

Write an entry in which you repeatedly use two different primary colors. Describe these colors without renaming them too often—and they to find effective synonyms for the colors without being too obvious about this disguise.

Write about an event set in the past (more than 20 years ago). Write about it from the first-person point of view of someone who was there and important to the event, then write about it from the point of view of someone who lived at the same time but wasn't an integral part of the event.

Take the full name (including middle name) of someone you love. Write down as many words from this name as you can. You can repeat letters from the names as many times as you wish. Treat the letters from this name as the *only letters* in a new alphabet. You cannot use any words containing letters that do not exist in this name. When you have built a sufficient list of words (maybe breaking the list down into nouns, verbs, adverbs, etc.), write a fragment of fiction that has to do with a fictionalized situation this person, or someone like this person, would be involved in.

Write about a person you love. This apparently simple instruction may be much more difficult than you think. You will immediately be faced with the decision of writing about someone you love or loved romantically or as a friend. Or perhaps you'll choose a family member. Spend some time simply writing ideas on the subject before you compose the story.

Imagine a character who is kind, whose every act is based on the notion that other people need help, and who rarely thinks of herself first. This should be a person of great empathy. The character walks into a room and notices immediately that the other person in the room who most wants something—a drink, the last cookie on the tray, help remembering a movie character's name. What happens next?

Write a set of short scenes in which confusion or chaos follows a character, as if in his wake. The character does not cause this, knowingly or unknowingly, but disorder nearly always happens after he has left the room, an intersection, or an elevator. This should not be magic. Things just happen.

Observe an adult through the eyes of an eight-year-old child. Write only what the child sees and can reasonably understand. This adult is going through a disturbing crisis that he cannot (or will not) explain to the child. The adult is also powerless in the face of the child narrator's will (essentially, any demand the child makes of the adult, the adult accepts), yet this adult should be a powerful figure in the adult world.

Write a conversation between two people who know each other extremely well. The two people are involved in a complex activity, but the conversation should not be about this activity. Show how two people very familiar with one another's way of talking assume a lot, speak in code, don't necessarily listen to each other, and telegraph replies.

Gather together four objects that mean something special to you, objects that have an emotional history behind them but that are in themselves ordinary and functional. The four objects should not have any relationship to each other. Write a fragment of a story that incorporates these objects casually into them without using the actual history of these talismans. Avoid using photographs or things that contain easily recognizable stories in and of themselves. Use humble, inert pieces of your daily life.

Interview by phone or in person a family member, preferably someone much older than you, and ask him or her to tell you a story that took place before you were born. Don't take notes. Wait 24 hours, then take

a few notes of the key details of the story. Wait another 24 hours, and then write a brief story based loosely on this story. Make sure you tamper with the facts and names but not the place (you need to understand how important these various ideas of home are to you as a writer). Don't be afraid to depart from what you imagine is the truth. Remember, you weren't even born yet! Write down a half dozen questions in advance.

Write a short story that relies on research. Use encyclopedias, the more esoteric the better, for a start. Read up on a process, say tunnel digging or root-canal dental work. Use the bibliographies at the end of the encyclopedia entry for further reading. Do research into two different subjects, then let a story that uses both subjects come to life. Or do this research outside of a library—go to some interesting place, ask questions, and observe the arcane activity. If one of your friends has an unusual job, ask him or her to describe it. Or drop in a local pet shop or barbershop that has been owned and operated by the same person for a long time and hang around, asking questions, probing. The only rule is to follow this exercise: Do not let the reader feel the research. Massage the material into your story so it feels natural, an organic part of the experience.

Write a third-person fragment of story about one important moment in someone's life. Examine the moment from every possible angle. Think about smell, light, texture, distant and near sounds, and the details that will stick in the memory of the participant. Don't worry about telling a whole story (although you may learn that you can't *not* tell a story here, when you explain the importance of the moment and tie up some of the threads attached to this moment).

Imagine someone who uses a public space as if it were a private space. This person is not crazy but has a reasonable excuse for behaving in this way. Make this person think every place is private space—his mind is always in a bedroom, even when he's in a supermarket. The sort of person you're creating for this exercise might be slightly boorish, self-involved, or maybe just head-over-heels in love and unconcerned by the critical eyes of strangers. How would this type interact with a very shy person, for whom all public spaces are perilous zones of potential embarrassment?

Write a very short story on the model of a villanelle, which is a 19-line poem of five three-line stanzas, plus a four-line stanza at the end. The first and third lines of the first stanza alternate as the last lines of the next four stanzas. Then, in the final four-line stanza, those same first and third lines of the story become the last two lines of the poem, in order: ABC DEA FGC HIA JKC LMAC. For the purposes of this exercise, your "lines" may be full sentences or not. If you choose not to use a full sentence, make sure this incomplete sentence will be completed by several different concluding phrases without harming meaning too much. It might be best to write this first of all in the form of a poem. After you've set it up, then turn it into prose.

Examine a group of people who are part of a team. Don't show their actual sports activity (game or practice time). Don't even tell what sport they play. Show only their lives off the field, away from the coaches and the crowds. Show how these people are tied together—the ridiculous and moving bonds of something other than friendship—team spirit, esprit de corps, hatred of other teams. The idea of this exercise is to study the way people create group relationships—the invisible web of commitments and hierarchies.

Describe intensely and minutely the experience of one individual in the midst of a team sport. Don't describe the other events on the field—the other players, the plays, the strategies. Simply present this one person's graceful or graceless behavior as if isolated from all that's going on around him or her. Show the intensity of the experience, the single-mindedness of this athlete.

