

# Chapter Four

## Pre-writing: how to use journals, notes and plans to improve your writing

*Lorna Fergusson*

### *What is pre-writing?*

Pre-writing refers to a wide range of techniques by which you can approach and get to know your writing project before you ‘officially’ embark on it. These techniques range all the way from thinking about and discussing a project to mind-mapping, free-writing, journaling, note-taking, planning and research. In this chapter we’ll explore how you can employ pre-writing in ways that will increase your confidence in your writing project and enhance your ability to tackle it successfully. This is especially important when you’re setting out to write a novel or complete a project of significant length and substance. Used effectively, pre-writing techniques can improve your chances of entering the ‘zone’ of writing when you commit yourself to producing your story.

### *Why pre-write?*

There are many potential benefits and learning experiences to be had from pre-writing. It allows you to experiment with possibilities without feeling that you’ve committed yourself too seriously. By testing the potential of ideas you

can clarify which ones have the capacity to sustain your creative interest over the long haul.

Through pre-writing, you can practise observation, garner useful material and experiment with expression, structure and point of view. This may save you time later, as you will have had the chance to discover what doesn't work at an early stage rather than when you're halfway through a manuscript and you find out that the structure won't hold up or the perspective you've opted for won't work out. It can help to reduce the chance of experiencing the sort of crisis in confidence that can lead to giving up entirely because it seems easier *not* to write than to get it wrong. If you feel you've had time to play around with your idea and explore its facets, then you may feel greater faith in it and in your ability to tackle it.

At the pre-writing stage, you can also do background research and analysis, which will ground your work and may well lead to new inspirations and connections, lending your story more depth and resonance.

Pre-writing allows you privacy: this is work you don't need to expose to external judgement. Awareness that this is work entirely for *you* can liberate you, not just from the criticism of others but also from your own critical self. At the same time, this playfulness can be combined with discipline, because pre-writing also gives you the chance to get into the mindset of being a committed writer. At the pre-writing stage, you can learn how to create conditions and routines which will be conducive to the regular production of work: this will also contribute to a satisfying degree of momentum when you come to write your project in full.

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## *Pre-writing: tools and techniques*

There are various techniques you can employ at the pre-writing stage. In some cases, these involve using physical, tangible resources. At other times, it's about tuning into the intangible, the inspirational – being able to access special states of mind.

### THINKING

This seems self-evident, doesn't it? You can't tackle any project unless you think about it. First you have to have your idea or ideas, then you have to think yourself through the maze of plot, the kind of tone and intention you have, the themes you want to explore. So the first thing to take on board is this: to brood is good! You should never underestimate the importance of taking time to think your way into a project. Dennis Palumbo, a psychotherapist who specialises in tackling psychological blocks to creativity, describes in his book *Writing from the inside out* how those around you may see you as a dreamer or daydreamer but that your perspective on yourself should always be that you are a writer-in-training.

What's crucial is that your thinking has a *point*, ultimately. Ideas often cannot be rushed, but they do need to have a purpose. So there's a paradox here. You need a kind of withdrawal into your own private inner space, first of all. You need to take yourself away from distraction. Distraction takes many forms for writers: social life, forms of entertainment, social networking! The world is busy and present to us twenty-four hours a day. It's hard to resist checking our Twitter feeds and our Facebook pages. It's hard to resist going down to the bar. However, it's no

accident that, throughout history, people have gone on retreats to get away from the buzz and clutter of society. They've retreated into caves and deserts, they've fasted and performed religious rituals – and have been rewarded by insight into deeper aspects of existence. So it is with writers: I don't mean that you should take up residence in the Kalahari. To retreat is, ultimately, to go within *yourself*. You have to go inside yourself to find out what's there. People choose physical retreat as a means of attaining a psychological or spiritual retreat.

Writing retreats take many forms, from the organised trip to a Greek island or French villa, to a Vermont farmhouse or cottage in Ireland. It can be a weekend away, on your own. It can be a desk at the library, or upstairs in your bedroom. Although we may dream of the perfect retreat, remember that it entails a psychological as much as a physical turning to a place within your head, where you settle into the mind-set of the writer. Choose the location that works best for you and indulge yourself in the rituals of the right desk, pen, paper or writing software. Get into the habit of associating that place or those accessories with the process of writing.

A few lines back I mentioned a paradox and it's this: you need to back off from life, yes. You need to go within yourself, yes. You need to accept that to brood is good. But you also need to know when the time for thinking is over and the time for the actual writing has arrived. I'll come back to this point later on, but file it away in the meantime.

## COMPOSTING

Composting, to use a gardening image, is about giving a story time to come into being. The word itself, though

deeply unglamorous, describes a process, one which can't be rushed, during which ideas settle and bed down within you. Like the slow accumulation of leaf mould, random notions, thoughts, opinions and experiences drift down into the subconscious. They blend and turn into a mulch (another rather unglamorous word) of creative potential from which stories can grow. Allow yourself to be open to notions and experiences but also accept that many writers find a story emerges an exceedingly long time *after* the original experience. In some cases years pass, during which time the notion quietly ferments until it's time for it to fizz its way up to the conscious mind and executive will of the writer.

#### FREE-WRITING

As all that talk of composting may have made you feel pretty impatient, we'll move on to more 'active' ways of generating story, with more immediate results. You may well have heard of the term 'free-writing' before, or you may have heard of 'morning pages'. These are techniques advocated by such inspirational writers as Dorothea Brande, Julia Cameron and Natalie Goldberg (who also advocates composting). Their aim is to help writers find the sources of inspiration within themselves along with a belief that what the writer does is important and life-affirming. This is a field where writing meets life-coaching, because these are techniques that often have a therapeutic effect on the writer.

So, what does free-writing actually mean? Well, the clue is in the title. The point of the exercise is to liberate your imagination from the constraints of self-consciousness.

You take some paper, you may if you choose set a timer, you put pen to paper, and you *write*. You write fast. You write without thinking. You certainly write without editing.

‘Morning pages’ are precisely that: they’re pages you write each morning before the day claims you, with all its distractions, tasks and niggles. When you wake, your mind is often in a strange state, a halfway zone between sleep and full consciousness, and it’s in this mental state that imagination can be very active and uninhibited, if you let it – and if you write your thoughts and impressions down before they fade, defeated by the reality of your daily schedule. It’s like pinning down dreams: if you don’t do it fast then you know you had a dream but you can’t for the life of you remember what it was. Seize the moment, seize the feeling, run with it.

To help this process, some people advocate not even lifting the pen from the paper as you write. So, you ask, what *do* I write? You write anything, essentially. Any thought, image, memory, character, description that pops into your mind – and you throw it onto the page any old how. If you come to the end of a phrase or sentence and you can’t think what to write next, keep repeating the previous phrase over and over until the log-jam breaks and you can get going again.

Don’t think about spelling, grammar or punctuation as you write: this is not the finished article or anything like it, and it’s not meant to be. Don’t worry if you think you’re writing garbage. It doesn’t matter. This is all about spontaneity.

One of the purposes here is to create a habit of writing; Julia Cameron in *The artist’s way* recommends that

you write three pages first thing, every morning. You're making a daily appointment to write. If you discover that mornings are really not your thing, you can turn up in the dead of night, when the world's gone to bed, leaving you able to tap into that strange half-world of nocturnal creativity.

You'll start to build up these free-written pages at a remarkable rate if you maintain your commitment to turning up and writing them. At some point after that initial writing splurge you'll come back to them and review them. As you do, highlight or extract words, images, phrases and notions that jump out at you as interesting. You'll be surprised what's there – at times it will almost feel as if someone else has written the material. In a sense that's true: the someone else was the inner you. Notice what has risen from your subconscious. What themes and feelings turn out to have been significant to you? Do you return to these over and over again? These may have enormous potential as they are so personal. The next stage is to start the process of stepping back from the intimate in order to create the art.

For instance, you may notice the image of a dark room or the word 'abandonment' or the line 'Don't leave me!' crops up. Maybe this has come from personal experience, but now you can start to imagine a character, a *someone else*, who's having this experience. You can alter the context. Maybe as a child your parent forgot one day to pick you up from school: now imagine you're the parent who's forgotten their child. Why would they do that? What are they feeling as they rush towards the school, held up by traffic, consumed by guilt?

Thus, story is born.

## MIND-MAPPING/CLUSTERING

If you feel daunted, or all at sea with the idea of free-writing, you might prefer a more visual, organised and constructed method whereby you can allow your mind to come up with connections and directions. Mind-mapping, also known as ‘clustering’, is a technique you may well have come across before. It allows you to start with a keyword and blitz your way through a set of connected notions that come up, triggered by that central keyword. Mind-mapping gives you a visual sense of your work and the possible directions it may take, which may help you to feel the freedom to play around but at the same time have confidence that your ideas can possess both structure and development.

You can choose to mind-map in an almost doodly manner: just jot down a word. It could be a theme at the heart of what you want to write. ‘War’, say, or ‘doomed love’ or ‘betrayal’. Then start to jot down connected ideas, linking them back to the central one. You might play around with ‘betrayal’, taking it off in the direction of betrayal in ‘business’ or ‘sport’ or ‘society’, by ‘a friend’ or ‘a lover’. Mind-mapping essentially creates a halo of possibilities, each of which generates its own halo.

You can use computer software such as Mindjet to help the process of mind-mapping: the end result is a visual map of potentiality. Just don’t doodle and play for too long!

## TALKING (AND LISTENING)

Like thinking, this seems to be all too obvious to be called a technique. However, many writers shy away from discussing their work with others. They’re inhibited by the fear that the inner critic they live with will be reinforced



by the outer critic, whose comments will devalue their work, highlight its failings – and, by extension, the writer’s failings as a human being. To talk about your work takes courage. In some cases, it takes ego: the mirror of the shy retiring writer is the arrogant writer who takes centre-stage and does nothing *but* talk.

Who should you be talking to? There are all sorts of possibilities. Of course there are your friends and family, your nearest and dearest. The risk here is that they care too much about you to give you honest feedback or that they think, fondly, that putting you down will keep that writer-ego in check. It might be better to consider talking to fellow writers, who will understand all too well the struggles you’re having. Or mentors and writing tutors, people who not only have experience of the process of writing but who are able to suggest practical strategies for solving problems.

You should also be *listening*, of course. As a writer, you should have your radar switched on all the time for what could make a story. Be shameless about this. Listen to conversations and write them down. You are always listening for the potential in people’s experiences and attitudes. If you’re a fiction-writer, remember you’re at liberty to bend reality. You can add new characters, change dates and places, alter the sequence and pace of events. Use reality as a springboard into your imagined world.

## JOURNALING

This, arguably, is the most obvious technique of all. It’s well known that many writers’ first novels tend to be autobiographical, and certainly your own life can provide more material than you ever thought possible.

The best way to develop your writing skills in combination with what you can source from your life is to start journaling or diary writing. As with free-writing, you are liberated by the idea, first of all, that you are writing a private document. Diaries and journals require you to be honest. You aim for authenticity in the way you describe events and your personal reactions to those events. You aim for honesty in the expression of those events, which is an excellent way of improving your powers of observation and analysis. You train your writer's eye and ear: knowing you will later describe what has happened, in the pages of your diary or journal, works wonders to sharpen your awareness.

A diary asks of you that you record each day in it. For some people that works very well indeed. It provides a discipline in that you know you should be writing in it every month, every week, every year. It provides a linear shape. On New Year's Eve you can cast your eye back over the significant moments of your year and feel glad that you captured both the dramatic and the more mundane events.

For others, a diary is a tyranny. Those dates at the top of the page nag and chivy. If a day is missed the writer feels guilty, intends to go back and fill in the blanks, perhaps never does – perhaps lets the whole thing lapse. Guilt and resentment are not good for creativity.

A journal, then, may be the answer: here you choose on which days you will open those pages and write. If you have nothing to say, you say nothing. If you're brimming with words, they can flow on for page after page because you're not trammelled by the limits of your diary's allocated page or half page. This gives you freedom to spread

your wings but doesn't send you on a guilt trip if your wings are clipped.

In your journal you can write about emotions without them being linked to a specific day's events. You can write responses to films or shows, you can write a debate about an issue that concerns you, you can write a manifesto for yourself as an artist, you can create a 'commonplace book' effect by recording wise words and favourite lines and what they mean to you. You can use your journal as your ideas book, you can record what you're currently working on and how you feel about it at each stage, what lessons you've learned, what plans you've made.

Life-mining is also about the experiences of others: it isn't always all about you. If you want to enrich your perceptions of human nature, record lives other than your own. Read memoirs and biographies, newspaper articles, interviews, history and social history, look at old photographs. View all of these as potential sources for plots and characters. The old adage that truth is stranger than fiction? True.

## NOTING

Ideas can come ... they can also go. All too often you think you'll retain an inspired or salient thought, but then it slips from your grasp. Our headspaces are crowded, and we are easily distracted, so you need to write down more than your personal history and core emotions in diaries and journals. You need to record information, research, plot notes, possible character names, possible titles for stories (always a fun activity). If you overhear an amazing conversation on a bus, you need to keep it recorded and fresh.

The prime rule of the game is always *always* to have a notebook by you. As an alternative, you might like to use a digital recorder as an aural ‘jotter’ – though don’t use it to record overheard conversations! Keep a notebook by the bed. This is crucial because of that strange brain-state I mentioned earlier, when you are between sleep and waking, a state that allows ideas to rise to the surface, along with beautiful phrases and sudden perceptions. There isn’t a writer alive who hasn’t sleepily said to himself or herself, ‘Oh, I’ll remember that in the morning’ only to find that in the cold light of day the Muse is long gone. It’s incredibly frustrating to know that for the lack of a little bit of effort you’ve let something go which could have been great. So, keep that notebook by the bed. And a pen that works.

Many writers – and you may be one – are complete notebookaholics. They cannot come out of a stationer’s shop without having bought a notebook. They’re engaged in a quest for the Holy Grail of notebooks, with perfect paper, margin size, smoothness, portability ... The problem with notebookaholics is that they accumulate virgin notebooks they cannot bring themselves to taint with actual writing, because writing runs the risk of being imperfect. So they save their notebooks, waiting for the perfect expression of the perfect project. You have to accept that perfection never comes.

Many writers write on whatever old scrap of paper comes to hand. This is because inspiration isn’t very considerate, tending to arrive at the most inopportune moments. So you end up with torn off pieces of paper, envelopes, bus tickets, with something scrawled on them – something which later is indecipherable or cryptic to you. Jotting

down notes randomly is good in that you've captured that moment's thought, but you should take the process further. You can transfer notes into notebooks or onto the computer. You can use a programme like Evernote, for example, which sits on your toolbar and which can be brought up in an instant. You can create a new category, a 'note' on it and record your thought or phrase: it's safe. You can sync Evernote with your mobile devices so that if you're out and about, once again, the moment's thought is captured.

You can also use writing software such as Scrivener, which gives you not only increased flexibility when creating and moving around sections of your story but has an onscreen area where you can save research notes, links and images.

Some writers like to use wall charts and pinboards where they attach photos, maps and timelines as a way of containing information. You could pin up photos of actors who resemble your imagined characters, or pictures of costumes, or maps of battlefields or shipping routes – whatever is relevant to the story you envisage.

## PLANNING

From notes, you move to more ordered plans. This is where you start to draw connections and approach your work in terms of its sequence and how it will all hang together. By this stage, you're no longer feeling about in the dark. You've explored potential notions and have found that some simply don't have the 'legs' to be taken further. A good story always flags up how good it is by the way it grows in your mind. As in the mind-map we

discussed earlier, your central idea will have sprouted feelers and may have shot off in lots of different directions. But now, as you prepare to engage with serious composition, it may need pruning and taming. You could draw your plot as a graph or set out its stages in a series of index cards which you can move around. Draw sketches and timelines, set out the line of your plot, with its crises and turning points. Give yourself a map. Try to get a sense of the ‘arc’, the potential trajectory of your story. To enrich characterisation, you can ‘hot-seat’ your invented characters, quizzing them about their backgrounds and beliefs, building up a solid sense of who they are. Many details about them may not make it into the finished story, but by exploring aspects of their biographies you give yourself and your reader a greater sense that they have an existence ‘off the page’. If you start believing in your characters to the point where you instinctively know what they would or would not do in a given situation, then your reader is likely to believe in them too.

## RESEARCH

You can also research background fact and detail for your story. You may need to know the kind of terrain on which a battle was fought, so you use Google satellite as well as historians’ accounts. You may need to know about women’s fashions in the 1940s so you need to read women’s magazines of the era or watch movies. You may need to know how it felt to wear a suit of armour in the fourteenth century, so find out whether there’s a medieval re-enactment society whose members can tell you. If you’re writing non-fiction, clearly you need to prioritise

accuracy and you need to be prepared to put hours into fact-checking. If you're writing fiction, the act of gathering information often has an inspirational effect, throwing up connections or surprising elements you couldn't have imagined on your own. You may need to spend time in libraries and archives, you may use the Internet (judiciously), you may want to travel to particular locations or interview useful witnesses or people with experience of the subject of your story.

#### READING

Some writers are wary of reading other writers' works for fear of being influenced, but it's important that you read widely and often. Developing the skill of critical reading can help you to understand what works and what does not work. You can then bring this skill to bear on your own work both while you create it and later, when you revise it. You should try to cultivate a dispassionate critical awareness of your own writing abilities and strive continually to improve.

#### PLAYING

At the pre-writing stage you can experiment with subjects and with writing styles. By telling yourself that you're not as yet actually committed to either subject or approach, that you're just taking your lines for a walk, you can feel unburdened, unpressured. Much of the emphasis of these pre-writing strategies has been on their spontaneous and liberated qualities, because once a writer feels forced to write in a certain way, they can become inhibited, and inhibition and self-criticism can lead to the dreaded writer's block. So tell yourself

continually that nothing you have written is set in stone and that if one approach does not play out well, you can experiment with another.

### TIMETABLING

Although I've just mentioned playful experimentation, it is also worthwhile making a deal with yourself to work regularly and committedly. Thus, experiment takes place within the structure of a disciplined and mature approach to writing. In the free-writing section earlier I discussed making an appointment with yourself: decide when you work best as a writer, whether it's early in the morning, late at night, at weekends. Challenge yourself to turn up, again and again, even when the spirit isn't really moving you, and write. Experiment with a timetable chart for the composition of your project, especially if it's a long one, working out set dates by which you will complete the first 5,000 or 10,000 words, or dividing the work into quarters with date targets and setting a completion date for the entire project.

### BUDDYING

Many writers find it useful to set up a buddying relationship with another writer. This can boost both morale and productivity because here you make a deal with somebody else that you will turn up and write, that you will produce certain amounts by certain dates. Each buddy supports and is answerable to the other. You agree to deliver segments of work at set times: you meet up and discuss what you're doing. You are prepared to be a comfort, a support and at times an outright nag – and you expect your buddy to be the same.



## *The downside of pre-writing*

Writers are very talented when it comes to the art of displacement activity, so be careful! Preparing to write can all too easily take the place of actual writing. You can toy with too many ideas and projects or tell yourself that you need to do just a little bit more research and then you'll be ready ... You may have talked about it so much that even you are bored with it. You find yourself working in fitful bursts but you achieve no steady momentum. The work stalls. Ultimately, you need to achieve a balance between preparatory work and getting on with the main project, because if you don't you risk losing faith in it and in yourself.

### HOW TO AVOID THE DOWNSIDE?

As I've said before, being answerable really helps here. Be answerable to yourself by setting targets. Create deadlines you must work towards, set goals in terms of word counts and datelines. Just make sure that your goals are realistic and that you are not likely to fall short of them if you make a reasonable effort.

Set up meetings with your writing buddy or mentor. Embarrass yourself into productivity by telling your friends and the entire Twitterverse that you'll enter a certain competition or finish your story by a certain date. Stephen King in *On writing* describes the Muse as a guy who lives in the basement: go down there and hit him on the head until he mends the boiler.

As a prompt, you can write an 'elevator pitch' summing up your story's purpose in a sentence or two. Then pin it up where you can see it, a constant reminder of what is core to your writing project.

Be prepared to go public: your ultimate aim is for people to read your writing, so after the pre-writing and the writing, there's the reception and the reaction to your work. You are moving from the silent room, the room of meditation and experimentation, into the auditorium, where your readers await you.

Don't skip about the surface of things. There comes a time when you need to say, 'This is the project I choose' and make a commitment to it, whether it's a short story or a full novel. Be answerable to the story you feel deserves to be told in the way only you can tell it. Trust your instinct and believe in that story's right to be told and in your voice's right to be heard. Nobody can write this story the way you can. Nobody.

So go write it.