

100 Writing Prompts

Story starters, first lines, dialogue, characters, settings, what-ifs and challenges. Each one works in any genre. Pick one, set a timer for ten minutes, and write without stopping.

Using them in a class or a journal: one prompt a day is a hundred days of writing. Number them off, draw one at random, or let each writer choose from a section.

Story starters

- 1 A woman inherits her estranged brother's storage unit and finds every letter she ever sent him, unopened, filed by date.
- 2 A night-shift baker finds the same order slipped under the door every morning at four: one loaf, paid for in coins that went out of circulation decades ago.
- 3 A court interpreter realizes the witness is lying, and the only way to expose him is to admit she has been mistranslating him on purpose.
- 4 A man returns to his hometown to scatter his mother's ashes and discovers the town has no record she ever lived there.
- 5 Three siblings must agree on what to do with a family business none of them wanted. One of them has already sold it.
- 6 A ferry pilot has made the same crossing every day for twenty years. Today a passenger boards with a ticket dated tomorrow.
- 7 A wedding photographer realizes the same guest appears in the background of every wedding she has shot this year.
- 8 Someone has been paying off a widow's debts in secret. She wants to find out who before she owes them anything.
- 9 An apprentice is left in charge of the workshop for one week. On the second day, the most important customer walks in.
- 10 A teenager forges her father's signature on one form, and the lie grows until it changes the whole family's life.
- 11 A house-sitter is given three rules. By the end of the first night she has broken all of them, and only one was an accident.
- 12 A man who has never left his island wins a trip he cannot afford to take and cannot afford to refuse.
- 13 Two rivals are locked in the same building overnight and have to finish the job they were both hired to do.
- 14 A courier is told the package must not be opened, must not get wet and must arrive by dawn. It starts to rain.
- 15 A woman spends her savings on a house she has only seen in a photograph. When she arrives, someone is already living in it.
- 16 A building inspector finds a sealed room in a house whose owners have lived there for thirty years and swear it was never there.

PROMPTS 17–37

First lines

- 17 “The day my sister came home, our mother set a place for her at the table and then, without a word, took it away again.”
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- 18 “Nobody in our family talked about the summer of the flood, which is how I knew it mattered.”
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- 19 “I had been lying to the woman at the bakery for three years, and this morning she finally caught me.”
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- 20 “The letter had my name on it, a stamp from a country that no longer exists, and a coffee ring I recognized.”
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- 21 “By the time the bus reached the coast, there were only two of us left on it, and the other one was asleep with my bag on his lap.”
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- 22 “It was the kind of town where the church bells rang every hour except three o’clock, and nobody would tell you why.”
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- 23 “My grandfather kept a list of everyone who had ever lied to him, and on the morning of his funeral I found my name at the bottom.”
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- 24 “The job came with a key, a uniform, and one instruction I was told never to write down.”
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- 25 “There are two ways to leave Carver’s Point, and my brother tried both.”
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- 26 “The first thing I ever stole was a library book, and I still have it.”
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- 27 “When the power came back on, every clock in the house showed a different time.”
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- 28 “Mrs. Okafor had lived next door for thirty years, and I had never seen her front door open until the morning it stood wide open with the radio playing inside.”
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- 29 “I knew the wedding was off when the caterer started packing up the cake.”
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- 30 “The map had been folded so many times that the town I was looking for had worn away along the crease.”
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Dialogue

- 31 “You kept the receipt?” Write the argument that follows between two people who were never supposed to need it.
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- 32 “I didn’t come back for you. I came back for the car.” Use this line in a scene between estranged siblings.
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- 33 Write a conversation between two people who both know a secret and are each pretending the other doesn’t.
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- 34 “That’s not how I remember it.” Open a scene with this line and let the two speakers tell the same story two different ways.
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- 35 Write a phone call in which one person cannot say what they mean because someone else is in the room.
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- 36 “If you’re going to lie to me, at least make it a good one.” Use this line as the turning point of a scene.
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- 37 Write a job interview in which the interviewer slowly realizes the candidate knows far too much about the company.
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PROMPTS 38-58

Dialogue, continued

- 38** "Please tell me you didn't bring it here." Write the scene that leads up to this line and the scene that follows it.
- 39** Write an argument between two characters in which neither of them mentions the real reason they are angry.
- 40** "I'll give you one minute to explain, starting now." Write the minute.
- 41** Write a conversation between a parent and a grown child in which every question is answered with another question.
- 42** "We are not doing this again." Write the scene in which they do it again.
- 43** Two strangers share a table in a crowded café. Write their conversation so that by the end the reader knows one of them is lying about who they are.
- 44** "Nobody else knows I'm here." Use this line in a scene where it is a comfort and a threat at the same time.

Characters

- 45** Your character has to tell the truth about one thing today, and every option will cost them someone.
- 46** Your character learns they were the second choice for the job, the marriage or the inheritance. Write the moment, and what they do next.
- 47** A character who is always early is late for the most important appointment of their life. Show why.
- 48** Your character agreed to keep a secret for a friend. Now keeping it is hurting someone else they love.
- 49** A proud character has to ask the person they wronged for help.
- 50** Your character is handed a large sum of money that is not theirs, and nobody would ever find out.
- 51** Your character has pretended to be an expert for years and is finally asked to prove it, in public.
- 52** A character returns something they borrowed twenty years ago. Show what it costs them to knock on the door.
- 53** Your character realizes the version of them their family describes is not who they are. Write the dinner where they say so.
- 54** A character who never cries is the only one who does at a funeral. Write it from the point of view of someone watching.
- 55** Your character is offered exactly what they want, on the condition that they give up the thing that made them want it.
- 56** A character must choose between keeping a promise to the dead and helping the living.
- 57** Your character is the only person who remembers something embarrassing a powerful person did long ago.
- 58** A character who has always been the responsible one decides, for one day, not to be.

PROMPTS 59-79

Settings

- 59 Set a scene in a laundromat at 3 a.m., where the only other customer is washing something they don't want anyone to see.
- 60 Set a story in a town whose highway was rerouted ten years ago, where everyone stayed anyway.
- 61 Write a scene in a hospital waiting room during a snowstorm, when no one can leave and no one is being called.
- 62 Set a scene on a night ferry where everyone on board is traveling for the same reason, and none of them will say so.
- 63 Write a scene in a closed amusement park the week after its final season.
- 64 Set a story in an apartment building where the walls are so thin that every neighbor knows one thing about every other.
- 65 Write a scene in a family restaurant on the day it closes for good, told from the kitchen.
- 66 Set a scene in a roadside motel whose owner has kept every guest book since the day it opened.
- 67 Write a scene in a public library during a power cut, lit only by phones and the exit signs.
- 68 Set a story at a wedding during a heat wave, where the air conditioning fails and so does everything else.
- 69 Write a scene in an airport after the last flight has been canceled and the shops have pulled down their shutters.
- 70 Set a scene in a greenhouse in winter, the only warm place for miles.
- 71 Write a scene at a desert rest stop where two cars have broken down at the same time.
- 72 Set a scene in a dentist's office that used to be the town jail. The old cells are now the waiting room.

What if...

- 73 What if everyone could hear the last lie you told, once a day, at noon?
- 74 What if your character woke up famous for something they had not done yet?
- 75 What if the town's oldest resident promised everything she owned to the first person who could tell her a secret she didn't already know?
- 76 What if a family voted once a year on whether to keep each of its traditions, and this year someone voted no?
- 77 What if your character received a heartfelt apology from someone they had never met?
- 78 What if a lost wallet held a photo of your character, taken last week, through their kitchen window?
- 79 What if the wrong person read your character's journal and believed every word of it?

PROMPTS 80-100

What if..., continued

- 80 What if two people who had written to each other for years finally met and were nothing like their letters?
- 81 What if your character could undo one decision, but only by confessing it to the person it hurt?
- 82 What if a small town found out that its beloved founder had been a fraud?
- 83 What if your character was the only person in the room who knew the speech had been stolen?
- 84 What if a stranger at a bus stop handed your character a key and said, "You'll know which door"?
- 85 What if your character's best friend had been living two separate lives, and your character was only in one of them?
- 86 What if a will left everything to a person no one in the family had ever heard of?

Writing challenges

- 87 Write a scene of exactly 100 words in which a character changes their mind.
- 88 Tell a story entirely through a list: a shopping list, a to-do list or a packing list.
- 89 Write a full paragraph without the letter "e", then use it as the opening of a scene.
- 90 Write a scene in which every line of dialogue is a question.
- 91 Write a story in the second person, where "you" is the antagonist.
- 92 Tell a whole story in five sentences, each exactly ten words long.
- 93 Write a scene using only dialogue: no tags, no actions, no description.
- 94 Write a story that takes place in the time it takes to boil an egg.
- 95 Write a scene in which your character never says what they want, but the reader knows by the end.
- 96 Write a story that moves backward in time, one paragraph at a time.
- 97 Write a scene that uses all five senses, and let smell do most of the work.
- 98 Tell a story through the notes left on a shared refrigerator.
- 99 Write a scene with no adjectives and no adverbs. Let the nouns and verbs carry it.
- 100 Write a story in which the most important event happens offstage, and the reader only sees what comes after.

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