



How to Write (More)
Antena

Forget grammar and think about potatoes.
—Gertrude Stein

To change the meaning of a name is to change the world.
—Cecilia Vicuña

If you are a poet would you have the three obligations: work on yourself to become more conscious, work in the world to change it free and equal, include ecological survival, and work in poetic forms that themselves alter consciousness.
—Hannah Weiner

One of the distressing and fascinating features of being writers is the (nearly constant) sensation/suspicion that writing is impossible, overwhelming, unattainable—even in periods of great productivity, and more so in moments when we are not feeling productive (regardless of whether or not that feeling is accurate). Writing and the inability to write are perhaps one and the same.

An important part of the process of writing is to devise both ways to write outside our habits and structures that help us to extend our learning, our experiments, and our practice. At a very basic level, one of the most important elements of writing—perhaps the most important element of writing—is simply writing. Not to be daunted and silenced by the blank page or screen. Not to believe in the myth of “writer’s block.” Not to talk ourselves out of writing before we’ve even begun. The strategies we’re exploring here are designed to be flexible enough to be relevant to any existing/ongoing writing project, or to provide sparks for new projects, or ways to play and experiment with language outside the context of any project in particular. Any of these exercises can be revised to fit your purposes more precisely, and with any of these exercises, you might edit the resulting texts based on your particular goals or inclinations at the moment.

This list contains loosely clustered generative practices intended as resources for language play, deepened exploration of ideas or sensations, processes to accompany research, and/or encouragements to exit our comfort zones as writers. There is quite a bit of overlap among our categories, and many of the exercises might fit just as easily in two or ten other categories as in the category where it’s placed. Our purpose is not to create taxonomies of experimental practice, but to excite writers—ourselves included—to explore new approaches and welcome the unfamiliar or unexpected into our practice.

Certainly there are zillions more techniques than the ones we have devised here. As these occur to you, please let us know so we can expand this list. You’ll find us at antena@antenaantena.org.

Initials following an exercise mean that we have borrowed it from another author. A list of referenced authors can be found in the “Resources” section at the end of this pamphlet.

APPROPRIATION

Appropriation is a ticket out of “writer’s block.” No more blank sheet of paper. No more empty word document staring out at us with its evil blinking cursor. The text is already there: ours is the job of arranger, editor, intervener, disrupter, provocateur. More is more! Start with someone else’s words and start writing as rewriting!

- * Cento: Write a collage made up of lines from selected source poems.
- * Construct a text made from administrative language you encounter in your every day life. You might use the fine print from credit card bills, tax forms, a cell phone contract—any kind of “impersonal” and “objective” language.
- * Serial sentences: Select one sentence each from a variety of different books or other sources. Add sentences of your own composition. Combine into one paragraph, reordering to produce the most interesting results.
- * Write a poem or prose piece that culls from a speech or text that uses rhetoric or content you find entirely reprehensible. Consider the different ways to encounter your source material so as to construct a response or resistance to that source. For example, write from the text of an anti-immigrant law or a homophobic rant.
- * Write a poem or prose text that takes any line or phrase from a book you have readily at hand as its title, first line, last line, or any combination of the above.

COLLABORATION

Writing is famously a solitary pursuit, but it doesn’t have to be. Making space for someone else’s thought process, ideas, vocabulary, habits, quirks and interruptions to change the shape of our texts can be unsettling and exciting. Our words belong to us, and to everyone. What might happen in that “third space” that exists between two (or more) consciousnesses?

- * As Lyn Hejinian and Anne Tardos did, write a collaboration that begins with one person sending the other person two lines. The second person inserts a line between those two lines, and then follows that three-line stanza with two lines, and sends back to the first person. The first person inserts a line between the two lines, and then follows that second three-line stanza with two lines. Etc.
- * Create a collaboration with an artist friend whose practice is very different from yours—a filmmaker, a musician, a sculptor, etc. Make a new work together incorporating both of your practices: not a text to accompany their visual work, or an illustration to accompany your text, but something that incorporates both modes from the inception of the piece.
- * Exquisite Corpse: With a group of people, start a poem or a prose piece with three lines of writing. Next, fold over the page so that only the last line is visible. Now pass to the next person

for them to write three more lines that follow the one visible line. Do this for as long as you like, or until the page is full. Read out loud!

* Take turns talking with a friend. Tell each other a story—or maybe you have something to vent about: vent about it! Set a time limit—five or ten minutes perhaps. As your friend talks, write using only words that the other person says. Then switch. When you are finished, read what you wrote to your friend.

* Write a collaboration with a friend via email or snail mail. Agree on the terms (perhaps a set number of lines? the use of shared vocabulary? writing in-between each other's lines? writing at particular times of day or congruent places?) and agree on a number of exchanges or a time frame for the collaboration.

CONSTRAINT-BASED WRITING

Traditional forms are constraint-based practices the same way that rules we make up for ourselves are. Experiment with the constraint of form: write a sestina, a pantoum, or a terza rima. Or invent your own forms and constraints, as the Oulipo writers did. Oulipo stands for the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* or Workshop for Potential Literature.

* Alphabet poems: Make up a poem of 26 words so that each word begins with the next letter of the alphabet. Write another alphabet poem but scramble the letter order. (CB)

* Anagrams: Choose a sentence that expresses an idea you believe merits rearrangement. Write a series of lines using only the letters from that sentence. Another version of an anagram is the *beau présent*, in which only the letters of a person's name (or two people's names—*beau présents* make great gifts for people celebrating unions) are used to make a poem or poems. (Oulipo)

* Exercises in style: Write twenty-five or more different versions of one event. (BM; the Oulipian book titled *Exercises in Style* by Raymond Queneau depicts one event in 99 different ways)

* Lipogram: choose one or more letter(s) of the alphabet and write a text that does not contain any words with the letter(s). Prisoner's constraint (no clue why it's called that) is a lipogram where any letters with ascenders or descenders are omitted (b, d, f, g, h, j, k, l, p, q, t, and y).

* N+7: take any text and replace every noun with the seventh noun after it in the dictionary; experiment with using different dictionaries but the same text. (Oulipo)

* Pick a book at random and use its title as an acrostic key phrase. For each letter of the key phrase, go to the page number in the book that corresponds (a=1, z=26). Find the first word that begins with that letter, and copy from that word to the end of the line or sentence, using this as the first line of your poem. Continue this process through all the key letters, leaving stanza breaks to mark each new key word. (CB)

* Pick twenty words, either a word list you generate yourself or from source texts. Write three different poems using only these words. (CB)

* Systematically eliminate the use of certain kinds of words or phrases from a piece of writing: eliminate all adjectives from a poem of your own, or take out all words beginning with “s” in Shakespeare’s sonnets. (BM)

* Write a poem consisting of one-word lines; write a poem consisting of two-word lines; write a poem consisting of three-word lines. (CB)

LISTENING AS A GENERATIVE STRATEGY

What if we were to think of all writing as transcription? What if we were to transcribe not the ideas in our brains or the perceptions of our immediate context or the narratives and memories we hold in our bones, but some other overheard melody, screech, or chatter? When words won’t come to us, what if we come to words, letting outside language or sounds filter into our consciousness and into the text?

* Go to a busy café, bus stop, train station, or other public space. Allow the overheard to permeate your text.

* Immerse yourself in a piece of music you find especially compelling. Listen to it for an hour, for 8 hours, for 24 hours. Or listen to it once a day for a week or a month. Write into that immersion.

* Listen to the news (on radio or TV) and write as you do, letting some of the language you are hearing filter into your writing.

* Write a poem composed entirely of misheard song lyrics, clichés, overheard conversations, news headlines, menu items, etc. (CB)

* Write down everything you hear for one hour. (CB)

* Write while being read to from science texts, or, write while being read to by one’s lover from any text. (BM)

MOVING WRITING OFF THE PAGE

Writing—and its corollaries, live reading and performance—belongs on the page, off the page, in the office, in the streets, in the woods, on mountains, in subways, in motion, in stillness, in bodies, in the ether. That is, writing belongs anywhere and everywhere, and there’s no reason we need to see writing as sealed off from the world or as a purely intellectual activity involving only ink on paper and possibly a single person standing somberly (or not somberly) at a microphone.

How might we lure writing off the page and into the world? Where are the worlds we might envision our writing moving, and how might we move with it?

* Collaborate with someone who works in a different discipline (dance, film, music, biology, cooking, architecture, etc.). See what techniques they use to make what they make; try to use those same techniques to make writing.

* Devise a poetry walk or a poetry bike ride or a story scavenger hunt or a poetry potluck or a novel dance party or an all-night poetry marathon. Find ways to bring your work into the world that imagine something beyond the traditional model of the poetry reading (though readings are great too!).

* Experiment with ways to collectivize public writing practice. Organize a reading in a bookstore, park, or empty building. Start a “flash” literary journal that will only have three issues. Make a DIY anthology with work by people in your local community.

* How might you enact a poem in the form of a mosaic? As graffiti? As a trek in the woods? As a climate?

* Make a bunch of copies of a little chapbook or zine of some recent work. Make them pretty—whatever “pretty” means to you. Then give them away to friends and people you meet at readings and other events. Voilà—the gift economy!

PROCEDURAL WRITING

Procedural writing is similar to constraint-based writing—or perhaps it is the same thing, in a sense, but constraints on language use are replaced by formal or process-based structures that provide a kind of scaffolding for writing explorations.

* As Bhanu Kapil did with *Schizophrenie*, take a manuscript you have been working on for some time; perhaps you feel frustrated about the manuscript for some reason. Leave the manuscript somewhere outside where no one will disturb it, maybe in your backyard. It should be in a place where rain or snow will fall on it, mold can grow on it, the world will modify the text. After a few months or an entire season, retrieve the manuscript. Re-write using only the words still readable.

* As Lee Ann Brown, Danika Dinsmore, Jen Hofer, and Bernadette Mayer did to create the book *The 3:15 Experiment* (and as many other writers who’ve participated in the experiment have done as well), wake up every morning at 3:15am (or some other middle-of-the-night time) and write. Don’t censor yourself. Let your nighttime, half-asleep brain do the work (or not work). Do this every day for a month.

* Write a set of instructions, or ask a friend to write a set of instructions. Do the instructions, taking notes as you do them. Write a poem based on these notes.

* Write a sonnet during a limited amount of time. Begin with one- or two-minute increments, lengthen to five or ten. Try writing a sonnet every day at the exact same time. Or write one word or line or one stanza a day for fourteen days. Try writing a sonnet in an unlikely circumstance. For instance, if you wait in line every day for five minutes write a sonnet then, on a bus, waiting to buy coffee or before or after brushing your teeth while standing at the sink. The idea is to write not in the usual spaces or circumstances where you fall into a habitual pattern. Standing up trying to write on the wall or on a little pad can be part of the experiment. Try dictation into a recorder. Have someone write down what you are saying. Try writing upon waking or before sleep. Set a certain number of days to try a practice, such as a week or more. (LB)

* Write eight (or however many) lines every day at 8 a.m. or 8 p.m. for 8 days. If you like this process, do it for 88 days.

SHIFTING THE CONTEXT

A conventional cultural imaginary envisions writers sitting at a desk or table, perhaps clutching their head in their hands, perhaps gnashing their teeth or sipping their umpteenth whiskey, struggling to get to some gem of expression. And it's true that some of us sit, some of us clutch, some of us gnash, some of us sip, and most of us struggle. But it doesn't have to be that way, and our struggles don't have to take place at a desk. What if the world becomes our writing studio? What might happen when we shift the physical context of our writing, or the linguistic context of the language we are accustomed to using?

* Choose a site or topic to research. Locate at least two literary sources and at least two non-literary sources that address your site/topic (however obliquely). If the site is accessible, take those sources there and find a place to write. Write a poem or prose text that incorporates perspectives or material from each of your sources, as well as observations from the location itself.

* Make a list of at least ten neologisms, new words that never existed before. Write a long poem (a few pages at least) that uses neologisms to create both sound and meaning that will propel your text into otherwise inaccessible places.

* Structure a poem or prose writing according to city streets, miles, walks, drives. For example: take a fourteen-block walk, writing one line per block to create a sonnet; choose a city street familiar to you, walk it, make notes and use them to create a work; take a long walk with a group of writers, observe, make notes and create works, then compare them; take a long walk or drive—write one sentence per mile. Variations on this. (BM)

* Take a train or bus to the end of the line, preferably to a place you haven't been. Write while in transit. Disembark and explore your surroundings; take notes. Write on your return trip home. Alternately, ride to the end-points of every train line or bus line in the place where you live (or however many make sense to you). Write at these extremes.

* Visit a cemetery. Write one or more cemetery texts. Use language you find in the cemetery or language that comes to you in the cemetery. Visit an industrial site. Write one or more industrial texts. Visit a supermarket. Write one or more supermarket texts.

TRANSLATION

Translation can be a generative process for our own writing, often happily blurring the boundary between what is “our own” writing and what is someone else’s. English-to-English translations are texts written in English through or toward other texts written in English, using translation techniques as a compositional method. Some of these techniques are very close to modes we use regularly in our translation practice between different languages, while others are more fanciful or even completely unrelated to actual translation practices. (Note: a version of this list was originally published in *Poets On Teaching: A Sourcebook*, edited by Joshua Marie Wilkinson).

* Audio Filter: create a sonic space that relates to the text you are translating (that space might entail putting on a particular piece of music, going to a particular place, riding public transit, etc.). Begin your process with a headphone in one ear playing an audio version of the text you’re translating and with the other ear open to the sonic space you’ve chosen to occupy. Allow fragments of what you hear in both ears to filter in and become part of your translation.

* Fanciful: use each word or phrase or line as a jumping off point and let yourself jump as far as your imagination can take you.

* Grammatical: substituting parts of speech—like mad libs—nouns for other nouns, adjectives for other adjectives, etc.

* Homophonic: take the sound of each word as if you did not know its meaning and create a text that sounds the same. You can also do this one with languages you do not know or languages that use other alphabets, just guessing at the possible sounds.

* Interrogative: think of each fragment or phrase or line as the answer to a question. Write a text that asks the questions. Write your answers to these questions.

* Musical: make a text that “rhymes” with the vowels and consonants of the original. Or take the rhythm and meter of a poem and follow those, using words of your own.

* Responsive: talk back to the poem, word by word, line by line, or stanza by stanza.

* Structural: reproducing the structure of the lines or sentences exactly—the placement of punctuation, line-breaks, etc.—but substituting your own words.

VISUAL EXPERIMENTS

How might our use of language shift if we were to consider words as objects, pages as fields? How does our vision of writing change if our purpose is not to “say something” but to put different images or shapes in proximity to one another to see what kinds of sense or nonsense might be sparked? What becomes possible when visual techniques are applied to written material?

- * Consider word and letter as forms—the concretistic distortion of a text, a multiplicity of o’s or ea’s, or a pleasing visual arrangement: “the mill pond of chill doubt.” (BM)
- * Create a sonnet through erasure and/or palimpsest from/upon another text. As an example of erasure, look at Jen Bervin’s from the book *Nets*. (LB)
- * Get a cheap book, preferably one of little value to you or anyone else. Tear out one page. Cut up the page into different shapes and sizes. Experiment with different shapes and sizes. Now rearrange these text blocks on the page. Try to read it.
- * Get a cheap book, preferably one of little value to you or anyone else. Tear out one page. Using scissors, make a poem only by cutting up words from that single page.
- * Get a cheap book, preferably one of little value to you or anyone else. Tear out one page. Using white out or a black marker, white or black out text on the page to reveal the hidden text beneath it.
- * Make a pattern of repetitions. (BM)
- * Take two different pages from a newspaper or magazine article, or a book, and cut the pages in half vertically. Paste the mismatched pages together. (CB)

WRITING IN THE BODY

Anything we do with our body can be the origin of a poem. Often as writers, we forget to pay attention to our bodies. We quickly become brains hovering over hands as they type on a computer. If we get up and walk around, use our bodies in different ways, put our bodies into different situations, writing sometimes flows in new and unfamiliar ways. As CA Conrad says in relation to his (soma)tic exercises, “Write as much as you can as fast as you can no matter how silly it seems to you. A day later start to mine this writing to find the hidden poem.”

- * City Piece—Walk all over the city with an empty baby carriage. (YO)
- * Do something with your body. Something your body does not normally do. Some shape it is not used to being in. Make this shape once in your room, once on the sidewalk in the neighborhood where you live and once in a bank. Take notes and write a poem.

* (Soma)tic Poetry Exercise #10—At a street corner pause to see how the sunlight comes down to enter the landscape just as it has for millions of years. After a little while imagine the fern or blackberries from before the buildings and sidewalks. Was there a nest of squirrels? The death of a snake? Where are you in time? After your time travel, sit the hell down and write a poem! Don't let anyone interrupt you! You're busy! (CC)

* Spend some time with CA Conrad's book *A Beautiful Marsupial Afternoon* or on his blog, "(Soma)tic Poetry Exercises" (<http://somaticpoetryexercises.blogspot.com>). Experiment with a bunch of his exercises. When you are done, write your own (soma)tic poetry exercise, then do the exercise and make a poem or other piece of writing.

* The possibilities of synesthesia in relation to language and words: the word and the letter as sensations, colors evoked by letters, sensations caused by the sound of a word as apart from its meaning, etc. And the effect of this phenomenon on you; for example, write in the water, on a moving vehicle. (BM)

* Tunafish Sandwich Piece—Imagine one thousand suns in the sky at the same time. Let them shine for one hour. Then, let them gradually melt into the sky. Make one tunafish sandwich and eat. (YO)

Resources for Further Experiments and Exercises

Online:

Charles Bernstein: <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/bernstein/experiments.html>

Laynie Browne: <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/21843>

CA Conrad: <http://somaticpoetryexercises.blogspot.com>

Lyn Hejinian and Anne Tardos, "I Will Write Two Lines,"
<http://www.fascicle.com/issue02/collaborations/tardoshejinian1.htm>

Brian Kiteley: <http://mysite.du.edu/~bkiteley/exercises.html>

Bernadette Mayer: http://www.writing.upenn.edu/library/Mayer-Bernadette_Experiments.html

Oulipo: <http://nestersteachingblog.com/2010/11/23/a-collection-of-ouli-po-exercises/>

Poets & Writers: <http://www.pw.org/writing-prompts-exercises>

In Books:

Lee Ann Brown, Danika Dinsmore, Jen Hofer and Bernadette Mayer, *The 3:15 Experiment*. Woodacre, CA: The Owl Press, 2001.

CA Conrad, *A Beautiful Marsupial Afternoon*. New York and Seattle: Wave Books, 2012.

Annie Finch and Kathrine Lore Varnes, *An Exaltation of Forms: Contemporary Poets Celebrate the Diversity of Their Art*. University of Michigan Press, 2002.

Bhanu Kapil, *Schizophrene*. Callicoon, NY: Nightboat Books, 2011.

Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

Gertrude Stein, *How To Write*. New York: Dover, 1975.

Hannah Weiner, *Hannah Weiner's Open House*. Chicago: Kenning Editions, 2006.

Joshua Marie Wilkinson, *Poets On Teaching: A Sourcebook*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010.

Colophon

Antena is a language justice and language experimentation collaborative founded in 2010 by Jen Hofer and John Pluecker, both of whom are writers, artists, literary translators, bookmakers and activist interpreters. We view our aesthetic practice as part and parcel of our language justice work. Antena activates links between social justice work and artistic practice by exploring how critical views on language can help us to reimagine and rearticulate the worlds we inhabit.

How To Write (More) was written collaboratively by Antena in a 1923 Sears & Roebuck kit barn on the estate of Edna St. Vincent Millay in Austerlitz, NY, in Summer 2013. Gratitude to the Millay Colony for the Arts for the space to articulate more (and more) ideas. The cover design for the Antena pamphlet series is by Jorge Galván Flores.

This pamphlet is a publication of Antena Books / Libros Antena. It was originally distributed as part of the installation Antena @ Blaffer at The Blaffer Museum at the University of Houston, curated by Amy Powell with Antena. It is also available as a free download on Antena's website: <http://www.antenaantena.org>. You can contact Antena at antena@antenaantena.org; we'd love to be in dialogue about the ideas in this guide.