

## Writing Exercise: Fill in the Blank

Another exercise swiped from Nick Bantock's *The Trickster's Hat*.

The standard way of writing fiction is to plot a story line, then flesh it out as you go along. Once begun, some authors, like Joseph Conrad, would work on one page at a time for eight hours a day. Others, like Georges Simenon, the creator of the French detective Maigret, would spend weeks mentally developing a story line, then explode onto paper with 200 pages in 48 hours.

▶ Their speed may have been vastly different, but their linear approach was similar.

However, that's not the only way to write. I sometimes begin creating a book in the middle or in a series of middles, expanding them outward until they join and the story makes itself known to me.

In some ways it doesn't matter where you start; the key is to get moving so that you have something down on paper to work with. Trying to get everything perfect from the outset can be crippling. You cannot experiment and be flawless at the same time. Better to let first thoughts have their run and then see what comes next.

This next exercise is meant to be a springboard. I'll start you and then you take it from there. There's no guarantee it will blossom into a novel or even a short story, but what matters is that you get under way and don't waste the day staring at a blank page, waiting for inspiration to strike.

**Materials:** pen and notebook

**Time:** 30 minutes

### INSTRUCTIONS

Add to the following starting points by writing down whatever comes to mind. Don't stop to think—just go with your stream of consciousness.

Complete this sentence: *The horse felt obliged to express itself by...*

When you've done that, write down the sentence that might come before that sentence.

Then compose the sentence that follows the obliged horse sentence.

Now another sentence to finish: *She could not help herself, the date was waiting...*

Same again. Write the preceding sentence and the following one.

And again complete and add the before and after: *Elvira looked at her brother's fast-growing...*

You should now have three sets of three sentences. See if you can find a way to link these sets together in a vaguely cohesive fashion. Once you've done that, you can go back in and edit it, changing a few words here and there to help bring it together. By then it should have some life of its own. Try expanding it further, developing any characters or themes that have begun to show themselves.

Just write—keep going till your 30 minutes are up. Then read it aloud to yourself.