

## Warming Up: Ten Exercises for Fiction Writers By Dr. Erika Dreifus

Would you expect to wake up one morning and successfully run a marathon without any preparation? Would you think it reasonable to sit before a piano and - with little or no practice - play a concerto? Probably not. Why, then, do so many people seem surprised to discover that the will to write isn't always enough to overcome the blank screen or page? Doesn't it make sense that, like athletes and musicians, writers might benefit from training, too? And that includes warming up - with exercises.

Writing exercises are similar to other warm-ups. They get the required "muscles" moving. They introduce you into the rhythm of the activity - gradually. And as in other fields, they can often prove energizing and sustaining themselves. Start writing a scene for an exercise and you may find hours have passed and an entire new section of your manuscript has evolved.

Such exercises and prompts can be especially helpful at the beginning of a project. Let's say you're just starting to sketch out the characters for a story or a novel. But today you find yourself staring at a screen or pad of paper that is stubbornly, resolutely blank. Responding to one of the following questions will not only get you actively writing, but it may also help you learn something new about your character(s).

1. What is this character's name? "Joe" won't do. We need to know if it's Mr. Joe or Dr. Joe or Reverend Joe. If Joe is the full first name. What's Joe's middle name. His last name. Any stories/history behind his name.
2. Where and when did the character begin elementary school? Describe that first day.
3. Make lists of the character's "favorites": books, movies, foods, etc. Be specific.
4. What does the character do on a typical Wednesday? A Sunday? Provide a sample datebook entry if you wish (or if the character would keep a datebook!).
5. Who is the love of this character's life?
6. Have someone else propose a toast in this character's honor.
7. What languages does the character speak, read, or write? Write a scene in which s/he overhears a conversation in an unfamiliar language.
8. Describe an illness the character (or someone close to the character) has suffered.
9. How would this character spend an ideal vacation? (Perhaps sketch out an itinerary.)
10. What one question is this character most afraid of being asked-and how would s/he answer it?

Even if the particular scenes or details that first emerge don't seem relevant or don't survive into the story or novel manuscript, you won't have misspent your time. Such information deepens your knowledge of your character(s), which can lead to richer writing later on. And you've been writing, rather than confronting that empty screen or page. Warm- ups work in multiple ways for writers, too.

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