

7-Day Writer's Bootcamp



Marylee MacDonald

Writer's Bootcamp

Learning to write, and then learning to write better, takes years. But if you've ever been stuck in a dead-end job where mindless routine made you crazy, I can assure you that writing will not be like that.

Writing is an adventure! It will take you places you never thought you'd go.

For more about the writing craft, including information about how to find agents and publishers, visit my website at www.maryleemacdonaldauthor.com.

You can also find me @MaryleeMacD on both [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

—Marylee MacDonald

Day 1

Daydreaming is the Number 1 tool in a writer's toolbox. Where do you daydream? After a nap? In a library? At your desk? Or, maybe you're a writer who can only let your mind roam when there's a certain amount of background noise. Maybe, like J.K. Rowling, you write best in a coffee shop.

Your job today is to make a list of places you can escape the impulse to plug in your favorite tunes, throw a load of clothes in the washing machine, or check Facebook.

I want you to list the pros and cons of each place. Don't make a decision in a vacuum. Try one out, and then try out another.

Over the course of Bootcamp Week, I want you to check out **five different places** you can write.

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Fill out the list below. I'll explain why I'm asking you to do this in a minute, but first, let's get busy with brainstorming.

Your Favorite Writing Places

1.

Pros and cons

2.

Pros and cons

3.

Pros and cons

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4.

Pros and cons

5.

Pros and cons

Keep this list handy. Eventually, you'll find a day when you just can't write in your normal writing place. Houseguests take over the extra bedroom, or you sit in your favorite spot and NOTHING COMES.

Give it a little time, but if you feel like you can't write there—for whatever reason—look at your list and go to one of your other choices.

Plant this seed in your mind: "If I can't connect with my deepest and most creative self, I'm not going to waste my precious writing time. I'm going to x, y, or z, and when I'm there, I'm going to start immediately."

That's it. That's all for today. Do not worry that you didn't do more. By the end of this week, you will have words on the page.

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Day 2

When I was speaking at a college recently, a student asked if he could listen to music while writing.

I sometimes listen to music, and I know many other writers who do; however, I would suggest that you listen to music that doesn't have words.

Listen to jazz or classical music. Listen to Kenny G. If the place you're going to write has background music, that "white noise" could work in your favor, but be aware of your own responses. Loud music, or music with a strong vocal element, can make it hard to find your own words.

Mining the Past for Images

Today, you're going to begin mining the past for images.

Writers must learn how to put images on the page. You must create pictures in your reader's mind. Ideally, you will create a flow of pictures. You will keep "feeding" your reader's "minds-eye," just as if you were a movie projectionist, feeding a movie reel into the projector.

The Bosnian writer, Alexandar Hemon, did this exceptionally well in his first book, *THE QUESTION OF BRUNO*. Hemon was trapped in the States when the siege of Sarajevo began. In his first book he wrote about his childhood in the former Yugoslavia.

I'd like you to read this passage. Look at the wealth of information: smells, sights, bodily sensations. Most writers begin by writing autobiographically. Like Hemon, many writers mine their childhoods for "material."

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THE QUESTION OF BRUNO

We waited for the ship on a long stone pier, which burnt the soles of my feet, as soon as I took off my sandals. The air was sweltering, saturated with sea-ozone, exhaustion, and the smell of coconut sunscreen, coming from the German tourists, already red and shellacked, lined up for a photo at the end of the pier. We saw the thin stocking of smoke on the horizon-thread, then the ship itself, getting bigger, slightly slanted sideways, like a child's drawing. I had on a round straw hat with all the seven dwarves painted on it. It threw a short, dappled shadow over my face. I had to raise my head to look at the grown-ups.

Aleksandar Hemon, THE QUESTION OF BRUNO,
p. 3-4 (Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2000)

When you're seated in your daydreaming place or swinging in your hammock, you're ready to begin. Are there places from your past that you can visualize in your mind's eye?

Here are a few ideas: your grandmother's house, a stable, the beach, your bedroom, or school.

Look for places or memories that give you an emotional stab. Maybe something happened there. Maybe the place you're imagining was the one place you felt safe.

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For now, just let the images come into your mind. Let the feelings come, too.

Use three or four words that pop into your mind when you think of that place. Don't worry about describing the places in detail.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Congratulations! You have connected with your inner writer! Your inner writer loves to watch home movies! Your inner writer loves to remember smells and tastes and people from the past.

You're on your way!

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Day 3

Now, I want to teach you a new skill—how to learn from another writer.

Imagine you are the grown-up Hemon, and you are staring back at your childhood, trying to figure out what it was that could have told you a war would begin in the not-too-distant future.

Imagine standing on the dock in your little hat. Imagine waiting for the boat. You are trying to capture what it felt like to be a child.

Writing longhand, copy the excerpt from Hemon. Let your pen move down the page. And, yes, I meant "copy." I want you to copy Hemon's **exact words**.

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It's Your Turn

Now, let's tackle Part B of today's assignment.

Pick one of the places on your list. You're going to write a long paragraph about that place from your childhood.

Write from an "I" point of view. Imagine the place with all your senses, and record details of smell, sight, touch, and sound.

Pick up objects and look in drawers. Observe more keenly than you ever have before.

Maybe something happened there that causes pleasant or painful memories. The details you choose allow the reader to infer how you feel.

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When you're writing, you're discovering stories that are waiting to be told. You are the only one in the world who knows the secrets of your special place. Maybe you don't have the secrets figured out, but by putting your words down on the page, you're beginning to discover them.

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Day 4

Writing isn't automatic. It's not mechanical. It comes from your feelings, so it's good to check in and see how you felt about yesterday's assignment.

When you were copying Hemon, did you feel like a "real" writer?

When it came time to do your own paragraph, were you able to sink into your imagination?

Could you visualize the details but not find the right words?

Don't worry. That's part of the creative process. You are beginning to imagine! You're setting off on a journey, but it's a journey without a map.

Although you may have some vague sense of a final destination, you may not know where you're going until you're almost there.

I can tell you from personal experience, that every new story begins with doubt. Everything's a muddle. You have some hazy notion of where the story's going, but the end is so far off that you can barely glimpse it. Never mind. You will find your way. Just keep going.

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Day 5

Days 2 and 3 asked you to mine images from your childhood. You entered the past and pulled out details that helped your reader imagine *what that place was like for you*.

The details you chose gave your paragraph its particular “voice.”

That's how stories begin. They begin with an image or a voice whispering in your ear.

Eventually, writers run out of “things that happened to them in real life.” As you develop confidence, you may find that you'd prefer to write about people who aren't you.

Inventing Stories

Make up a character to go with one of the voices below. The best way to make up that character is to simply start writing, and see where the voice takes you. (Go ahead and use “I.” This isn't a college theme. It's a story.)

Also, this isn't the *big* story you want to tell. It isn't *important*.

By telling yourself to have fun or that “it doesn't matter,” you can keep yourself from getting all tied up in knots.

Set a timer for fifteen minutes. Keep your pen moving, or if you'd rather type on a computer, keep typing.

Don't worry about spelling or grammar.

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Below are ten first lines. Pick one.

Now go!

- I used to want to be a nun.
- She never did like seagulls.
- The shoes didn't fit.
- My mother was big on plans.
- Funny, how I could never remember her name.
- The best movie I ever saw was happening inside my head.
- She was old enough to know better.
- Her hair was all tangled.
- They ought to give me a medal for what I done.
- Work sucks.

The examples above are called "writing prompts." Next week, try a couple more.

With writing prompts you can discover stories you didn't even know you wanted to tell.

For websites that allow you to generate your own writing prompts, see **Tip #4** in "35 Writing Tips." <http://bit.ly/MacDonaldWritingTips>

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Day 6

How did it feel to let another voice speak through you? Did you feel as if the “story voice” came from someplace deep inside? Pretty cool, right?

Before we move on, look at how many words you wrote. You set the timer and began writing. My guess is that you went over the fifteen minutes.

Most people put off writing for one simple reason: They tell themselves that their lives are too busy. They don't have big blocks of time.

Guess what? No one has big blocks of time. Most writers—including writing teachers—have full-time jobs. They write before they go to work. They write on their lunch hours. They write on the subway or commuter train.

The important thing is that *they write every day* (or six days a week). Or, possibly, they write on weekends.

On Day 1 you made a list of places you could write, and those are places that allow you to connect with the *dream state* you're in when you're imagining a story.

Today, you are going to put in place the one other essential tool a writer needs. You are going to figure out your *best writing time*.

Please watch this video. I'm sharing it with you because a year ago, I thought I was too busy to write. The video helped me find bits and pieces of time.

<http://bit.ly/MacDonald-MarkForsterAutofocusSystem>

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If you don't want to deal with Google calendar, then buy a Daytimer, and pencil-in half an hour of writing every day.

Just as if you were starting a daily fitness routine, you need to build up some writing muscle. You need to be accountable to yourself, and if you want to call yourself a writer, then don't beat yourself up for not writing more. Write a little.

The habit of writing is what is known in Creative Writing college programs as *developing a writing practice*.

This week's Boot Camp is helping you establish a writing practice.

Developing Your Powers of Observation

I bet you're disappointed that I don't have a writing exercise for you today. Well, never fear. Here it is.

Bring a notebook to a coffee shop, train station, bus stop, mall, or movie theater. Wait for something to catch your eye, then use your writer's journal to record as much information as you can capture in fifteen minutes.

Look for concrete details of sound, smell, or sight. (Look back at the Hemon excerpt for ideas.) This time, you're not a kid. Be a *camera eye*. Try to use as many senses as you can to make the place vivid.

Listen to how people talk. Describe people's actions from the outside. Don't go inside their heads, and don't psychoanalyze them. You're not their shrink.

Incidentally, this way of writing is called *Direct Observer*.

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Day 7

Beginning writers have a tendency to dip inside one character's head and then another's. That's why I asked you to use Direct Observer. Hemingway used it in a story called "Hills Like White Elephants." If it's good enough for Hemingway, then it's good enough for you. Here's a link if you'd like to read the full story. (<http://bit.ly/HemingwayHillsLikeWhiteElephants>)

Using Direct Observer can help you sharpen your powers of description, but writing that way may have made you feel too far from the action. It's like watching a football game from the stadium's top row.

It's time to get up close and personal with one of the people you observed.

Here's today's assignment.

Move the person or group you observed yesterday to their home or to a neutral place, such as a Motel 6. Add husbands, children, and wives. Turn your imagination loose.

When you reread what you've written, does the storytelling voice match the character being described? Do you have a feeling of foreboding or of curiosity about the character?

If so, you have a "story starter." Maybe it will turn into a story, or maybe you'll abandon it in favor of a different story. Don't throw these gems away though. You can never tell when you'll look back in your notebook and think, Hmmm, that's not so bad.

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Wrap-Up

This week you've mined your childhood for stories worth telling. You've learned how copying from another writer can help you write your own visually rich paragraph. You've learned to use writing prompts. And you've done preliminary work on carving out your writing time and space.

Keep up the momentum! I truly believe that each of us has stories worth telling. The world is waiting to hear yours.

Welcome, writer!

In my short publications, I share knowledge I've gained about writing fiction and creative nonfiction.

My blog is dedicated to helping you learn about writing, publishing, and connecting with readers.

Of course, I would also love it if you'd take a look at my fiction. Here's my book page.

www.maryleemacdonaldauthor.com/books/

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