-scheme AABCC etc, used without any regular rhythm, metre or syllable count, so that the poem sounds like real speech and not Rupert Bear. Half-rhymes are absolutely fine.

Examples of this form include 'A Great Day' (*An Affair of the Heart*, eds Lay & Stratford, Cape Catley, 2003) and 'Letter' (*New Zealand Books*, Vol.13 No.5, Dec. 2003).

## **Eirlys Hunter: the five objects exercise**

Some writers just get on and do it. Others, like me, get paralysed by the infinite choices of an unstarted story. Who will it be about? Where are they? What do they want? We chew our pencils and stare at the blank plain of unlimited possibility.



Which way to go? My favourite exercise seems to provide this direction. It's the one in which a number of given elements have to be incorporated into the story. It's paradoxical perhaps, but having a constraint like that can liberate the imagination. The plain of endless possibility is no longer featureless because the objects act as landmarks that must be visited as the story unfolds. The trick is to devise a natural route between the landmarks so that the journey feels spontaneous and the objects don't stand out from the surrounding landscape of the story.

The first time I met this exercise was in the undergraduate short fiction course; I was astonished by how easily a broken typewriter, a friend of Janet Frame's, a child standing in water and so on led to a story of a journalist on her way to a Romanian orphanage — a character and a destination that I'd never have invented without those prompts. So when I was stuck for ideas for a children's story I asked two friends to provide an object each. Once I'd been given 'an apple with a bite out of it' and 'a small purple planet', the story of *The Astonishing Madam Majolica* (Scholastic, 1996) fell into place in a few hours.

When I was doing the MA in Creative Writing in 1998 Bill challenged the class to write a story incorporating a dictionary of sign language, a surface with something missing, a senior moment, a theatrical tribute to Invercargill and Mrs Vengalaers' babies. Those disparate elements slid together to form the diaries of the pompous Montgomery Cadwalader, showman, in a story that was more fun to write than anything else I've done, because, I'm sure, the objects sent my imagination to places it would never have managed to get to by itself. (See 'The Cadwalader Papers' in *The Picnic Virgin*, ed. Emily Perkins, Victoria University Press, 1999).

Since then I've often used this exercise with students and I've found that it usually inspires about half of any group to write a story that is better than anything they have written before: more original, more interesting, more formed. The students always protest when they get the assignment — it appears impossible - and then they say how easy they found it. And how surprised they are by what they end up creating, and by how different each journey around the list of objects turns out to be.

There's more about this exercise, and several terrific examples of stories which grew from these constraints, in *Mutes & Earthquakes*, edited by Bill Manhire (Victoria University Press, 1997).

## **Damien Wilkins**

Here's a fiction exercise: write a job interview scene. There are two parts. The first scene should be written from the point-of-view of the applicant, and then the same scene from the interviewer's point-of-view. The job itself can be anything from part-time work at the garden centre to a permanent position at a bank.

Try to avoid the obvious stuff here. The words 'job interview' trigger an almost automatic response; pity for the person being interviewed, who will be a nervous wreck, and dislike of the interviewer, who will be cold and uncaring. The applicant's hands will be sweaty; the interviewer will have beady eyes and a tendency to bark. What kills writing is cliché. The best responses I've had to this exercise move the reader away from these types. What if the applicant was extremely confident and the interviewer poorly prepared? What if the garden centre boss, instead of dirt under his fingernails, had immaculate hands? What if the bank manager wore a pony-tail and his office smelled of incense instead of aftershave? Play with expectations.



This is basically a dialogue exercise, and potentially a deathly one. Q: ‘How long did you have your last job?’ A: ‘Six months.’ Q: ‘Why did you leave?’ A: ‘Er . . . the business closed down.’ Again, the work of the writer is to reanimate the tired formulae of the everyday. What if the scene didn’t start at the beginning but half way in, when all the ‘boring’ bits had been gone through? (If you find yourself writing boring bits, it’s a good sign to stop.) Some boring bits, however, turn out to be rather wonderful. One student wrote about ‘the white fish-like flash’ of the interviewer’s ‘bald, spotted shin’ as he crossed his legs. I remember that shin but I’ve forgotten everything else.

## **Chris Price**

Photographs resemble poems in their ability to compress a great deal of action, thought and emotion into a single frame, and to suggest far more than they tell you explicitly. Like poems, photographs often seem resonant to me in ways I don’t consciously understand, and I’ve sometimes used them as starting points for poems that explore the situation or narrative or ideas that they evoke in my mind. The point of using a photo as a trigger is not to describe the image — that can produce a rather dull result — but to let your imagination run away with what it suggests to you, and make it your own.

The other great thing about photographs is that they may enable you to transcend the limits of your own experience, to ‘write what you don’t know’. So I’ve written poems that imagine the lives and environments of a Peruvian street vendor, psychiatric patients during the collapse of Soviet Russia, and of the people in a Turkish marketplace, even though I’ve never visited those countries. (See *Husk*, Auckland University Press, 2002.)

I’ve also written a poem (‘Swan Song’, published in *Sport* 31) that takes inspiration from two pictures by Wellington photographer Anne Noble. One shows a statue of the Archangel Michael with raised wings, the other shows the wings of a swan. Seeing the two pictures in an exhibition made me think about the physical and emotional adjustments you’d have to make if you had large wings attached to your shoulders, and to wonder what it might be like to be an angel of the traditional kind. It’s not necessary to know about the photos when reading the poem, but I doubt that idea would have come to me without the juxtaposition of those two images as a trigger.

Photographs can suggest whole stories, so I imagine they could be used to generate fiction as well. There’s no need to go to galleries to find great photos: just look for images that intrigue you in the photography section of the library, and see where they lead.

## **Caroline Foote: Obsess**

Kate De Goldi taught me this: write about an obsession. It can be any obsession: a fascination with bees, with airline menu cards, or with gory B-grade splatter flicks. It doesn’t matter what you choose, but make it something concrete; you will find it easier to write about an addiction to the music of an obscure, made-up punk band than a character’s search for ‘truth’.

Try your own obsessions. And, try to write about something you aren’t at all interested in; something incomprehensible, dull, or even disturbing. Writing with fascination about something out of your usual ken can open up some great new material.



The more you inquire into a particular subject — the harder you look at the love of shoes, or exhaust systems, for example — the more you may be able to uncover how strange and worthy of attention the everyday can be.

My favourite quote from illustrator Shaun Tan explains this better than I can. When asked about how he creates his odd, challenging images of the everyday world, he says:

*Everything is fundamentally mysterious... Art is about getting to the point of stopping and examining something for long enough that you actually see how unique and weird it is.*

Now, write a poem or a piece of prose. Try it several ways, and from different angles. If it's prose, try avoiding first person: have a character negotiating their obsession in the world of their everyday life. If it's a poem, try to be serious, especially about something absurd. Or, choose something that may be traditionally be written about seriously, like the love of good food, or love for your mother, or the drive to make money; and take it so far that it becomes something other than serious: absurd, or funny, or sad.

Have fun.

## **Bill Manhire**

My favourite exercise — partly because it always changes, and always surprises me — is called 'Five Things'. Here's an example of the exercise from *Mutes & Earthquakes*.

Write a piece of prose which makes room for:

- A child standing in water
- The *Oxford Dictionary of Saints*
- Someone claiming to be a close friend of Margaret Mahy
- A newspaper from which a photograph is missing
- A ladder (but no one's on it)

These items can appear in any order and in any manner you like, but they should all be present.

The exercise is pretty challenging. People need time to think, and to try different possibilities. So it can't really be done in class, though perhaps it can be started there. But the reporting process can be an exciting experience. Everyone finds such different solutions for different items. You would expect the exercise to produce uniformity, but exactly the opposite happens.

Some items become crucial in the piece of writing, while others are comparatively peripheral; but the solutions and combinations are always very distinctive for each writer. And there's a kind of collective excitement as you try to spot just how others have incorporated the various items.



This is also an exercise which tests the teacher or workshop coordinator. The five items have to be unlikely and provocative and fresh. To ask for a piece of writing incorporating a tree, a stone, a river, a refrigerator, and a man in a bowler hat might not work so well. But then, the first three things might be inside the refrigerator, and the man in the bowler hat just about to open the door . . .

## Susan Pearce

Way back, I found an exercise in *Mutes & Earthquakes* that suggested writing a story entirely composed of dialogue. I tried it, and produced the pointless, snarky argument of a couple in a car. My husband, when I showed it to him, said it sounded scarily familiar.<sup>1</sup>

After that I probably returned to free writing, the exercise I used most often in those days. It's a slacker's exercise (if there is such a thing), being a supposed banishment of patterns and boundaries. Natalie Goldberg (*Writing Down the Bones, Wild Mind*) sets out four rules for it:

1. Keep your hand moving.
2. Be specific.
3. Lose control.
4. Don't think.

Free writing has produced acres of vapid scrawl in my notebooks, a few lines for poems and stories, and once or twice, near-complete short stories in a single session. On those occasions, my flailing thoughts have wrapped around the gristle and rope provided by other, half-remembered, more strenuous exercises.

A few years after abandoning the disputatious couple in their car, I worked all day in a borrowed bach by Foxton estuary, trying to finish a problematic story. My friend sat upstairs writing poetry in front of a huge picture window, gathering inspiration from the water and the birds and the locals roughing up the dunes with their quadbikes. I had bagged the cramped, dark room by the kitchen, and sat opposite a blank wall.

I was a work fiend that weekend, and when I'd run out of my story, I continued to write using the rules of free writing. After a few pages, a couple of voices began to argue about the nature of stories and their provenance.

For days, the demands of realism had frustrated me (getting characters from A to B, making them content / frightened / hungry), and now it was hugely fun to let those two voices rant and fuss without having to make them *do* anything. They eventually became a short piece, 'The Pit', published in *Turbine 1* (at [www.vuw.ac.nz/turbine/pearce.html](http://www.vuw.ac.nz/turbine/pearce.html)). One print publisher told me that 'The Pit' is a writers' rather than a readers' story. I am happy for it to be so, but would also like to write a few best-sellers.

---

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Anderson's story 'Up the River with Mrs Gallant' (in *I think we should go into the jungle*, Victoria University Press, 1989) is a hilarious example of the dialogue idea.



Free writing can help you to ‘find your voice’, or free up your buried vocabulary. It’s good, too, if you’re after the simple confidence boost of filling a page. However, used on its own it’s not liable to wring wonders out of your imagination, or to develop your sense of what it means to write for impatient, distractible readers. Better, maybe, to supplement it with a random, limiting rule, setting yourself the task of ‘free writing from the point of view of a frog’, or ‘free writing without the words “and”, “the” or “it”’. Following ideas like these may not find you any readers, but they will push your mind in new directions.

## Stephanie De Montalk

The laptop’s on, the printer’s loaded and coffee’s in the cup. I have an idea for a poem or a piece of prose but the words are hiding.

The most useful thing I can do when the keyboard is silent and the screen doesn’t move is to open a scenic calendar or a thoughtful pictorial magazine (like *National Geographic*), or to pocket my notebook and take a walk, visit an exhibition (of art, photography, sculpture, a futuristic arrangement of sea-weed ...), or lose myself in a movie. I find that there is something about releasing the mind from the conscious, earnest search for details and words, and engaging with random visual stimuli, that provokes my imagination and causes subconscious thoughts — the real genesis of writing — about the topic to rise to the surface.

An example of this strategy at work can be found in the poem, ‘Dog on a Mountain’ (*The Scientific Evidence of Dr Wang*). Here, I had been searching, unsuccessfully, for a way into a poem about exile or separation and the emotional distance of an unfamiliar landscape. As the film festival was on, I left the concept to simmer and went, without expectation, to a documentary about throat singing. The film included footage from, as I recall, Mongolia. Of course, there was nothing about throat singing that was remotely relevant to exile. But there *were* connections in the images of the barren Mongolian landscape from which the backdrop to the poem would be established, as well as the fragments of geographical isolation, including a lonely road and a dog howling ‘from the back of its throat’, that wove their way into the work.

In addition to developing an idea, visual input can also suggest an idea or subject to develop. For instance, the impetus for two poems, ‘Fish Sometimes Swim in Pools’ and ‘At the Border’ (*Animals Indoors*), were black and white photographs of oriental rugs in an advertisement in the daily paper. In the case of the first poem, the rugs reminded me of ‘the carpet/rolled//in which the last Caliph [of Baghdad] was murdered’ (as the last lines of the poem were to run), and set me thinking about what the design on the carpet might have looked like, and the individual significance of the borders and designs on exotic rugs. This last thought led to consideration of the ancient art of hand-weaving and personal attachment to hand crafted carpets, and a flight of fancy about a couple of rugs which I and a traveling companion might have purchased in Afghanistan after ‘the monarch/had been deposed’, only to encounter, on leaving the country, a border official with ‘the long rolls of our carpets/and the gleam of our beads in his eyes’.

Being open to visual stimulus can result in surprising associations. Most recently, an essay on mutton-birding, with its photographs of shearwaters above the sea preparing to land on their nesting island, cleared the way for a poem entitled ‘Waxing and Salting’ (*Cover Stories*). This poem, about loss and recovery, compared the return of a lost thought — a preoccupation with writers — to the most unlikely spectacle of mutton birds making their way back to their burrows.



## Nigel Cox

For me any new piece of writing starts with the first sentence. Well, obviously — though not all writers begin at the beginning. But I do. I like to try out the implications of a piece of language. That first sentence will tell me how much the narrator — if the piece is told by a person — or how much the voice, if it's told by a 'voice in the sky' — knows. When they lived, and where. How much schooling they've had, what their tastes are. How old. Which gender.

Of course not all of that is revealed in every first sentence, but it's surprising how much does become apparent. And, by the end of a first paragraph or stanza, a lot is known. Especially the 'feel' of this piece of writing; its tone.

I don't want to plunge ahead with the writing until I know enough to go forward — and yet I can't really tell what the qualities of the piece are until I've started writing it down. So, as an exercise, I try the voice of the first paragraph in different tenses. The traditional storytelling tense, which is the immediate past: 'She opened the door.' The present: 'She opens the door.' The future: 'She will open the door.' (though, imagine reading a whole piece in that voice.) Then I try various speakers: 'I opened the door.' 'I watched her open the door.' 'He watched her open the door.' 'From our place in the clouds we look down and see her opening the door.' Of course with such a dull sentence, and such a short one, not so much is revealed, but if a little more is written, say, a paragraph or three, then... Then what happens is you find out what is the best way to come at your material; which angle of approach is the most lively and has the most possibilities.

I used exactly this approach to begin my long novel *Tarzan Presley*. I tried out the opening pages from seven or eight 'points of view' until I found the one which would, I thought, make the telling of that strange story the most convincing and the most engaging. What I liked about the voice that developed was how it worked up a combination of the traditional storytelling voice ('Once upon a time'), in which the narrator already knows everything that will happen in the story, and a voice of discovery, in which the story is being discovered by the teller. And there was a mystery: 'How come this narrator knows all this?' The answer to which is one of the novel's secrets.

Here are three openings I like:

'The same week our fowls were stolen, Daphne Moran had her throat cut.'  
from *The Scarecrow* by Ronald Hugh Morrieson

and...

'Dennis Lenahan the high diver would tell people that if you put a fifty-cent piece on the floor and looked down at it, that's what the tank looked like from the top of the eighty-foot steel ladder.'  
from *Tishomingo Blues* by Elmore Leonard

and...

'This is the story of Ella Bend Hess, of how she became clairvoyant and what she was able to see.'  
from *Cartesian Sonata* by William H. Gass.



## Nick Ascroft

My experience with teaching (slash, I don't know, eek, what's some suitably ugly business-jargon...facilitating?) the writing of poetry has involved teaching a second-year English class at the University of Otago, and a night class of middle-aged women at a Dunedin art centre. Of the two, the most successful exercises were often opposites: having the oldies be experimental and the students, conservative. However, two exercises stood out as being utterly and universally successful, both with the intention of enlightening the writer's inner critic as to what makes for strong poetry and crucially, what does not. The first is an ongoing rule of anonymity in the workshop. Everybody's poems are initially shuffled – with no attributing author written in a top corner – and then read by a random member of the class. Comments are made, with the proviso that you are not allowed to defend or 'explain' your own poem. This works miracles in opening a poet's eyes as to how their work is actually perceived, and in critiquing others' work helps them to isolate what they like and strive for in their own.

Obviously it can be a bit of a rough ride, and teacher has to make sure no one is too cruel, and, where possible, the positive is accentuated. The second exercise is a kinder one, and more fun. It is simply the request that members of the class each write a bad poem. To appreciate that such a thing can exist outside of the pervasive falsehood that poetry is 'all relative' is educational in itself, but the rewards of the exercise are also subtle. In the end 'badness' simply becomes an alternative ideal of aesthetic which involves just as much craft and hard-wrought poetry-power as any other ideal. And the class always love it.

## Marty Smith

This is an autobiographical exercise based on the poem 'History' by Tomaz Salamun. I like to use this exercise with students who are new to the workshop process, because it provokes extraordinarily free writing, which is odd, given that they have to write in public and under pressure. Somehow they just start writing and keep going. It works because you get to reach into your fantastical self. You get to tell wild and extravagant lies about yourself, which may even be true.

The poem begins with the lines, 'Tomaz Salamun is a monster/Tomaz Salamun is a sphere rushing through the air' and goes through a series of escalating and exhilarating comparisons and speculations until it brings you back to ground with, 'This is Tomaz Salamun he went to the store / with his wife Marushka to buy some milk.' (Read the whole of Tomaz Salamun's poem at <http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,12084,1226354,00.html> so you can hear the musical phrasing and follow the way he moves around.)

Write a similar poem in which the statements are sometimes true, sometimes false, and frequently outlandish. You can use your own name to begin as many lines as you like, but pay particular attention to the musicality of the poem. The trick is to let go of trying to create order, because the sense will make its own way through the sound patterns.

Russ Kale's poem 'History' (a finalist in this year's award) is from this exercise, and so is Sue Mun Huang's poem by the same name, which won the New Zealand Poetry Society junior section this year.

The exercise comes, courtesy of Bill Manhire, from *Teaching Yourself Writing Poetry* by Matthew Sweeney and John Hartley Williams (Hodder Headline, 1997).



## Lorae Parry

I'm a great fan of right brain/left brain writing techniques to kick-start a piece of writing. An exercise I like to use if I get stuck on a speech is based on the work of Gabrielle Lusser Rico, from her book *Writing the Natural Way* (Jeremy Tarcher, 1983).

The exercise has two parts. In the first part, you think about the subject of a speech or a poem that you want to write about. Then you choose a key word that you feel best encapsulates that subject, eg: a key word might be: 'Passion'; 'Anger'; 'War'. Or it could be a phrase, eg: 'The concrete jungle', or 'The moonlight crept in'. Once you have this key word/s, you take a blank piece of paper and write it in the middle.

You then draw a circle around the word or phrase. And then from that 'nucleus word/phrase', you begin to word associate, using an arrow that goes off to another word that you create, circling that word, connecting it with an arrow, and so on. Although you start from the original key word/s, as you create other words, you can associate off those as well, until you've created a cluster of word/s that are connected to each other like a spider web, and your page is filled with circled words and arrows.

The words you come up with may eventually seem to have little or nothing to do with the original key word, eg: 'Passion' may contain words like 'shattering glass' or 'daffodil bulbs pushing through the earth', yet they have come from your nucleus. The important thing about this exercise is not to think! Just allow your hand and right brain to come up with the images, writing whatever comes to mind. If nothing comes, doodle until something on your page sets you off again.

Once you have your 'word cluster', you are now ready to start the second part of the exercise. For this part you are going to write a vignette or speech or poem, using the words and phrases that your right brain has come up with.

Start by scanning the words on the page, until a word or phrase leaps out at you. It may be your original key word/s. Then, still employing the right brain, write your vignette or speech using as many of your clustered words as possible and linking them together with other words that occur to you as you go. You don't have to use everything you've come up with. You'll instinctively know when to finish the piece and I often finish with the original nucleus word. Once it's finished, you then utilise the left brain in order to edit, refine and polish.



The extraordinary thing about this process is that although you've come up with the words seemingly at random, the right brain 'knows' how to create unity, and the end result is an invariably cohesive piece of writing. It's a wonderful method of accessing rich and textured work that can leave you surprised and delighted by what you've come up with.

## Lynda Chanwai-Earle

I've found both these exercises very useful in terms of finding inspiration and getting 'fired-up' to write.

1. The **Snowstorm Exercise** is fairly short, for the first workshop. It's very simple and a fun 'ice-breaker' that utilises a whole group as well as individuals. The teacher will need 3 containers (for 'lucky-dips') and to cut up 3 separate piles of blank strips of paper. The 1st pile is for the 'characters', the second is for the 'subject of dialogue', the third is for the 'location of the scene'. If the strips of paper are small, then there'll only be room for a brief sentence. For 12 students, the first pile needs to be around 200 strips of paper (characters), and the second and third piles around 120 strips each. Students are to write down (and call-out **loudly** as they go) as many characters as they can think of and place their paper strips into the first container. By calling out as they write — the students are forced to be quite inventive. Once obvious characters like 'lawyer' and 'doctor' are used, then they'll be forced to use their imagination such as: 'Man in tux and swimming fins'. Once all the strips are filled, place the container to the side and repeat the process again for dialogue and location. The race is on to fill up all the blank strips of paper. Once all three containers are full — pass the 1<sup>st</sup> container around for a lucky-dip. The students are to take 2 characters each. Repeat the lucky-dip for 'dialogue' and finally 'location'.

This is how the students get to find out what their 'surprise' short scenes will be about. This exercise forces the participants to be inventive and think laterally about two characters in dialogue at a location. It also creates an atmosphere of hilarity where students end up 'feeding off' each other for inspiration in the process.

2. The second, the **Newspaper Exercise** will be kick-started at the end of the first workshop — so that the students may take it away as homework, with the aim to bring their pieces back to share in a group reading session for the second workshop.

Hand out a page of newspaper to each student. Make sure each page is different, so that no student has the same one. They are to choose **one** article from the paper — the one that grabs their attention and inspires them the most. Ask them to think about why it inspires them, the various characters they can find within the article and all the possible unique scenarios and locations for their scene. Get them to think outside the square again, try **not** to choose the most obvious story. For instance — if it's an article about a plane crash, instead of writing tragedy they may choose to write a black-comedy about the last thoughts and dialogue of the pilots or a petty argument between journalists on the ground speeding towards the crash site. Often students are disappointed if they get an advertising page — but they shouldn't be. An advertisement for a shoe sale may inspire a drama about a woman who walks across a continent in stilettos...anything goes!



## Linda Burgess

An exercise that I have found works with groups of all levels and ages is the story of your life in 14 (or sometimes, if I'm feeling generous, 15) words.

This exercise has worked particularly well at the end of a writing course although it is also an effective starter. It does several things. It demands economy, which is essential in many writing modes. It's less pretentious (and less clichéd) than a haiku. It isn't too daunting — anyone can do it, yet there is real satisfaction from doing it well. It asks for a mood to be established. It requires the writer to choose a style: a list of nouns or adjectives? a pithy sentence? a poem? It requires editing. It reads aloud well. It also asks a writer to confront who they are - which, it appears to me, is what many people who are attending a writing course have come to find out. It would also be a useful writing exercise to attach to a literary study — King Lear's life in 14 words. And of course a happy hour or two can be spent turning them into charts to decorate your prefab.

Each time I do this exercise I'm delighted with the variety and the complexity of the responses. It's up to you (keeping in mind the group that you're teaching) to decide how much help to give. I think though that to read examples to them can actually crush their own creativity — they tend to think there's 'a right way' to do this. And there isn't. Perhaps if after a first go the students haven't stretched themselves, you can read examples that approach the exercise more imaginatively than they have.

I include some examples — all written by middle-aged creative writing students unfortunately. However once you start using this exercise you will quickly get your own collection.

- Genes from Bengal, culture from Wales, body and spirit in New Zealand. Where next?
- Sixty-one-year-old Kiwi mother teacher traveller farmer housekeeper gardener seeks exciting position.
- More running than walking  
More laughter than tears  
More husbands than most  
Fewer fears
- Lifelong grasshopper in mind and action. Mother, dreamer...yet to gain traction.
- Only eighteen slowly up the aisle too late to turn and run after forty years.
- A journey from birth to death with too many roundabouts but some great views.
- Katherine Kitten Kathy Katy Kat Kath Miss Smith Mrs Wright Ms Smith Kate.



## **Ken Duncum: Action Is Character**

This is the second half of a longer exercise. In the first half I get writers to invent a character or describe one they're already working with. Then I give them a sheet of paper on which is written:

*Your character is shown into a room — and the door is locked behind them. There is a small table — with one chair (its back to the door). On the chair is hanging a jacket. In one corner of the room there is a coat-rack (empty). There is a small window in one wall about 10 feet high. That is all. Your character is alone for at least a minute. What does he/she do?*

So — the writer describes how their character responds in this arbitrary and vaguely threatening situation. I stress the character does not talk to themselves — which is both unlikely and boring. A minute is a long time when detailing what someone does, there's enough time for a lot of different actions. In my experience of this exercise no two characters have ever responded the same way. What happens is that the writer finds out about their character (and is able to take these discoveries into other work with the character) and the character expresses the traits the writer has built into them through action — which is a much more powerful communicator than speech. What a character does tells us who they are — action is character.

## **Kathy McCrae**

Create a short play complete with characters, setting and conflict.

Write down as many CHARACTERS you can think of in 5 minutes and put in a hat / box.

Write down as many SETTINGS you can think of in 5 minutes and put in a hat / box.

Write down as many sources of CONFLICT you can think of in 5 minutes and put in a hat / box.

(Try to keep suggestions unrelated to previous ideas, ie random.)

Pick out

- 2-4 characters
- 1-2 settings
- 1 conflict

Write a short play using the elements you have chosen.

Perform it with a group.

# Bell Gully

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON  
*Te Whare Wānanga o te Ūpoko o te Ika a Māui*



Now up the ANTE.

Choose one category and increase the stakes.

e.g. put characters under more strain (physical, emotional, monetary. . .)

Make the setting more extreme.

Heighten the conflict (increase how much the characters want something).

Now EDIT the play.

Reduce the dialogue by a third.

Perform.

Reduce by another third.

Perform.

## **Vivienne Plumb**

Oh no, the 'describe your favourite poetry exercise' question. Give all my secrets away and bare myself naked. It's like asking pirates to show you where their treasure is buried.

Anyway, what exercises? . . . I used them when I first began writing because they can set you a good discipline, but I don't use them much anymore. My poems are produced from little scraps of tiny pieces of things, stitched together with my best hand sewing and hemmed neatly. Although, there is something I still like. So here we go, here we go: syllabification.

In several of the poems in my poetry collection, *Nefarious*, I have used a syllabic discipline. In particular the last poem of the book, *Lorikeets*, is a long piece using nine syllables to almost every line. This is available to read on the Institute of Modern Letters' *Best New Zealand Poems 2004* online site ([www.vuw.ac.nz/modernletters/bnzp](http://www.vuw.ac.nz/modernletters/bnzp)).

Counting syllables can be a soothing job and the end result gives a melodic rhythm to the pieces, even more so when it is read out loud. Syllabic metre teaches the writer a lot about sound and the length and power of words. You can try five, seven, or nine syllables, all give different results. Or add an extra discipline on top of syllabification — how about a syllabic prose poem?

Now I'll chuck in a linked writing exercise which I think I might have made up. The results can be used for prose or made into poems, and can prove most interesting. I like the way it's possible to reverse the exercise. Try one half straight after the other and get yourself warmed up:

# Bell Gully

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON

*Te Whare Wānanga o te Ūpoko o te Ika a Māui*



Part One — Write the instructions on how to do something you know a lot about, for instance a recipe you often cook, how to milk a cow, something you do in a job you have, or how to saddle up a horse. Write it as if you are instructing someone else how to do the same activity.

Part Two — Now write about something you don't know how to do but it must be something you have always wished to learn. Maybe you always wanted to scuba dive, learn a language, or pilot a space shuttle. It should be something you think you would enjoy. Describe how you imagine you would go about doing this thing.