

TRY 101: THE MANIFESTO

SAYING YES TO A LIFE OF EFFORT AND EXPERIMENTATION

PART IV

Try 101: The Syllabus

I. Course Texts

You have the rest of your life to do the reading.

—Joseph Campbell, to one of his students at Sarah Lawrence who complained that the reading list on his syllabus was too long.

One of the ways I (try to) make sense of things is through reading books, and I develop a strong attachment to a particular book if its insights help me at least intuit the underlying nature of things. I'll read and re-read, earmark and return to passages, more like scripture than just a regular old book that you read and put back on the shelf. While my reading style can be a little obsessive, there's a meditative quality to reading this way, and it's generally served me well. It is, I believe, the style of reading Joseph Campbell was advocating to his students. Reading as an extended relationship with seminal (if not sacred) texts, not as a transaction of extraction and/or accomplishment. Here, then, are some of the seminal books that have helped me develop the Try 101 mindset.

The Highly Sensitive Person: How to Thrive When the World Overwhelms You and **The Highly Sensitive Child: Helping Our Children Thrive When the World Overwhelms Them** by Elaine Aron. Don't take my synopsis for granted. There's lots more I didn't get to cover, including (in *The Highly Sensitive Child*) a chapter on parenting a Highly Sensitive Child, which would surely be of interest to at least some of you—particularly if you buy the hypothesis that your inner Creative Spirit is best understood as just such a highly sensitive child.⁸

¹¹ If you suspect yourself (or someone you love or like or at least someone you need to consistently conjure the better version of themselves) to be an HSP, here's a practical list, "Top Ten Survival Tips for the HSP" by Susan Biali, M.D. in *Psychology Today*:

1) Get enough sleep. Lack of sleep (less than 7 hours, for most people) is well known to produce irritability, moodiness, and decreased concentration and productivity in the average person. Given our already ramped-up senses, I'm convinced that lack of sleep can make a highly sensitive life almost unbearable. Getting enough sleep soothes your senses and will help you cope with an already overwhelming world.

2) Eat healthy foods regularly throughout the day. Aron points out that extreme hunger can be disruptive to an HSP's mood or concentration. Keep your

edgy nerves happy by maintaining a steady blood sugar level through regular healthy well-balanced meals and snacks. I also take fish oil (omega-3) supplements daily as the brain loves these, lots of studies support their beneficial cognitive and emotional effects.

3) Wear noise-reducing headphones. A boyfriend introduced Peltor ear protecting headphones (usually used by construction workers, not pre-med students) to me when I was 19 and studying for exams. No matter where I am in the world I have had a pair with me ever since. HSPs are highly sensitive to noise, especially the kind we can't control, and my beloved headphones give me control over my personal peace in what's all too often a noisy intrusive world.

4) Plan in decompression time. HSPs don't do well with an overly packed schedule or too much time in noisy, crowded or high pressure environments. If you know you're going to spend a few hours in a challenging environment—such as a concert, a parade, or a crowded mall at Christmas time—know that you're likely to be frazzled after and will need to decompress somewhere quiet and relaxing, on your own if possible.

5) Have at least one quiet room or space to retreat to in your home. If you live with others, create a quiet safe place you can retreat to when you need to get away from people and noise. This could be a bedroom, a study, or even just a candlelit bath (or shower if that's all you have!). I've found it often helps to listen to quiet relaxing music as well, this can even drown out more jarring external noise when you need it to.

6) Give yourself time and space to get things done. I mentioned above that HSPs don't do well with a packed schedule. I've managed to structure my work life so that I work afternoon/evening shifts the days I'm at the medical clinic. This way I'm able to get out of bed without an alarm, eat a calm unrushed breakfast and putter around before getting down to business. The calm this gives me carries through my whole day. Another strategy for those who work in the morning might be getting up extra early (after 8 hours sleep, of course) to enjoy the quiet before the rest of the household wakes up.

7) Limit caffeine. HSPs are sensitive to caffeine—I usually can't even handle the traces of caffeine found in decaf coffee. If you're a coffee drinker (or dark chocolate junkie) and identify with the HSP trait description, giving up the joe might be a big step towards feeling more collected and calm.

8) Keep the lights down low. I've never liked bright lights and learning about HSP helped me understand why. Minimizing light stimulation goes a long way: I only put on low lights in the evening, and prefer to shop in certain local grocery stores which have gentle mood lighting, avoiding the garishly lit, crowded "big box" stores whenever I can.

9) Get things done in off hours. To avoid crowds and the associated noise and stimulation, I've learned to live my life outside of the average person's schedule. I grocery shop late in the evenings, run errands during the week whenever I can, go to movies on weeknights, and go out for my walks before the rest of the world hits the jogging path. An added bonus: by avoiding the crowds I usually get things done faster and almost always get a parking spot!

10) Surround yourself with beauty and nature. Since we HSPs are so sensitive and deeply affected by our surroundings, envelop yourself with beauty and calm

whenever possible. I've decorated my home simply in a way that's very pleasing to my eye, with minimal clutter and chaos. I also spend as much time as I can walking in nature, enjoying the quiet and its naturally healing and calming beauty. **For the full article:** <https://bit.ly/30SP6kP>

Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences and Five Minds for the Future by Howard Gardner. Again, Gardner pioneered the theory of Multiple Intelligences, and this is the seminal book articulating the theory. He's not talking about learning styles; he's talking about the variety of ways people are gifted and the importance of helping students recognize and fully develop their specific aptitudes. Gardner believes that conventional schooling only addresses a couple kinds of intelligence, namely the ones associated with reading, writing, and arithmetic—he calls them linguistic intelligence and logical/mathematical intelligence, respectively. But Gardner sees other crucial intelligences: kinesthetic, spatial, musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Later in his career he added two more: environmental and spiritual. Also later in his career, he wrote about what he calls "Five Minds for the Future"—the Disciplinary Mind, the Creative Mind, the Synthesizing Mind, the Respectful Mind, and the Ethical Mind. My very rough sketch of those what occupies these Minds: expertise, originality, the ability to make good connections, honoring others' rights, and accepting responsibilities.

The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything by Sir Ken Robinson. When it comes to discovering what you're truly passionate about, it boils down to four questions: Do you get it? Are you good at it? Do you want it? Where is it? This, too, articulates a rationale for what we do at ASFA. (I mean, it's got "Passion[!]" right there in the title.) Our students have an innate, in-depth understanding of their specialty area, they're exceptionally good at it, they want to get even better at it, and we provide the place for them to do that. It's that simple. At ASFA, our students are in their element. Their element is here and nowhere else. But read the book because it's mostly about why the process of finding our passion, and inhabiting our "element," is so important for all of us to undergo (and keep undergoing)—and it has nothing to do with being 15 and knowing what you want to do for the rest of your life.

The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World by Lewis Hyde. Gifts are for giving, and that's true for our personal gifts, too—the things we're good at. Hyde argues that the free exchange of creative gifts, in particular, is crucial for the health of any culture. By turning our creativity into a commodity (property to be bought and sold, a process to be commercialized), we restrict the flow and

growth of our collective imagination. As a letterpress print in my office would indicate, I agree: the print says "The essence of art is generosity." One thing I'd add to the gift exchange concept is that teaching is also a gift exchange, a symbiotic back-and-forth between teacher and student. The essence of teaching is generosity, too.

Letter's to a Young Poet by Rainier Maria Rilke. I love this book for its sheer intensity and for its paradoxical combination of narcissism and selflessness. On the one hand, Rilke is ostensibly responding to fan mail—a series of unsolicited letters from a novice poet named Franz Xaver Kappus—by waxing philosophical about his own existence. There is the sense of journaling to this work, a certain note-to-self nature that, at times, seems to bypass Kappus and his concerns entirely. On the other hand, how magnanimous of Rilke to engage Kappus, a neophyte-stranger in need, with the full faculties of his poetic thought, with the intense energy he otherwise guarded jealously, fearing even his own family would devour it if given half a chance. Regardless of Rilke's motivation, the letters are full of cross-cultural, interdisciplinary wisdom and insight. Not unlike Shunryu Suzuki's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, it's ostensibly about being a beginner, about always being new to the world. Interestingly, that idea is not, itself, new to the world. Thus sayeth, for example, the Book of Mark:

*And they were bringing children to Him so that He might touch them; and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, "Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it at all."
(10:13-16)*

Rilke too gets at a (maybe?) complementary concept—the essential agelessness of things:

Being an artist means: not numbering and counting, but ripening like a tree, which doesn't force its sap, and stands confidently in the storms of spring, not afraid that afterward summer may not come. It does come. But it comes only to those who are patient, who are there as if eternity lay before them, so unconcernedly silent and vast. I learn it every day of my life, learn it with pain I'm grateful for: patience is everything!

Clearly that advice isn't for everyone, and because I haven't read many Franz Xavier Kappus poems, maybe it either fell on deaf ears or Franz took it to heart and decided that all that unsayable navel-gazing—not to mention the relentless, edifying pain for which he was supposed to be grateful—just wasn't for him. Which is fine. Not everybody—thank *God* (or goodness, anyway)—is a poet.⁸

¹² One of my teachers in poetry school used to say that one of the most important things an MFA program can do is help people realize they *don't really* want to be writers. It's a lot to ask of yourself and the people you love. I don't want to put *too* fine a point on any of that, just because it gets tiresome even to somebody who takes himself as seriously as I do: *O the crushing burdens of the artiste in an indifferent Universe!* I'll leave it at this: through trial and a good deal of error, I've come to the following realization: by definition, art and artists are abnormal. Weird, even. There's all that aforementioned self-absorption that seems to go with the territory, but just practically speaking, to put all those words on the page (or paint on a canvas, etc.) you need a lot of quiet time alone. Quite frankly, if you can comfortably live a "normal" life, surrounded by nice, "normal" people with cool stuff and fun activities, you probably should go ahead and do it.

Traveling Mercies by Anne Lamott. Also *Bird by Bird*, which is a book about writing, among other things. Really anything by her, though her books can get a little redundant in terms of what she writes about—her recovery from alcoholism; her faith, her funky little church in California; her beloved alcoholic father who died young(ish) of brain cancer; her frustrating neurotic mother who lived to a ripe old age with lipstick on her teeth; her only son, whom she had out of wedlock and semi-intentionally, in her late thirties; her politics, her dogs; her travels; her many obsessive-compulsive foibles, the fleeting moments of transcendence that sustain her. Etc. It's her voice, really. I don't worry too much over what she's writing *about*. I find reading her to be like channeling my late mother, who was a complicated and lovable and damaged but also (in her complicated, lovable, damaged way) very wise soul. Lamott presents the raw, sometimes even ugly versions of herself, and while she kicks herself a lot, she seems pretty good at forgiving herself too. I'm not so good at forgiving myself, but I want to be better at it, so it helps to see how somebody else does it.

True Love: A Practice for Awakening the Heart by Thich Nhat Hanh. Not because you need help opening your heart. Your heart is open. This is a well-established fact. And a wide open heart is the goal, so you're ahead of the game (ahead of me, for sure). That's why you're so special. I think "open" and "awake" are slightly different things, though. To be sure, "open" is a necessary prerequisite to "awake." Most of us don't quite get to "open." Some don't even try. But "awake" is the right way to be "open," the only path to open-wide, wide as the

Cosmos, wide as—wider than—anything any of us can imagine. So open that even your hurts—past, present, future—become the path to pure Love. Because of how open you are now, I know you can get to open-wide. The Big-Love kind of open-wide. This book can encourage you towards it.

Just Kids by Patti Smith. Because of labors of love, true love, Big-Love, open-wide. Love that transcends romance. And circumstance. Also because of art.

Man on Wire. This is the documentary film accounting of tightrope artist Phillippe Petit's monumental life achievement: walking a tightrope strung between the two towers of the World Trade Center. If you've already watched it, watch it again. For inspiration. Chill bumps. Tears come to my eyes every time Petit steps out on that wire for the first time. In conjunction with that: *Let the Great World Spin*, a novel by Colum McCann. Set in NYC, 1974. The day Philippe Petit walked out on the wire. For a reminder that other (quieter, more private) extraordinary things are always happening in the ordinary world below sky-high feats of derring-do.

Wild by Cheryl Strayed. Another kind of intensity and adventure, though perhaps it's a complementary kind. After a divorce and the death of her mom, Strayed set out to hike the Pacific Crest Trail from southern California all the way to Canada. Alone. On a kind of vision quest or something. Kicker being she never really even day-hiked before, much less hiked the whole entire Pacific Crest Trail, which is the west coast equivalent of the Appalachian Trail. It winds through the Sierra Nevadas, which is where the infamous Donner party met its grisly fate. (Oh: and she was maybe kinda-sorta trying to kick a slight heroin habit at the time.) So she was in *no* condition to try something like this. She easily could've died and nearly did on one or two occasions. She did it anyway (with some necessary midstream adjustments to her itinerary) and lived to write a book about it. I suggest you read it not only because I think her story would interest you but because her writing style is very much like yours. You could definitely write books like this. Books that are honest, books that inspire, books that make you want to turn the page. (PS: Don't do heroin. Or hitchhike, which she does a lot in the book. And if you go on a really long hike, which you'd probably enjoy, you know, like, do some training or something beforehand.)

The Artist's Way by Julia Cameron. A (maybe *the*) classic guide to creativity and the creative process. You respond well to books like this (you may even have this one already?), and I think this one would really speak to you. As would Twyla Tharp's *The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It For Life*.

The books [you] loved as a child. For me, a creature of the late 20th Century, that means books by Beverly Cleary (the Ramona books are classic, as are the Henry books), Judy Blume (*Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret; Then Again, Maybe I Won't; Tales of a Fourth-Grade Nothing*), and Katherine Paterson (*Bridge to Terabithia*). This is what I was reading—loved reading—as a kid. I sure as hell wasn't reading Tolstoy or Thomas Pynchon then (and, to be honest, such heavy-lifting literary reading isn't always my natural inclination even now—if I had to pick between reading *Anna Karenina* or *The Crying of Lot 49* and re-reading *Tales of a Fourth-Grade Nothing* for the millionth time, it would be no contest). I like these books and these writers from my childhood because they are so human and they spoke to my experience as a neophyte on Planet Earth. More than anything, they inspired me to read (and *re-read*, which might be even more important), and they made me want to write, though I didn't take up that inspiration until I was in college. Such books—age appropriate to your generation—tap into something that was new and previously untapped in us; something I suspect is *always* new and untapped in us. Something essential and vital. Revisiting these texts reacquaints us with this essential vitality. It does me, anyway.

“Rough Crossing: The Cutting of Raymond Carver” by Simon Armitage.⁹ This is a *New Yorker* piece about the permeable wall between writer and editor—in this case Carver and Gordon Lish, whose influence on Carver's work was profound and somewhat controversial. I think this article is especially pertinent for you because you bring such good skills to the table from either side of that wall, and you could well find yourself on either side of it at various points down the line.

¹³ Link: <https://bit.ly/2GIVZBL>

Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking by Susan Cain. Because if you're quiet by nature, if you're a contemplative who listens more than you speak, I think the world needs the likes of you, and this book might help you strategize your way into the fray.

Bento's Sketchbook: How Does the Impulse to Draw Something Begin? by John Berger. Berger is a painter, a writer, a critic, a farmer, and all-around bon vivant. If your talents and interests are interdisciplinary, you will likely find inspiration in his work and overall career. At any rate, the ink drawings in this book are great, particularly the technique of smudging the ink for shading and

color. Produces a nifty watercolor effect. And its toggling back and forth, from journal-like musings, extended quotations of the philosopher Spinoza (aka, "Bento"), and drawings is a great model for a commonplace book. But that's not necessarily why I hold this book to be "sacred." It's for a pearl of wisdom it offers regarding stories—the ones we tell others, the ones we tell ourselves. Here it is:

There are two categories of storytelling. Those that treat of the invisible and the hidden, and those that expose and offer the revealed. What I call—in my own special and physical sense of the terms—the introverted category and the extroverted one. Which of the two is likely to be more adapted to, more trenchant about what is happening in the world today? I believe the first.

Because its stories remain unfinished. Because they involve sharing. Because in their telling a body refers as much to a body of people as to an individual. Because for them mystery is not something to be solved but to be carried. Because, although they may deal with sudden violence or loss or anger, they are long-sighted. And, above all, because their protagonists are not performers but survivors.

...

The heartfelt hopes, once exemplified in triumphant Hollywood stories, have now become obsolete and belong to another epoch. Hope today is a contraband passed from hand to hand and from story to story.

There may, in fact, be no better expression of the animating spirit behind Try 101.

II. Course Objectives

- Maintain a kinder, gentler, more expansive definition of **Practice**.
- Identify and honor our **Process(es)**.
- Bear **Projects**—wide-eyed, pink, bleating—into the world. (Or not.)

Try 101 is for anyone who wants to tap into the Creative Spirit. You probably want to make things. Worthwhile things. Things for you. Things for others. Maybe you're not too worried about making "Something in Particular" or you're not that interested in sharing what you make with the world at large. Or maybe it's fine by

you if you do, and it's fine by you if you don't. Regardless, there's a very good chance you want to strike a better balance—in your life, in the world—between creativity and consumption. That very likely means adding more of the former and subtracting some of the latter.

Newsflash: that's *hard*. But it's the work of the Creative Spirit. And the Creative Spirit has the power to transform, transcend, transubstantiate. You know that. Or else: you know that if Try 101 is the place for you.

Our Vocabulary: Practice, Process, Projects

Practice. Practice is what we do around here. Yes, "practice" can mean, like, soccer practice or piano practice, etc. Something you do regularly with the ultimate aim of getting better at it. Depending on what that something is, we can get into that kind of practice. Getting better at something can be fun (as long as you really want to get better at it). But there's also the "labor of love" angle, the spiritual pursuit the word practice can suggest. The cool thing we've discovered is that the two kinds of practice aren't mutually exclusive. In fact, our favorite kind of practice helps us to do both: to get better at something we want to do well and to feel closer to something larger and more numinous than ourselves. (Win-win!)

Process. Not all creative processes are the same. In fact, individual creative processes are subject to change over time. Process can be hard to define, hard to talk about, because it's not always tangible. It's a set of conditions, a climate, an ecosystem. Remember: it's not the swimming fish; it's the ocean they swim in.

Projects. To keep the metaphor going, projects are the swimming fish. The ocean can exist without the fish, but the fish can't exist without the ocean. If you want healthy fish, it stands to reason you better have a healthy ocean. But, oddly enough, the metaphor only goes so far: not all successful projects are the result of a healthy, sustainable creative process, and a healthy, sustainable creative process invariably produces an awful lot of sick-fish projects bobbing sadly on its undulating surface.

Here's what we think about that crazy paradox: we value the Creative Practice above all, because the Creative Practice reflects and feeds the Creative Spirit. We think the best way to strengthen your Creative Practice is to forge an ever more balanced, more sustainable relationship between your process and the projects it

spawns, to commit to the belief that the two can—and should—nourish each other. All our workshops are designed to help you make that commitment. To your process. To your projects. To yourself.

Our Tools*

A big part of our effort/experimentation involves noticing and documenting the world around us. Our whole bodies do that sort of noticing, of course, but we'll be trafficking mostly in words, sounds, and images. Eyes and ears are particularly suited to noticing sounds, images, and words, so our tools reflect that focus.

To do your documenting you'll need the following:

- A notebook or commonplace and writing instrument(s)

Also helpful:

- A camera
- A tape recorder
- A laptop (optional)

* In this day and age, a cell phone has the capacity to be all these tools in one. That will do in a pinch. But consider, too, disconnected, non-digital tools: pen and paper; disposable cameras; Polaroids; cassette recorders; etc. They tend to work a different part of the creative consciousness, if not (literally) different parts of the brain.

Our Practices

30 Things I Love Right Now is a meditation. A practice of gratitude and love. At its most basic and heartfelt level, the practice is pretty simple, and it can inform your whole Practice:

- Write a list of 30 things you love right now.

It might not seem hard to come up with 30 Things You Love Right Now. But, you know, sometimes it really is. And if you try to do it on a semi-regular basis—especially if you try to come up with 30 *NEW* Things You Love Right Now—well, you're constantly having to look at The Glass half-full. And you're also having to ruminate on a lot of the things that have, of late, captured your imagination. So it

can be a challenge. A good challenge, but a challenge nonetheless. The important thing to remember is there's no *wrong way* to do a 30 Things. "Right Now" is a flexible concept too. (Last week is close enough.) As is "Love." Heck, so is "30," though there is something strangely perfect about that number. It's not insurmountable but it's usually not *easy* either. Kind of like 90 feet between home plate and first base, or 14 lines and 140 syllables to a sonnet.

In the process of crafting a list of 30 Things, the problem/opportunity of Craft might creep in. You're just cruising along, minding your own business, making your mundane list ("...15. Blueberry Pop Tarts... 16. Pez candy... 17. Lizzo...") and then, all of a sudden, #18 requires that you tell a story or at least provide some context. Because it's not so much a tangible thing but a feeling or an ambiguous experience. Or something. But it seems very important and, of course, you really love it right now, so it has to be in your list *right now*. You quickly get immersed in telling the story or articulating the feeling, so you start really laboring over words and images (sounds, even!) and before you know it, you're trying to make it *good*. Like, fit-for-public-consumption good. But that wasn't the point. It was just supposed to be this ad hoc Spiritual Exercise or something. *You're not supposed to care if it's good.*

But, then again: *sure you are*. If you start caring to make it *good*, that's awesome. Go for it. Make it good. But you don't *have* to make it good. You never have to make it good. The genius of the 30 Things is its versatility. It can simply be a meditative exercise for you and only you (you never have to *share* your 30 Things if you don't want to). Or it can be that *and* an art form in itself. Or somewhere in between. Again, there's no wrong way to do it.

Free Writes. You may have been asked to do this in an English class at some point in your life. The idea is to just get words on the page. The only rule is you can't stop writing. If you can't think of anything to write, you just write nonsense or repeated phrases until something new sparks.

- A variation on this theme is the **focused free write**, in which you start with a given word or phrase and write whatever comes to mind. If you lose your train of thought, you go back to the word or phrase and repeat it until your mind starts to move in another direction. Items on a 30 Things list work well for focused free writes.
- A non-textual variation on this theme is the **blind contour drawing**, which is the visual arts equivalent of free writing. You don't have to be

“good at drawing” to do it, either. It’s not about producing a piece of art. It’s about looking at things more closely—it’s about being more conscious of how and what you see.

Notes-to-Self are real-life excerpts of resurrected insight from real-life notebooks. Read through your old notebooks and commonplace books. What does your former self still want you to know?

Pilgrimage. Go, for a time, to a place where you feel called. You’ll know where. It’ll be obvious. If you want to make art as you go, make art as you go. If not, don’t. Do notice. Be open. Be more conscious about how you see. Try to document. Somehow. (When in doubt: a 30 Things list can work wonders.)

A variation on this theme:

- **Flâneuring.** Take an hour or two to wander around. Technically, I think, a flâneur wanders through an unfamiliar city. But the important thing is the wandering (preferably by foot). Alternate routes and landscapes are fine—make like a Romantic and wander lonely as a cloud through nature, or wander through a city or subdivision that is intimately familiar to you. Take a creative tool with you (notebook, camera, tape recorder, sketchbook). Document what you see.

III.

Homework (Optional)

What follows are some specific prompts, mostly writing-related. There’s nothing magic about them. They’re designed to get you to engage your Creative Spirit, and some of them might end up helping you produce things (stories, poems, essays). They use words as the creative medium. Even if you don’t see yourself as a writer, there are prompts here that can be useful to you—particularly the journal prompts. That said, if you don’t see yourself as a writer, I would still invite you to try your hand at a few of the other prompts (nonfiction, fiction, and poetry)—in the spirit of Try = Effort + Experimentation.

Journal Prompts

Here are some ideas to get you started writing in a journal or commonplace book:

- **Make a list of your current Preoccupations.** Persons, places, things, activities that have a hold on your mind, body, spirit, and/or imagination. Update the list once a month.
- **Make a list of 30 things you love right now.** Big or small or in between. The first 30 things that come to your mind. Update it weekly (or more often than that). PS: This is a good place to go mining for your Preoccupations.
- **Freewrites.** Focused or not. You can write for a set amount of time or give yourself a set amount of pages to fill.
- **Interview yourself.** Write out the questions AND the answers. Make it a back-and-forth, where the interviewer (you) works off the responses of the interviewee (also you) in an organic, extemporaneous way. Keep it going over several sittings spread out over several days, weeks, months.
- **Draw the cartoon version of said interview.** Or a portion of it.
- **Draw a functional map in your notebook.** A real or imagined place. Write labels and a key that references a character (real or imagined) and suggests a narrative. Leave some stuff out.
- **Fill a page—the WHOLE page—in your notebook with the names of places in the world where you’ve NEVER been.** Be imaginative and specific. Peru is a place. So is Lima. So is the inside of a blue whale’s ear. Write big. Write small. Write in all kinds of different directions on the page. Maybe also in different colors. If you feel like it.
- **Fill a page—the WHOLE page—with the names of places in the world where you HAVE been.** Be imaginative and specific again. Etc.
- **Fill a page or two (or ten) of your notebook with pictures of one of the objects or places on your list of Preoccupations.** Draw. Trace. Cut-and-paste. Whatever.
- **These are things that you might want to put in there on a regular-ish basis:** song lyrics; quotes (from famous people and/or your friends and family); whole passages of books you love and/or hate; language you happen upon: in stores, driving down the highway, at temples and churches and mosques, in classrooms and doctor’s offices, on the boob tube, the interwebs, etc; color copies of family photographs; black and white copies of family photographs; (copies of) copies of black and white copies of family photographs; stencils; and/or etc. (Don’t forget [blind contour drawings](#).)

Nonfiction Prompts

Allow me first to direct you to [some notes about what nonfiction is](#). Keep in mind that any of the following prompts could be a quick-hitter of, say, a page or two and/or they can all be tricked out to take up 2,500 or 50,000 words or more.

- #1. **750-Word Autobiography.** Write a short essay about who you are in the here-and-now. Try to focus on a specific place or object or rite of passage (or perhaps some combination thereof)—as opposed to trying to tell your entire life story.
- #2. **Fan Letter.** In 1903, a 19-year-old student named Franz Kappus wrote what amounted to a fan letter to his favorite poet. He also sent him some of his own poems, asked him if he'd let him know what he thought. The poet in question was [Rainer Maria Rilke](#), who was **A)** making a name for himself as a rising star in the world of poetry at that time and is **B)** now considered one of the most important/influential poets of the 20th century. What resulted from Kappus's initial letter—much to Kappus's delight and surprise—was a back-and-forth correspondence that lasted five years and ultimately became [Letters to a Young Poet](#). (If you want to, you can read the letters on-line [here](#).) I want you to take a page from Franz Kappus's book and write a letter to a living artist you admire. Doesn't have to be a poet. Could be a novelist or a story writer. Could be a musician or a dancer or a director. Etc. And this person doesn't even have to be famous—Rilke had published a couple of books by the time he received Kappus's letter, but he wasn't RILKE yet. (Kappus knew of him mostly because they went to the same school, though they weren't there at the same time.) The artist you choose doesn't have to be a megastar. Just as long as this artist's work inspires you in a real way in the here and now. Consider this [interview with the musician Glen Hansard](#) who, when he met [Bob Dylan](#), engaged him in conversation about their shared love of [Woody Guthrie](#). If you can't think of a particular connection, feel free to go in search of one. Hint: interviews, reviews, bios, and liner notes are good places to start. You don't HAVE to find such a connection but the chances are, if this person's work moves you in a real way, this sort of connection is probably there somewhere.
- #3. **Explanatory Essay.** Write an essay that explains how something works or how something happened. Take the opportunity to be humorous and/or ironic.

- #4. **Experiential Essay.** Write about a unique experience you've had, preferably something you did with the express intention of writing about it later. Don't do anything dangerous or illegal.
- #5. **Food Essay.** Evoke place (and/or the character of a real life person or persons) through writing about food.
- #6. **Travel Essay.** Write an essay about a trip to some noteworthy place that's foreign to you. Keep in mind that "noteworthy" is a bendy term. A lobster festival in Maine is noteworthy. Paris is noteworthy. So is Andalusia, Alabama.
- #7. **Photo Essay.** Make a photo essay of a relatively common place—someplace a lot of other people wouldn't really find beautiful. Write an in-depth companion essay-ish shard sort of thing, in which you bombard the page with all your linguistic/lyrical powers. Make it "artsy." Make it beautiful.
- #8. **Family Essay.** Write a family story, preferably one that has more than one version. Try to express—explicitly or implicitly—what role this story plays in your family's identity.
- #9. **Place Essay.** Write a personal essay that evokes a particular place and that fully characterizes the people in it.
 - Pick a place where you have some history but where you can also return for a while to sit and observe (AKA: notice and document). Try, also, to find a place that is peopled.
 - In the process of this noticing, evoking, and characterizing, try to reveal something about yourself—but do it obliquely. Don't come right out and say it. Instead, try to let the things you notice and the way you convey them do the work of this personal revelation.
 - Also: maybe this is a [lyric essay](#)?
- #10. **Profile Essay.** Let's start with [an example](#). From the NYT. It's about singer/songwriter Katell Keineg. Our world abounds in profiles, especially on television, especially of people who are considered celebrities. You encounter them all the time. Your task is to profile somebody who isn't a celebrity. Someone in your general sphere of existence. The first trick is to notice an interesting person—What's interesting about this person? What do you think you already know about her/him? What do you want to know more about? Then spend time with this person. Preferably on different occasions, in different settings. Write about the experience. Period. That's it. It's okay—in fact, it's *encouraged*—for you to be in this essay too. You don't have to tell this person's entire life story—in fact, it's *discouraged*. Focus. Tell a specific story that captures something

essential about who this person is. Please *do* include actual quotes from this person. (A tape recorder would be a big advantage.) The rules of dialogue apply. Fold it into the narrative.

Fiction Prompts

Allow me first to direct you to [some useful notes about what fiction is](#). As with the nonfiction prompts, any of the following could produce a quick-hitter of, say, a page or two and/or they could yield a much longer piece of writing.

- #1.** Take a walk. Notice something that's out of place and use it to spur a story/vignette.
- #2.** Write a story/vignette in the form of a letter.
- #3.** Write a story/vignette that starts or ends with an explosion.
- #4.** Write a story that centers around something shiny, round, and blue. Perhaps a character has lost this shiny, round, blue thing. Or perhaps he or she covets it.
- #5.** Random Dictionary Word Prompt: Flip open a dictionary and point to a random word. Read the definition, even if you think you know what the word means. Use it in the first sentence (or somewhere else) in your story. If you don't like the first word you flip to, flip to another page and point to another random work. Use THAT word instead.
- #6.** Remember that shiny, round, blue thing from above? This time cut it in half with one half going to a character you've already established and the other going to a character you introduce in this story.
- #7.** Write a story in which the following three settings feature prominently: a barbershop, a convenience store, and a field.
- #8.** Start a story or a scene with a meticulous description of someone cooking something simple for themselves to eat.
- #9.** Set a story or scene in the year of your birth in the city or town where your mother either **A**) was born, **B**) graduated from high school, **C**) married your father. (Keep in mind: you and/or your mom need not have any direct role in the story.) Be sure to write something that could have happened in no other place, at no other time. Write in third-person POV, using past tense. Write at least 300 words.
- #10.** It's Thanksgiving night (or well after the ball has dropped on New Year's Eve). The guests have gone home. The house is quiet. Find the story.

Revision Prompts

Wholly re-see (i.e., revise: [Origin: 1560–70; REVĪSERE to look back at, revisit, freq. of REVIDĒRE to see again;]) something that you've written during this semester using one (or all) of the following strategies:

- Flesh out one of vignettes or scenes you've written in response to one of the prompts above. Turn it into a full-length short story.
- Start with a climax you already have and write a new story. For instance, if you were Flannery O'Connor and you wanted to apply this strategy to "[A Good Man Is Hard to Find](#)," you would start your new story with the grandmother meeting her demise at the hands of the Misfit. In that case, the whole focus of the story would probably have to shift to the Misfit and his crew. (Of course, the mark of a great climax—like O'Connor's in "A Good Man"—is that it feels so final. The idea of "what happens next?" is a moot point. The trick here will be to find a climax that feels a little squishy to you.)
- Change the point of view—from first person to third person or vice versa. Or if you're feeling crazy, change the POV to second person.
- Condense the action so it all takes place in the space of a day. Or less. Don't be afraid to cut characters and settings.
- Change the setting of the story to Birmingham, Alabama, in the present day. Which is to say: expressly and conspicuously put the story in a place and time you know like the back of your hand.
- Count the words. Divide by two. Cut the number of words in the story by that number. (E.g., 2,500 words divided by 2 = 1,250 words.)
- Count the words. Multiply by two. Add that number of words to the story.
- Tack 500 new words onto the very end of the story. What happens? Do you have to keep going? Do you have to cut something? Do what you have to do.
- Write the story again, this time from the perspective of a minor character.
- Eliminate all adverbs and adjectives. By "all," I mean **ALL**. Replace abstractions with concrete nouns and verbs. Things and actions. Try to eliminate ANY instance of ANY form of the verb TO BE. Use third person, past tense. No sentences longer than fifteen words long. No punctuation other than periods and commas. (You can use up to two question marks, but only in dialogue.)

Poetry Prompts

Here are [some ways to think about poetry](#). Now here are a few prompts:

- #1. Read some [sonnets](#)—here are some by [Shakespeare](#) and [Millay](#). Now write a sonnet. It should be 14-lines long and use at least three of the other distinguishing features of the form: iambs, pentameter, rhyme scheme, volta, octave, sestet, quatrains, couplets, love. Here's the trick, though: whatever you do, be specific. Use interesting nouns and verbs. Avoid abstractions—especially if you're writing about an abstract concept (i.e., love). [Bonus: Memorize one of the Shakespeare sonnets or one of Millay's sonnets. Recite it publicly.]
- #2. Object Poems. Read three object poems: "[Archaic Torso of Apollo](#)" by [Rainer Maria Rilke](#) (he of Franz Kappus/[Letters to a Young Poet](#) fame); "[Ode to a Large Tuna in the Market](#)" by [Pablo Neruda](#); and "[The Fish](#)" by [Elizabeth Bishop](#). Now find and consider an interesting object.
 - **After Rilke:** Write a sonnet in which you use the first twelve lines to describe your object in great detail using lots of sensory images. Nouns. Verbs. Similes. Metaphors. Then use the last two lines to change the focus entirely—either to the speaker of the poem ("I") or the reader ("you").
 - **After Neruda:** Write a poem that's directly addressed to your object. Use at least thirty short lines (one to three or four words each). Be celebratory. Make big imaginative leaps with your metaphors and similes.
 - **After Bishop:** Write a poem in one long stanza in which you tell the story of how you discovered/caught/obtained your object. While you're at it, describe the object in great detail, including the things about it that you can't know or see, and imagine all the places it's been before it came to you.
- #3. Consider two photos: one of you when you were much younger and one of a place that holds a lot of memories for you.
 - Imagine that you could go back in time and give the younger version of yourself advice based on all the things you know now. Put it in a poem.
 - Write a poem about something in the periphery of one of your photos.

- Write a poem in which you walk through the place in your photo. Don't explain the significance of the place. Use your descriptions to show the significance.
- #4.** Read this about [Ekphrastic Poems](#). Now find and consider an image of a piece of art located on one of the following museum websites: [The High Museum](#) in Atlanta, [the Birmingham Museum of Art](#), [the Museum of Modern Art](#) in New York, or [the National Gallery](#) in Washington, DC. And, okay, if you're really feeling fancy: [The Louvre](#) in Paris. Now pick one or several of the following prompts:
- Write about the scene or subject being depicted in the artwork. Maybe imagine a story behind what you see depicted in the piece. Perhaps relate it to something else it reminds you of.
 - Write in the voice of a person or object shown in the work of art. The person or object can address the reader or another character/object in the piece.
 - Speak directly to the artist. Try to speculate about why he or she created the work and/or imagine what was happening while the artist was creating the piece.
- #5.** Read some [Walt Whitman](#). Now write a long poem (30 lines or more) with long(ish) lines. Use the comma as your dominant mode of punctuation. Feel free to keep going with one of your preoccupations. (One of Whitman's was most certainly America and the idea of democracy.) You can also follow Whitman's example by making your poem a kind of "oratorical" address. Repetition/refrain is always nice.
- #6.** Read some [Emily Dickinson](#). Dickinson rather famously once wrote, "If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know THAT is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know THAT is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?" For Dickinson, a poem was/is a thing that makes you FEEL a certain way. What it "means" is less important than how it makes a reader feel.
- #7.** Read some [Elizabeth Bishop](#). Now pick one of the following:
- Invent your own form, a la "[Visits to St. Elizabeths](#)."
 - Write a long(ish) narrative poem about a particular real-life experience. Don't be prosaic—limit your line lengths and pay attention to sound (alliteration, repetition, rhyme, etc.). Here's the key: REFLECT. Also: OBSERVE.
- #8.** Read some [Lucille Clifton](#). Now pick one of the following:

- Write a poem with “sparse punctuation and a lean lexicon of rudimentary but evocative words.”
 - Use direct, ordinary language to write a poem about transcending an everyday human difficulty. (Pick a difficulty you know well.)
- #9.** Read some [Li-Young Lee](#). Now write a long—not long(ish); LONG: at least three pages—love poem that includes at least two different loves, two different KINDS of love.
- #10.** Read some [Rita Dove](#). Now pick one of the following:
- Write a dream poem.
 - Write a history poem. With a real life historical figure in it. Make it a personal poem—meaning one that focuses on the figure’s personhood as much as it does her/his historical significance.
 - Write a poem called “Adolescence I” or “Adolescence III.”
 - Write a poem with two fictional characters in the early stages of love.
 - Write a poem about loss: a loss of faith, a loss of identity, a loss of love.

Revision Prompts

Wholly re-see (i.e., revise: [Origin: 1560–70; REVĪSERE to look back at, revisit, freq. of REVIDĒRE to see again;]) something that you’ve written during this semester using one (or all) of the following strategies:

- Add 50 lines to the end of the poem. Seriously. 50. Just keep going. Don’t worry about going on a tangent. If you’re doing it “right,” you’ll end up in a completely new place. Do you have a new poem? Two new poems? The first or last line for seven new poems?
- If it’s 25 lines or less, double it.
- If it’s 25 lines or more, cut it in half.
- Add two extra syllables to each line. You can add lines but you can’t subtract them.
- Make the first line the last line of a new poem **OR...**
- Make the last line the first line of a new poem.
- Make it a [sonnet](#) or a [ghazal](#) or a [sestina](#) or a [prose poem](#).
- Make each line the same number of syllables. You can add lines but you can’t subtract them.
- Cut 3 syllables from each line. You can cut lines but not add them.
- Take out all the adjectives and adverbs. Count them. Add at least half that many new verbs and nouns to the poem—without adding any

new adjectives or adverbs. Articles, prepositions, etc, are okay, but don't go crazy with extra language. Keep it to mostly new nouns and verbs.

IV.
30 Things to Do
If You're Bored or Stuck

- #1.** Go for a walk.
- #2.** Read a book or a magazine.
- #3.** Write out (preferably by hand) your "30 Things I Love Right Now."
- #4.** Take a ten- or twenty-minute nap.
- #5.** Talk to somebody who you don't normally talk to. Talk for at least twenty minutes. Don't gossip and don't be mean. Or maybe talk to somebody who you *do* normally talk to but talk about something you *never* talk about. Don't talk for more than fifteen minutes. Again: don't gossip, don't be mean. Talk quietly. [Note: These talks can involve passing notes.]
- #6.** Open the dictionary to a random page and read every entry. Write a journal entry using the most interesting dictionary entry as a touchstone.
- #7.** Copy down a poem or a prose passage or a song you love. Word for word. In its entirety. By hand. Try memorizing it.
- #8.** Draw something. Maybe your hand. Maybe it's a blind contour drawing.
- #9.** Make a collage.
- #10.** Start a dream journal.
- #11.** Stare out the window.
- #12.** Go to a live performance.
- #13.** Sing or play an instrument. It's fine to do this badly.
- #14.** Read another book or a magazine.
- #15.** Go make a cup of tea.
- #16.** Drink the cup of tea you just made. Slowly. *Very* slowly. Don't do anything else while you're drinking the tea. Just drink the tea.
- #17.** Do some pushups. Or jumping jacks.
- #18.** Fill a page with a "mantra." Any "mantra." This doesn't have to be something some enlightened yogi might say. It can be something Bart Simpson might say. It's more about the repetition. With that

said, try to avoid cynicism or negative self-talk. (See p. 43-45 for some potential mantras to use.)

- #19.** Write a letter to Slightly Future You asking for advice. (Hat tip: fluentself.com)
- #20.** Write a letter to yourself from Slightly Future You. It can be about anything.
- #21.** Write out the lyrics to your favorite song from memory. Use the hand you don't normally write with.
- #22.** Name everything in your immediate vicinity.
- #23.** Stare at a map. Any map. Then try to draw it from memory.
- #24.** Count backwards from 1,349.
- #25.** Hold your breath for ten seconds. Release it. For fifteen seconds.
- #26.** Write out the five hardest things about right now. What's useful about what sucks?
- #27.** Write a bad poem or song.
- #28.** Pray, but not freestyle. A received prayer—like the Lord's Prayer, the Serenity Prayer, or some other one. The faith tradition doesn't matter. It's not even important if you believe what you're saying. Praying in this way is, for me, is a kind of spiritual free-writing.
- #29.** Meditate. Or else just be very, very still and very, very quiet. Notice that you're thinking and what you're thinking about. [Note: You don't have to do anything about it. Just notice it.]
- #30.** Breathe in through your nose to a count of four. Hold it for a count of seven. Breathe out through your mouth to a count of eight. Repeat that process four times. (Hat tip: Dr. Andrew Weil)