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Lively experiments: Writing exercises and life writing

Abstract:

Writing exercises are foundational to creative writing teaching and sustain a strong connection to life writing. Exercises often prompt students to work with memories, experiences, observations, perceptions and life stories. Examining the application of writing exercises in creative writing teaching can assess their significance for life writing, bringing insight to life writing practice and scholarship. In exercises, students work in embodied, intuitive ways with life narratives and as such writing exercises make an important intervention in understanding how life narratives are shaped on and off the page. They reflect key aspects of life writing including selfhood, the construction of self-narratives, autobiographical truth, and experimental form. The careful design and use of writing exercises enables student understanding of life writing as a practice and genre. Writer-teachers bring practice-based insights to the use of writing exercises, positioning them as significant sites for knowledge of, and experimentation with, life writing.

Biographical note:

Vanessa Berry is a writer, artist and researcher who works with autobiography, memory, place, objects and archives. Her work centres around autobiography and its formal and experimental possibilities, arising from her background in zine making and DIY literary practices. She is the author of five books of essays/memoir including *Calendar* (2025), *Gentle and Fierce* (2021), and *Mirror Sydney* (2017). Vanessa is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Sydney.

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Creative writing, life writing, writing exercises

Teaching creative writing, I have observed how writing exercises provide a powerful shortcut into understanding the defining features and challenges of life writing. By doing writing exercises, an activity fundamental to creative writing classes, students often produce short, impromptu works of life writing. Examining processes of devising and working with life writing in writing exercises reveals how they draw forth notions of selfhood, truth, and trust that are central to the genre. More than being tasks that seek to quickly demonstrate an aspect of writing craft, writing exercises enable embodied, instinctual experiences with life writing, providing understandings through practice. By examining the uses and applications of writing exercises, it is possible to map these understandings: the construction of self-narrative on and off the page, autobiographical truth, writing the body, and experiments with form.

Writing exercises are spontaneous writings that occur in response to an instruction or prompt. In my teaching of creative writing in undergraduate and postgraduate classes, I use exercises that enable students to put ideas or methods into practice. Exercises empower students to draw on their experiences, observations and perceptions as ready-to-hand material for writing. The first writing exercise I remember using, in an undergraduate creative writing class at the start of my teaching career, was from the often-used writing craft guide *Writing Down the Bones* by Natalie Goldberg. The exercise asks writers to “visualise a place that you really love”, and then write about it, paying attention to its details to evoke feeling in the reader (2005, p. 23). I was struck by the quiet intensity of the room as the students were doing the exercise and I imagined the places coming into their minds as they wrote. In that moment, the power of life writing, of connecting to personal experience and rendering it in language, was all the more present for being focused through the task and pursued collectively. Since then I have experienced this moment many times, over two decades of selecting, devising and adapting writing exercises for my undergraduate and postgraduate creative writing teaching.

Writing exercises are as integral to creative writing instruction as the writing workshop is as a class format. But unlike the workshop, which has been subject to extensive debate about its structure, influences, and biases, there has been less attention to the rationales that underlie writing exercises. The workshop has been scrutinised for its ongoing relevance (Donnelly, 2010; Adsit, 2019). It has been criticised for the power dynamics built into its mechanisms, such as the “gag rule” in which the author whose writing is being workshopped does not speak while their work is under discussion (Kearns, 2009; Violini, 2022), and reconceptualised to bring greater equity and recognise difference (Naga & McGill, 2018; Salesses, 2021). This attention reflects the nature of the workshop as a framework or format, and the writing exercise as an activity which is flexible and contingent within this framework. Small-scale and adaptable, exercises are tailored to the needs and requirements of individual classes, their aims more localised and immediate, but no less significant in what they establish and reveal.

Alexander Chee describes the aim of creative writing classes as teaching “the ordinariness of the profession as well as the radical possibilities in [students’] work” (2018, p. 271). Writing exercises connect with this sense of possibility. Brief in length and quickly composed, writing exercises aim to elucidate, open up, or test out various aspects of creative writing. These may be technical, relating to writing style, structure or language, or may be training in skills such

as observation or invention. Exercises often draw on the students' life experiences and perceptions. This can be through explicit instructions to write autobiographically, but even without such instruction students gravitate towards writing with their own experiences, observations, and life stories for in-class exercises. This is material that is close to hand: self-narration is an everyday mode of expression in an age in which the ephemeral narratives of social media are a dominant form of communication and self-expression (Cardell et al., 2017). Bringing this kind of everyday self-narration and storytelling as material into the writing classroom connects with life writing as an expanded practice. Crafting life stories through ephemeral communications and "autobiographical acts" (Schmitt, 2018, p. 471) leads students to reckon with the mutability of self-narrative and the reconstructive and fictive elements of life writing.

Some writing exercises foreground language and play over narrative. In this way they connect with experimental life writing, forms concerned with "fragmentation, hybridity and an insistence on the elusiveness and indeterminacy of the auto/biographical subject" (Drag & Guignery, 2025, p. 12). The brevity of writing exercises gives them inherently fragmentary form, as does the fact that, when written under time constraint, they often remain incomplete. Some writing exercises are presented as experiments, such as Bernadette Mayer's influential list of "writing experiments" (1971–1975). If "exercise" suggests training, "experiment" suggests testing an idea out within set conditions. Many of Mayer's prompts intend to distort, extend, or "derange" language, as they also attend to the daily and immediate, such as: "Make notes on what happens or occurs to you for a limited amount of time, then make something of it in writing", or "Do experiments with sensory memory: record all sense images that remain from breakfast, study which senses engage you, escape you" (1971–1975). The list also suggests journaling as an experimental practice: "Keep a journal that is restricted to one set of ideas, for instance, a food or dream journal, a journal that is only written in when it is raining, a journal of ideas about writing, a weather journal" (1971–1975). These prompts reflect Mayer's poetry practice, in which she experiments with recording her life experience within time constraints, most prominently in her long day-poem *Midwinter Day* (1999).

Recent collections of writing exercises continue this tradition of experiment, such as Lucy Ives's *three six five: prompts, acts, divinations* (2026). This collection of 365 writing exercises uses a playfully experimental approach in exercises such as "Exercise for Recovery of Joy", which begins: "Draw up a list of mistakes, large and small, that you have made across the duration of your life. Try to write about each mistake in a careful and exhaustive way. Give them names, if you like". Ives goes on to describe this list as a resource for personal ("set the list on fire") or literary ("give them to a character to hold for you") work (2025). Such a writing exercise draws on life experiences as writing material, connecting with ideas underpinning the practice and study of life writing, including issues of taboo and confession and relationships between memoir and fiction. It demonstrates, too, the list as a form of experimental life-writing (Rüggemeier, 2021).

A frequently used life writing exercise that I use in undergraduate and postgraduate creative writing classes is based on Joe Brainard's 1975 *I Remember* (2001). This long poem takes the

form of “an extended, largely random listing of remembrances” (Weissman, 2010, p. 71). An exercise based on this text might instruct the writer to follow their own associative flow of memory through the repeated “I remember” prompt. The popularity of the exercise is in part due to its apparent simplicity: an open string of free-associated memories that can be recent or from long-ago, major or incidental, “everything that isn’t this moment is memory coming alive again as you write” (Goldberg, 2005, p. 22). The exercise also brings self-awareness to the act of writing. In *I Remember*, “the author’s act of writing feels present on the page ... each entry says not only *I remember this*, but also *I wrote this*” (Weissman, 2010, p. 81). This dual focus draws attention to the decisions the writer makes in order to write memory. How are memories shaped for the page? What is left out? Is what is written true to the memory? In this way, such a writing exercise connects with key aspects of life writing theory, from Lejeune’s foundational “autobiographical pact” to notions of the constructed self, the ethical challenges of truthfully rendering experience, public and private writing, and relationships between the “autobiographical act” and “autobiographical work” (Schmitt, 2018, p. 475).

Writing exercises draw into immediate focus the processes by which life experiences become crafted pieces of life writing. In doing so, they provide leads into understanding life writing as a practice and a genre. This process can be heightened by designing exercises that encourage reflection on how life stories that have already been formulated ‘off the page’ can be written, such as those expressed verbally, in conversation. One such exercise, which I use in specialised life writing courses as well as general creative writing, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, is:

Consider a story about your life that you often tell. It could be something formative, funny, unexpected or unusual, about a place, or a time in your life, or perhaps centred around an event, incident or moment. Whatever its focus, it should be a story that you have found yourself recounting to others and feel comfortable sharing. Write this experience either in the way you would tell it in person, or in a new way for the page.

This exercise requires work with an existing self-narrative the student has already formulated and shared. Depending on the context of the class, different aspects of the exercise can be accentuated in the discussion that arises from it. The truth value of autobiography, autofiction, the ethics of life writing, and social norms and expectations are all invoked by such an exercise. I ask students: Has your story been embellished or shaped for the fact of having an audience? Is it a certain kind of experience? Is it, for example, a turning point, an emotionally intense experience, a brush with fame? Who do you tell it to, when, and why? Do you “tell” it differently when you come to write it? Are there elements you omit, or change? Did you decide to write it in a new way and if so, what happened? Despite the brevity of the exercise, all of these aspects can be involved to some extent in the written response, and will bring attention to narrative practices of identity and selfhood, on and off the page.

Creative writing teachers are often practising writers and this is reflected in writing craft guides and collections of writing exercises. Exercises reflect “the approach, style and cultural heritage of the individual” who designs them (Walker, 2012, p. 11), as they demonstrate the writer-

teacher's areas of expertise. Craft anthologies, in collections such as *Now Write! Nonfiction: Exercises from Today's Best Writers and Teachers* (Ellis, 2009), offer exercises based on practice. For example, Lia Purpura's "Walking Through It" exercise uses the concept of the real estate "walk through" as a "bounded and concentrated [way] of seeing our environment" (p. 181). This approach is in keeping with Purpura's essayistic practice around that time, in the essay collection *On Looking* (2006). The exercise highlights the specific craft of attentional and embodied knowledge that comes through practice. As well as aspects of writing craft, it teaches students what it is to be a writer through developing writerly practices of attention, observation, and intuition: the "ways of seeing, thinking and feeling" that are just as much a part of creative writing as the craft (Vandermeulen, 2011, p. 197).

In the introduction to *three six five: prompts, acts, divinations*, Ives articulates concepts that inform her exercises. These are drawn from her own personhood and writing practice and include ideas like memory as readily available: "It already belongs to you. You have endless amounts. You can never run out" (2026, p. 9). This resonates with my own emphasis on the everyday in my life-writing practice, as a writer of memoir and essays. I have also produced personal zines for three decades, experimenting with my voice and craft in these DIY publications. These are also subversive autobiographical publications because they are self-devised and writer-produced. The practice of making zines is "infused with the tempo of immediacy" (Nguyen, 2021, p. 233). This practice has guided my emphasis on creative writing learning activities that are impromptu, spontaneous and self-directed. The way that zines draw from everyday life and memory, the incidental and what is to hand, has informed my approach to writing exercises. Using readily available material from life provides students with a way to quickly enter into writing. But it also enables them to reflect on challenges and processes of life writing because these are familiar, memory-based or experiential tasks. Making zines also helps students to draw attention to life writing as a practice that extends beyond traditional texts to include material and digital practices (Poletti, 2020).

However, using life experiences or perceptions of the everyday as writing exercises in the classroom can be challenging. Careful exercise design can support students to write with personal material, and it can open up room for discussion and consideration of writing trauma or the politics of confession. In examining the therapeutic dimensions of the life writing classroom, Celia Hunt describes a sequence of exercises on finding writing voice through autobiographical fiction (2000). Hunt's research in this area was inspired by her own experiences writing autobiographical fiction, and how this had aided her in "mak[ing] sense of myself and my story" (p. 10). The flexibility of fiction facilitates the writer's sense of agency in working with their life stories. In guiding students in using autobiographical material as imaginative inspiration, Hunt's exercises include freewriting, using memory, using photographs, and considering place. By aiming for "felt authenticity" rather than factual accuracy, Hunt stresses that writing fiction allows for therapeutic psychological insights for writers, as they work with the feelings and emotions that run through their life stories (p. 12).

Describing the autobiographical fiction exercises, Hunt stresses the practicalities of setting up a safe space in the classroom and supporting students to develop their own internal "holding

environment” (p. 46). This requires the careful and respectful fostering of group dynamics, as it also requires the instructor to set clear parameters about the aims of the class (p. 48). Hunt’s autobiographical fiction classes were focused on the dual aims of therapeutic benefit and producing literary life writing. Autobiographical fiction can be protective for writers who are working with traumatic memories. The imaginative reinterpretation and freedom from proving the factual truth that fiction provides can bring about therapeutic negotiations with memory and trauma (Jensen, 2019). In fiction, writers can use techniques such as multiple perspectives, shifts in point of view, repetition, and metaphor as they work with life stories, bringing “potential, mutable meanings” to traumatic experiences (p. 124).

In the years since Hunt outlined her approach there has been increasing awareness of “the costs and risks of writing from one’s own life” (Nisbet, 2025, p. 632), the mediation of trauma through life writing (Kurvet-Käosaar, 2020), and the rise of trauma-informed pedagogy. This awareness of the complexities of writing trauma now informs writing exercise design. For example, a memory-based writing exercise which asks students to visualise the rooms of a childhood home could trigger confronting memories in students who have experienced childhood abuse or a difficult upbringing. Suggesting alternative locations, or bringing the exercise into the present, would achieve the same aims of closely observed detail prioritising emotional safety (Atkinson, 2023, p. 337–8). When designing exercises, I reflect on the aims of the exercise and how safe options can be built into achieving these aims. For example, an exercise in writing about home and domestic space can give the option to write fiction for the exercise, or, following Goldberg’s “visualise a place you really love”, the exercise can set a positive frame of reference as its focus.

A model in which there is no obligation for students to share their writing, opting for discussion of the process and results, is another common strategy with in-class writing tasks that provides a safeguard when working with personal material. Along these lines, Emilia Karjula recounts using an autobiographical writing exercise in a lecture on creative writing and ethnography, based around “a moment when something in your life changed, shifted, was transformed” (2021, p. 55). Karjula describes working with the exercise, keeping context in mind: “The participants had come to the online seminar to listen to a lecture, not to write or talk about their personal, transformative experiences. The texts we wrote in answer to the prompt were not read aloud. After writing we talked *around* the texts” (p. 59, emphasis in original). Talking “around” the exercise mitigates the pressure to share impromptu writing, in all its unpredictability. It relieves students of the anxiety of producing a share-worthy piece as it can also lead students to reflect on how they shape their life stories for an audience: considering what they are comfortable sharing, and what they choose to keep private.

These examples highlight the contingent nature of writing exercises, as tasks responsive to the requirements of particular classes and learning purposes, while also having an element of unpredictability in how students choose to respond to them in the moment. Hunt’s class on finding voice had specific goals in generating fictional writing from autobiography, encouraging “a close engagement with the inner life” (2000, p. 19). Hunt has gone on to further investigate creative writing as a personally transformative, therapeutic practice, “opening-up

to a less cognitively driven, more spontaneous, and bodily-felt approach to learning or writing” (2013, p. 37). While the aims of general creative or life writing classes are not therapeutic in this way, there is a personal, individualised element to creative writing teaching. By recognising students’ identities and distinct lifeworlds, teachers “help them construct their own creative writerly identities” (Udelson, 2022, p. 186).

The “bodily felt” approach is a strength of writing exercises which, through their immediacy, foreground the embodied, instinctual and intuitive aspects of creative writing. Life writing sustains a heightened, reciprocal relationship between text and body: the body as the site of autobiographical knowledge, and life narrative as a site of embodied knowledge (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 49). Writing exercises that draw on students’ life experiences both bring embodied experience to the page and are an embodied experience in themselves through the physical act of collectively writing together in a class setting. Time constraints encourage students to respond quickly and intuitively. This can work to overcome resistance to starting or getting into writing. Or, as Melissa Febos argues in *Body Work*, it can bring forth familiar narratives to then drill down into, refine and personalise, to find “the ways that only I could possibly write it” (2021, p. 31).

This movement towards particularity, towards the specifics of personal experience, autobiographical voice and writerly imagination – the very foundations of life writing – is highlighted through writing exercises. In class, after time is up for the exercise and students discuss their approach to it, or share their piece, I’m always struck by the diversity of responses to the same prompt. Post-exercise discussion is an opportunity to guide students in understanding the relationships between their unique, individual memories and ways of being, and the shared aspects of human experience. When I design writing exercises, my goal is to empower students to access this dynamic in their writing.

Across the span of creative and life writing teaching settings and scenarios, writing exercises provide an intuitive, embodied writing experience and an entry point to issues and debates at the heart of life writing practice and scholarship. They draw attention to the constructed nature of life writing as a practice on and off the page. Negotiations with truth, authenticity and fictionality are generated by writing exercises, as is reckoning with trauma and the ethics of writing self and others. They allow for experiment through their fragmentary form and capacity for playful, collective experiences of writing. In these ways, as a generative creative-critical activity, writing exercises are key sites in which life writing is practised, imagined, and conceptualised.

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