

FREE 8-Week Group Plan

Week One:

Each writer introduces herself and says aloud that they are committed to keeping the confidentiality of the other writers and will respect and be kind to other writers.

Group Writing Exercise: MY IMAGINARY SANCTUARY

(Can be done on paper, on paper towels, on paper bags and does NOT have to be grammatically correct or in full sentences).

“Sanctuary”: Write about a room you’d love to live in. Where is it? What is in it? Be really detailed—what kind of bed? What kind of light? Furniture? Shape? How many windows? When you look out the window of this room what do you see? What do you hear? Imagine the room as deeply and thoroughly as you can.

In between Week One and Two: Keep thinking about this idea of Sanctuary, of a place in the mind you can create and revise. Any new ideas about what else you’d like in your room?

Week Two: Characters

Group discussion (about 10 minutes): what did your writing make you think about the nature of Sanctuary?

Try closing your eyes for a few minutes and visualizing the sanctuary you wrote about.

Group Writing Exercise: Some Character Play. This exercise will take about a half an hour to write out.

We are going to create a character today. Either have a print out of this list beside you or have one person read each question aloud. The trick is not to overthink this exercise at all. We are playing here. First: choose an age for your character and then choose a gender (remembering that multiple, variable genders are always an option).

Then, answer a few questions about your character:

What does your character do on a day off?

What does your character do for work?

Does your character remember their dreams ? Does your character dream in black and white or color or both? Does your character have any recurring dreams?

What makes your character belly laugh?

What's your character's biggest fear?

What's the one secret your character would never want to tell anyone else?

What's your character's favorite thing to eat for breakfast?

Does your character sing in the shower? If so, what song(s)?

What was your character's first kiss like?

When your character looks in the mirror what does your character see. Have them look esp. closely at their faces.

Your character is walking downtown and sees someone leaving an ATM machine and dropping 40 dollars without realizing it. What does your character do?

Writers read their "character studies" aloud.

In between weeks two and three: think more about your character and imagine them in more situations. Imagine more about their "backstories," about their families. If you have time, use your writers' notebook to write about: your character's first memories, your character's defects of character, your character's family history.

Week Three: "Character Studies" Continued

Part ONE:

Group Writing Exercise: We are going to continue with the characters you began creating last week. Read over what you wrote last week about your characters. Now, giving yourself about 20 minutes, answer a few more questions:

What is your character's first memory?

What was your character's mom like?

What kinds of lies does your character tell herself/themselves? Tell others? Under what conditions?

What's one thing your character does not realize about herself/themselves that their closest friend can see?

Your character gets to choose a pet. What kind of pet and why?

Now, you have some idea about your character, but use writing and events to get to know your character better. Pick two of the following three situations to take notes/write about.

Your character is invited to a party/dinner/church function/meeting and is attracted to someone in the room: who? why? How does your character handle it?

Your character is at a convenience store and sees someone shoplift. What does your character do?

Your character wins the lottery and gets to create their own sanctuary room. It doesn't necessarily have to be something "rich," at all—the lottery win just means they can afford their own room and to put in that room whatever they want and have that room be wherever they want. What do they create?

Group reads from their exercises.

Part TWO: the group should divide into groups of two/three, or, if you are a group of four/five, then just choose two of the characters. Decide on a kind of tense or joyful situation to put your characters in together and then, as a group, take notes on what you think they might do and let the stories run from there. Have fun.

Make sure to save time at the end of the writing group so that in the larger group (if you divided into groups of two/three), you can come back and tell everyone what happened when you set your characters into play: did those characters surprise you at all, once you saw how they might interact with other characters? How did they change?

Week Four: Praise It!

Part ONE:

This week we are going to practice one of the oldest methods/objects of stories and poems: we are going to praise. Only we are going to try to praise common, every day things, not the things that usually are praised.

Begin the group writing exercise: Write a list of things that, if you look at them with fresh eyes, are interesting and are great, but we take for granted, or they don't usually get praised, like soap, a fork, socks. Write down as many as you can think of in 15 minutes.

Writers Read.

Part TWO:

Write a love poem to one of those elements where you look at everything that thing does and how it does it; your writing can be simple: just say, "dear fork, I love you because you hook that slippery melon". Again, try to think of as many great things about that object as you can, even if you have to push it. Then try writing a made up personal history or mythology of the object. As in, "dear fork, you were overlooked in the bible," or "the fork was not much noticed in the early days as people were more worried about fire, but once they had fire, they kept dropping slick food into it. Then Marisol, one of the early women, said, enough of this and carved the end of a stick into prongs." Just make it up. Have fun.

Writers Read

Other Writers Respond to Each Writer, telling them one or two things they liked in their Love Letters to the Every Day.

In between weeks Four and Five, think more about the every day objects you come into contact with and how they function. Just use what you are doing in the writing group to become a person who pays even more attention to details of the day.

Week Five: The Writer Makes Herself Up

Beginning of the Group conversation: what objects did you notice this past week and why?

Group Writing, Part ONE: This week we are going to play with the idea of a writer's persona and a writer's story. You can keep this as true to whom you see yourself as or you can totally make it up for fun, or anywhere in between.

Some writers make up a name to use so they can stay private, confidential when they send their work out into the world. If you were going to make up a name for your writer self, what would it be and why (and remember, you don't have to keep just one). Think a little and come up with three different names in the first 15 minutes.

Writers Share: What's one of the possible names you came up with and why?

Group Writing, Part TWO: The Big Old Hyperbole, Mythology Autobiography:

Choosing your own first name, or the first name of one of your writing names, make up an exaggerated lie based on one or two characteristics of that person, a history of that person. Remember, the goal here is to tell the Tall Tale: As in, "little Mary was so tired all the time, she lost every job she every had because she overslept. She was so tired, she ran red lights, slept through a bank robbery as she stood in line. . ."

Or "Montgomery was so drunk most of their lives, their liver packed a suitcase and left for a dry county." Have fun.

In between weeks five and six, simply notice HOW people tell you their stories, the stories of what they have been or seen. What details of others' stories really stay with you? Why?

Week Six: Having a Talk with the Former Self or a Young Person

This week's writing exercise can be a trigger, so you can choose between three exercises. Make sure, whichever one you choose, you have support after you leave the group—just in case you need it.

Write a letter to yourself when you were 14. What do you want that 14 year old to know?

Or: Write a letter to a young teenager, giving them key advice you think they need..

Or: Write an escape story that works, that has nothing directly to do with your life (as in, here's a story about how a monkey escaped a zoo)

If you need to cry, cry. If other people need to cry, let them. Just hold the space and the sanctuary of the writing group for them.

If the writer feels comfortable and wants this to happen, the writer can call on two/three other people in the group simply to share what they heard the writer saying. It's important to try to mirror what the writer read and not to judge it in any way, for example: I heard you say you were angry that anyone hurt you but that you are blaming

yourself, too. If at all possible, it's important to have a counselor in the room when you do this—

In between Weeks Six and Seven, if you are feeling brave, write down a few hard truths. Look at them on the page. Then write down a few truly beautiful things in the world. Look at them on the page.

Week Seven: Having a Talk with the Future Self

This week's writing exercise can be a trigger, so you can choose between three exercises. Make sure, whichever one you choose, you have support after you leave the group—just in case you need it.

Write a letter to your 85 year old self, greeting that self and explaining a few things.

Or: have a character you created write a letter to their future selves

Or: Write a piece about how you think older people should be treated and why

Writer's share from their writings.

In between weeks seven and eight: try to write for just 10/15 minutes a day about whatever you'd like to write about (see the link on the website for some ideas of what you could do). It might just be to write your dreams from the night before down, or write a list of things you heard people say during the day, or things you thought, or saw.

Week Eight: Create Some Exercises

You've been in this group writing and working. To begin discussion for this last session, go around the room and let the group tell each person what they appreciate about them and their work.

Then, Group Writing: Just list and brainstorm as many writing prompts as you can think of—remembering that prompts are just ways to trigger ideas, to get the stories and poems going.

Writers Share. As writers share from their lists of writing prompts, take notes.

When everyone finishes, pick one of the writing ideas you heard from someone else, and write it.

After Week Eight: If you have access to books of poems and stories, read them. After these weeks of writing, you will be so much more aware of them as you read them. Can't read well/don't feel confident in your reading? See if there's someone where you are who can help with your ability to read and to write things down.

You can keep the group going simply by having new writing prompts each week that you all write together and then share from. You can also, if you have them available, all read the same story or poem and talk: a. about what you see in it and what it makes you think of; and b. how you might write back to the piece that you read.

Be.Write.Thrive.