

*** Writing Exercise: Hands plus twenty prompts**

A Two-Part exercise for writing, compiled by Mark Giles

This writing exercise fuses two exercises I have found over the years. It can be used for poetry or prose.

In terms of usefulness, this is a process that I have used often and continue to use frequently – it is my go-to exercise to dig myself out of “writer’s block.”

The first is Five Easy Hands, by Richard Jackson (and is in the book *The Practice of Poetry*, edited by Robin Behn and Chase Twichell). I actually first encountered a version of this as far back as high school.

The second is taken from the internet, posted by someone named “nameless.k”; but I first encountered a version of this one many years ago, though the prompts were somewhat different.

The great thing about this exercise is that if you give yourself five or so minutes to do the first part, and 20 or so minutes for the second, in a half-hour you can develop some raw material that can be shaped into a story, a scene, or a poem.

Indeed, I often use this two-part exercise to get a scene moving when I get stuck on “what comes next” – the first part generates focus on character; the second tells me what to do.

I believe the exercise works best if you don’t peek ahead – granted if you use it repeatedly, you know more or less what’s coming. But keeping focus on the here and now is useful.

Once you have the raw material, you can begin to process it – stretch it into a full story; re-arrange the lines if poetry. Add and subtract as necessary. Or do it again, continuing the narrative or poem.

FIVE EASY PIECES

Richard Jackson

As in the movie this title refers to, we discover things visually in fragmentary form, and what we think we know or see and what someone else knows or sees and what we communicate between those two positions is scant. This exercise attempts to tell a whole story in a quick scene. It is to be written in five sentences, and can be done in a class. There are two preparation steps. The first step is to remember a person you know well, or to invent a person. The second step is to imagine a place where you find the person. Then you are ready for the five pieces.

1. Describe the person's hands.
2. Describe something he or she is doing with the hands.
3. Use a metaphor to say something about some exotic place.
4. Mention what you would want to ask this person in the context of 2 and 3, above.
5. The person looks up or toward you, notices you there, gives an answer that suggests he or she only gets part of what you asked.

a life for me. Maybe it never turned out that way, but I've kept it as an ideal. What has always struck me is how you can invent a story from a part of a person. Here the writer is asked to focus on the hands and what they are doing, then explode the poem out to some widely different, unfamiliar context. Now the trick is to come back, but come back by trusting that your subconscious brought you to a place that has some relation to what you have been observing. The way to come back is usually through some tonal or image path related to the metaphor. Finally, the focus is broken again, this time by the subject. Often the other person ends by saying something about the exotic place that makes all the emotions come together.

The exercise is probably the most successful one I've used in beginning classes and is useful in showing how a poem can condense narrative and characterization, how it can quickly shift focus like a photographer going wild with a zoom lens, how images reveal stories behind them simply by knocking against other images and perspectives, how you can use dialogue in a poem—each time I use it I've found different uses. Sometimes I've made the five pieces sections rather than sentences or lines, but for a first draft, the sentence/line rule is generally best.

Part 2 of two part exercise.

After doing the "hands" exercise, I think about the character/memory that I have created then follow these prompts below – either adding on to the "hands exercise" or just using it as "background." The first time through, I try to give myself an minute for each prompt, so that this part of the exercise can be done in twenty minutes – and the two together in a half hour.

1. A line with a wall or boundary in it.
2. A line with weather in it (air, temp)
3. A line with a sound in it
4. A line with a gesture in it
5. A line of dialogue of six words or less
6. A line with light in it
7. A line of dialogue of ten words or more
8. A line with a ceiling or floor in it
9. A line with texture in it
10. A line with an object smaller than a hand in it.
11. A line with an allusion to literature or art in it.
12. A line fragment.
13. A line with a piece of furniture in it.

14. A line of dialogue that is a question.
15. A line of dialogue that responds to the question in a way that indicates that the question wasn't quite heard or understood.
16. A line with a hand or fingers in it.
17. A line with a dash in it.
18. A line with an allusion to a current event in it
19. A line with a metaphor in it.
20. A line of dialogue that is whispered

Adapted from a post "nameless.k" on <http://ask.metafilter.com/66609/creative-writing-exercises>.

Numbers 11 and 18 often seem difficult.