GREAT WRITING PROMPTS FOR STUDENTS WHO DON’T LIKE POETRY

Handouts & Useful Info from Taylor Mali
An Exquisite Corpse Poem

**Directions:** On line 1, continue the sentence below with a few words or phrases of your own. Then fold the top of the paper *forward* to meet the dotted line so that **only line 1 is visible**. Pass it on and repeat, continuing to fold the paper so that only the most recent line is visible to the next writer. Feel free to replace “you, beautiful you” with something better.

When I think of **YOU, BEAUTIFUL YOU,** I cannot help but also think of

1. ________________________________, with all of its

2. ________________________________, which is to say

3. ________________________________. But now I am thinking of

4. ________________________________ because my heart is a

5. ________________________________, except

6. ________________________________. You should probably know

7. ________________________________.
The Continuum of Average to Awesome!

Allen Ginsberg said "first thought, best thought." But he was wrong. Or else he simply had better first thoughts than most of us. Or maybe we learn to reject our first thoughts? We think, I can't write that! Regardless, here are some "first thoughts" that are meh and some improvements that help them toward Oooh! As you write, refer to this sheet and ask yourself where a particular line, image, or detail falls on the continuum of Average to Awesome.

**UNNAMED**
I had a stuffed animal I took everywhere  
**NAMED**
Skirby was a dirty pink stuffed piglet

**GENERAL**
I was filled with emotion  
**SPECIFIC**
Think regret mixed with pride, wrapped in hunger

**PLURAL**
my rock collection  
**SINGULAR**
a piece of quartz Emma told me was a diamond
All my friends back home  
One of my friends, Daria, was an exchange student

**ABSTRACT (WISHY WASHY)**
a diary filled with hope & wonder  
**CONCRETE (AN IMPERFECT EXAMPLE)**
a page stained with tears and a coffee ring

**A (INDEFINITE)**
a bird  
**THE (DEFINITE)**
the same bird I see every morning

**COMMONPLACE**
a blue shirt  
**UNIQUE**
a shirt with a blue ink stain shaped like Vietnam

**EXAGGERATED**
it smelled like a million rotten eggs cut the cheese!  
**REALISTIC**
it was rank and putrid

**BRAGGING ("EVERYTHING IS AWESOME")**
all my MVP trophies  
**HUMBLE (SOMETIMES OKAY IS . . . OKAY)**
my dented most-improved trophy

**PERFECTION (COULDN'T BE BETTER!)**
the surface was unblemished  
**FLAWS (WOULDN'T WANT IT ANY OTHER WAY)**
it was cracked and had only one hinge

**PRIDE (YOU WISH YOU WERE ME!)**
it's tough being beautiful  
**GUILT (I WISH I WERE YOU)**
I kissed her, but I think she wished I hadn't

**SUPERLATIVE**
It was the best cake in the world!  
**IT WAS WHAT IT WAS AND IT WAS GOOD**
a generous wedge of red velvet cake

**SAFETY (PLAYING IT SAFE & BORING)**
She told me a secret  
**TAKING A RISK ("I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU SAID THAT!")**
She said she used to make out with one of her cousins

**PREDICTABLE & OBVIOUS (& STUPID?)**
the cat sat on the mat in the frat  
**UNEXPECTED**
I stuffed Fred, my dead cat; he's on my bed

**MENTIONING SINGING**
I sang along to "Always" in the car alone  
**ACTUALLY SINGING**
"When the world gets too heavy put it on my back."
The Continuum of Average to Awesome!

Allen Ginsberg said “first thought, best thought.” But he was wrong. Or else he simply had better first thoughts than most of us. Or maybe we learn to reject our first thoughts? We think, I can’t write that! Regardless, here are some “first thoughts” that are meh and some improvements that help them toward Ooooh! As you write, refer to this sheet and ask yourself where a particular line, image, or detail falls on the continuum of Average to Awesome.

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Abandoned Farmhouse

by Ted Kooser

He was a big man, says the size of his shoes
on a pile of broken dishes by the house;
a tall man too, says the length of the bed
in an upstairs room; and a good, God-fearing man,
says the Bible with a broken back
on the floor below the window, dusty with sun;
but not a man for farming, say the fields
cluttered with boulders and the leaky barn.

A woman lived with him, says the bedroom wall
papered with lilacs and the kitchen shelves
covered with oilcloth, and they had a child,
says the sandbox made from a tractor tire.
Money was scarce, say the jars of plum preserves
and canned tomatoes sealed in the cellar hole.
And the winters cold, say the rags in the window frames.
It was lonely here, says the narrow country road.

Something went wrong, says the empty house
in the weed-choked yard. Stones in the fields
say he was not a farmer; the still-sealed jars
in the cellar say she left in a nervous haste.
And the child? Its toys are strewn in the yard
like branches after a storm—a rubber cow,
a rusty tractor with a broken plow,
a doll in overalls. Something went wrong, they say.

Directions: Write a poem like this in which the abandoned objects of a certain place are
almost like clues left behind at the scene of some accident, crime, or mystery. Describe
the surroundings by providing “snapshots” of it in the same way a police photographer
might record the placement of objects at the scene. Pretend you are the only
“detective” who can hear what the objects have to “say.” What are they telling you
happened here? Maybe there’s something they’re not telling you?

Ideally, you should describe a scene from your own life that actually happened.
Something true and real, in which the only “invented” details are little things you’ve
added for drama and memorability. Most of the facts are 96% accurate, and the only
“embellishments” are little things that maybe you don’t actually remember. If,
however, you decide to describe a scene you’ve made up entirely, please DON’T make
it the scene of a murder or some other violent crime (“Someone was tortured here,
says the bloody severed human thumb.”)
Lesson Title: After This, But Before That

Introduction & Background Information:
Sometimes what makes a poem memorable is the writer’s ability to evoke a certain period of time, the exact moment in which something remarkable or beautiful happened.

Consider the poem “Early in the Morning,” by Li-Young Lee, on the other side of this piece of paper. You could summarize the poem like this:  

At a certain time, while one thing is happening  
but before other things happen,  
my mother combs her hair in a certain way,  
as she always has, while my father watches.  
He says he likes it for one reason,  
but I think he actually likes it for another.

That’s basically it, except for the inclusion of some singularly magnificent details (what are your favorite lines or phrases?). And that’s all a poem needs to be: a simple observation—my father says one thing, but I think there’s more to it than that—about a daily routine, beautifully described, and carefully placed in a moment in time. But maybe not in that order.

A) Write this part first, but start ½ way down the page: Describe one of the daily routines of someone in your family or one of your friends. How does he or she do it? What makes it curious, unique, or beautiful? Do other people witness this routine? What would they say about it? Do they get anything out of watching it? Do you? Remember to leave plenty of room ABOVE what you write.

B) Do this part second, but write it ABOVE what you’ve already written. Place the routine in time. When does it occur? After what? Before what? While what else is happening at the same time? This is what you write last, but it will be what the reader encounters first.

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1 Some folks say it’s a sin to even try to summarize a poem, that it destroys the poetry! Indeed, one definition of poetry is that it is “unparaphrasable.” Okay, fine. But if you don’t take apart the toaster, you’ll never know how it works.

Early in the Morning
BY LI-YOUNG LEE

While the long grain is softening
in the water, gurgling
over a low stove flame, before
the salted Winter Vegetable is sliced
for breakfast, before the birds,
my mother glides an ivory comb
through her hair, heavy
and black as calligrapher's ink.

She sits at the foot of the bed.
My father watches, listens for
the music of comb
against hair.

My mother combs,
pulls her hair back
tight, rolls it
around two fingers, pins it
in a bun to the back of her head.
For half a hundred years she has done this.
My father likes to see it like this.
He says it is kempt.

But I know
it is because of the way
my mother's hair falls
when he pulls the pins out.
Easily, like the curtains
when they untie them in the evening.

The Routine
My mother glides an ivory comb through
her hair, heavy and black as calligrapher's ink.
[She] pulls her hair back tight, rolls
it around two fingers, pins it in a bun to the
back of her head. She sits at the foot of the
bed. For half a hundred years she has done
this.

The Witness & Testimonial
My father watches, listens for the music of
comb against hair. [He] likes to see it like
this. He says it is kempt. But I know it is
because of the way my mother's hair
falls when he pulls the pins out. Easily, like
the curtains when they untie them in the
evening.

The Timeline
While the long grain is softening in the
water, gurgling over a low stove flame,
before the salted Winter Vegetable is sliced
for breakfast, before the birds.

Thing, Direction, and Discovery

Here’s an untitled poem by Jeffrey Yang that I saw on the New York City subway a while back.

Untitled

west of rest is sleep
east, dream
where waters meet
north, emptiness,
south, wakefulness,
and out, rising up
to the stars, peace.

Yang chooses rest to be the thing he writes “around” or about, the central concept out from all sides of which his poem extends. So to write this kind of poem, pick a good thing initially, a good central place to start. It should be a noun like rest.

If you want, keep the directions Yang uses—east, west, north, south, and up—or come up with your own directions, like through, left of, right of, underneath, etc. Regardless, let’s call these five words the directions, the places where your poem will travel once it leaves the thing.

As for the words sleep, dream, emptiness, wakefulness, and peace, let’s call those the discoveries. These are the individual gifts Yang “discovers” as he moves in the directions from the thing. Notice that the word peace, in addition to being the last word of the poem, is the Last Discovery. It should be special somehow, right?

Lastly, there are two places in the poem where Yang offers a little bit of extra Explanation. He might be clarifying what he means by one of the Discoveries—sort of giving an example—or he might be clarifying what he means by one of the directions. Or maybe it doesn’t matter, because his goal isn’t really clarity. I think it’s more like beauty. Or wonder. But notice that there are only two Explanations even though there are five Directions and five Gifts. And I think that’s just about right. Yang uses a lot of ellipses to keep from repeating himself. Copy that.
Lesson Title: Build a Better Metaphor

Introduction & Background Info: A metaphor is a rhetorical tool or figure of speech that compares one thing to another. Actually, it’s not so much a comparison as it is a **figurative declaration** that one thing actually **is** another thing, at least in an imaginatively poetic way, because they share many of the same qualities. “She had a flinty stone of a heart.” “His eyes were twin lasers.” “When I was young, my family was a three-ring circus.” These are all metaphorical statements. They’re not literally true; they’re figuratively true.

Writers often use metaphors and similes, which are a kind of metaphor, when they need to describe abstract nouns—ideas, concepts, or emotions that cannot be perceived with the five senses—or very common concrete nouns that get written about all the time and are therefore at risk of becoming clichés. What they do in these cases is use the metaphor to create a temporary association between the difficult concept and a more common object, something **simple and easy to talk about**. This allows them to write with more clarity and originality. For instance, after I’ve told you that FALLING IN LOVE is like OWNING A DOG (as I do in the title of one of my poems), I can spend the rest of the poem talking about dogs, but everyone knows that I am also talking about love.

In this exercise, each student will create one new metaphor from two nouns and an adjective offered up by other students. Most of the metaphors will be ridiculous! But one or two might be surprisingly vivid and useful, and all of them will be entertainingly original.

What you’ll need: Index cards (three for each student, ideally each of a different color); a chalkboard or white board; paper and pencils for each student.

Minimum time required for this exercise: 30 minutes.

Directions: Pass out one index card of each color to every student. After reviewing what an adjective is and coming up with a few examples on the board (for instance, "RED," "SLIMY," and "SONOROUS"), ask each student to think of one adjective and write it clearly on one color of index card (let’s say, the blue one). Go around the room and read over their shoulders to make sure the choices are correct and appropriate. You could certainly have the students work in small groups, but be sure each group comes up with as many adjectives on cards as it has members (i.e. three members to a group should ultimately produce three blue cards with a single adjective on each card). Collect them all the blue cards, shuffle them, and leave them in a stack on your desk at the front of the room.

Next, after reviewing what a concrete noun is and coming up with a few examples on the board (for instance, "BUCKET," "ICE PICK," and "STUMP"), ask each student to think of one concrete noun and write it clearly on one color of index card (let’s say, the pink one). Go around the
room and read over their shoulders to make sure the choices are correct and appropriate. Collect them all, shuffle them and leave them in a stack on your desk at the front of the room.

Next, after reviewing what an abstract noun is and coming up with a few examples on the board (for instance, "FRIENDSHIP," "JEALOUSY," and "BEAUTY"), ask each student to think of one abstract noun and write it clearly on one color of index card (let's say, the green one). Go around the room and read over their shoulders to make sure the choices are correct and appropriate. Collect them all, shuffle them and leave them in a stack on your desk at the front of the room.

Now comes the fun part. Have each student come to the front of the room and pick one card from each pile in order and read aloud the resulting new metaphor while you write them on the board. Using our examples, you might get "The red bucket of beauty," or "the slimy ice pick of jealousy." The metaphors can also be read backwards, as in "friendship is a sonorous stump."

After you've written all the metaphors on the board, talk about which ones seem to work in surprising ways and which ones just plain don't. Have the students write poems about one of the metaphors by either explaining how it does or does not work ("People say that beauty is a red slap in the face, but they are wrong because . . ."). Encourage them to come up with their own metaphor for the same abstract noun using new adjectives and concrete nouns.

The result: By building simple metaphors piece by piece, your students will begin to think of the poetic device in a new way. And with any luck they will push themselves further is creating new metaphors.
Lesson Title: Except . . .

Introduction & Background Information:

The word except comes from the Latin exceptare, which literally means to take out. That makes it a very useful word as a poet. Because everything in the world can be compared to everything else in the world so long as you can make use of the word except in certain places as needed. How is an armadillo like a pineapple? They are both types of fruit, obviously.\(^1\)

Consider the following sentence, and guess which part was written first:

Most nights I dream of a candy cane with red-and-white stripes inside an empty glass bottle of vodka. Except instead of a bottle, it's a fogged up bathroom mirror, and instead of a candy cane, it's a bathtub streaked with little rivers of blood like a barber's pole.

The image that occurred to the writer first is strategically placed at the end of the sentence so that the reader can be better prepared for it, which is to say, blindsided by it. Think of the way a boxer uses a jab to prepare for a hook. You'd better keep your eyes on my left hand! Want me to tell you why?\(^2\)

Directions: Write a poem in which you use the word “except” at least a couple times to revise, tweak, edit, rebut, clarify, or maybe even refute what you have already said. Make it a kind of confession. How are you less than perfect? What have you done in your life that might have put you on Santa’s Naughty List? But keep this in mind: What comes to your mind first probably shouldn’t be presented to the reader first. And what comes to your mind last may not deserve to be presented to the reader last.

Consider the poem I wrote on the next page called “The New Ash on the Roof of our Building.” In it, I keep trying to say something, but I never get it quite right until the end. And even then, it might not be right. I just stopped trying to clarify it. When you died, part of me died, too. And I’m haunted. In your poem, let us see your struggle to say something in the right words. Feel free to use the phrases but even that’s not right, or I should be able to better than that. On one level, every poem ever written is the struggle to arrive at the best way of saying something.

Lastly, I must admit that I stole the idea for this poem (and this assignment) from my friend Rives, who wrote a brilliant poem called “Gorgeous” that I still don’t completely understand.

\(^1\) except for the armadillo.

\(^2\) Don’t worry about that now. Just enjoy the stars. They’ll disappear soon after you wake up.

The New Ash on the Roof of our Building

Haunted is an apartment where a woman lived.
Someone like your wife, or soon-to-have-been-ex-wife.
Do people even say such things?

Haunted is an apartment where a woman died.
Except instead of the apartment,
it’s the sidewalk outside six floors below,

the place where later candles and flowers
bloomed into a shrine of glitter and photographs,
pretty colored stones, and a carved wooden box.

We think of the dead as faded floating versions
of who they were in life—same grief, same need,
ghostly, doleful, disconsolate transparency,

except wearing sheets like gods, wraiths, or Romans—
maybe even Roman gods—revenants.
Do people even say such things?

I commit this notion to the earth with all the dead
flowers, pictures of you, haunted stones, and guilt.
I bury the carved wooden box like ashes.

I planted a flower in an open field
not far from my own grave, haunted,
except instead of a flower, it was a tree.

And instead of an open field,
it was the rooftop of our building.
And instead of my grave, it was yours.
The Well of Grief: A First Draft

Below are all of the ideas of David Whyte’s poem “The Well of Grief” and virtually all of the words he uses in the poem. But the real version of his poem, the “final” draft, is one long, beautiful, grammatically correct sentence. The version of his poem below is just plain terrible! It sounds as if it were written by a government committee.

The Well of Grief

Beneath the surface on the well of grief, which is very still, there is black water. And if you slip beneath its surface and turn downward through that water, you get to the place where we cannot breathe. That is the source we drink from. And that water is cold. It is also clear. Furthermore, there are small round coins that can be found glimmering in the darkness that were thrown by people who wished for something else. But no one can have those coins or drink that water unless he or she is willing to slip beneath the surface.

Directions: Try to combine all the ideas above into one sentence. Feel free to move things around (Whyte certainly does, as you will see when you read his “final draft”), but do your best to make it grammatically correct! It will be long, sure, but that doesn’t mean it has to be a run-on sentence.
The Well of Grief

by David Whyte

Those who will not slip beneath
the still surface on the well of grief,

turning downward through its black water
to the place we cannot breathe,

will never know the source from which we drink,
the secret water, cold and clear,

nor find in the darkness glimmering
the small round coins
thrown by those who wished for something else.

from *Where Many Rivers Meet*
Retroactive First Draft

Below is what the first draft of Ted Kooser's poem might have looked like. Read it with an eye toward how it might be improved.

**In the Basement of the Goodwill Store**

In musty light, in the stinky stale air made of old stuff, random stuff, and other junk, beneath creepy footsteps from people walking above, an old man stands trying on glasses, lifting each pair from the box like it was something else and holding it up to the light of a dirty bulb. Near him, a heap of enameled pans as white as snow looms in the creepy darkness, and old toilets with discolored drains hold bunches of other random things.

You've seen him somewhere before. He's wearing that outfit you threw out, and that thing you never liked, and those old shoes of your father's that you found and wore once. And the glasses which finally fit him, through which he looks to see you looking back—two mirrors which flash and glance—are those through which one day you too will look down over the years, when you have grown old and thin and no longer particular, and the things you once thought you were rid of forever have come back home to roost.

**Not bad.** But it needs work. On the next page, come up with your own version of a second draft of this poem by replacing the blue text with words and phrases of your own. Since the ultimate goal is to be memorable, strive to be unique and specific.
Working toward an improved second draft. Replace the writing in blue with better words, phrases, or examples of your own. Be unique and specific.

In the Basement of the Goodwill Store

In musty light, in the stinky stale air
made of old stuff, random stuff, and other junk,
beneath creepy footsteps from people walking above,
an old man stands trying on glasses,
lifting each pair from the box like it was something else
and holding it up to the light of a dirty bulb.
Near him, a heap of enameled pans
as white as snow looms in the creepy darkness,
and old toilets with discolored drains
hold bunches of other random things.

You've seen him somewhere before.
He's wearing that outfit you threw out,
and that thing you never liked,
and those old shoes of your father's
that you found somewhere and wore once [Why only once?].

And the glasses which finally fit him,
through which he looks to see you looking back—
two mirrors which flash and glance—are those through which one day you too will look down over the years,
when you have grown old and thin and no longer particular,
and the things you once thought you were rid of forever have come back home to roost.

When this draft is complete, neaten it up and read it aloud. On the next page, you will see the actual text of Ted Kooser's poem, his "final draft," the way it was published in a book and everywhere else.
In the Basement of the Goodwill Store

In musty light, in the thin brown air
of damp carpet, doll heads and rust,
beneath long rows of sharp footfalls
like nails in a lid, an old man stands
trying on glasses, lifting each pair
from the box like a glittering fish
and holding it up to the light
of a dirty bulb. Near him, a heap
of enameled pans as white as skulls
looms in the catacomb shadows,
and old toilets with dry red throats
cough up bouquets of curtain rods.

You've seen him somewhere before.
He's wearing the green leisure suit
you threw out with the garbage,
and the Christmas tie you hated,
and the ventilated wingtip shoes
you found in your father's closet
and wore as a joke. And the glasses
which finally fit him, through which
he looks to see you looking back—
two mirrors which flash and glance—
are those through which one day
you too will look down over the years,
when you have grown old and thin
and no longer particular,
and the things you once thought
you were rid of forever
have taken you back in their arms.

Ted Kooser, from One World at a Time. Copyright © 1985 by Ted Kooser. All rights are

Listen to Kooser himself talk about this poem and recite it:
http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/171342
This is a green leisure suit.

This is a wingtip shoe.

And this is a toilet with a "red throat."
What is synesthesia?

A neurological condition in which responses to the five senses get a little mixed up, synesthesia (pronounced sin-ess-THEE-ja) is also the name of a literary technique. People who have the condition claim to see music as colors floating in the air. And vice versa: certain colors make sounds only they can hear. Or maybe they taste the colors they see! Imagine every time you touched a certain texture, surface, or fabric, you smelled something that no one else could.

As a literary technique, synesthesia describes a similar occurrence. It’s when a writer uses adjectives normally associated with one sense to describe something that doesn’t outwardly seem to possess those qualities. It’s like mixing up your adjectives on purpose, calling ocean waves “joyful” or a mother’s tears as being “threadbare.” In The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald describes the kind of music played at swanky parties as being “yellow cocktail music.” He’s using synesthesia.

Directions: Fill in the blanks in the numbered sentences below with the most unexpected adjectives from the list on the right (or, for extra credit, from your own imagination). The only wrong answers are the obvious answers! Don’t worry about making sense. Just don’t be predictable!

1. The sky was filled with __________, __________ clouds.  a) white
b) fluffy
c) sad
d) lonely
e) stinky
f) disgusting
g) honest
h) thoughtful
i) soft
j) warm
k) kindhearted
l) pleasant
m) straight
n) narrow
o) dark
p) stormy
q) warm
r) breezy
s) deadly
t) serious

2. He cried __________, __________ tears.

3. The baby’s diaper was __________ and __________.

4. I appreciate __________, __________ criticism.

5. The fresh bread was __________ and __________.

6. He has a __________, __________ face.

7. The path she walks is __________ and __________.

8. It was a __________ and __________ night.

9. The weather was __________ and __________.

10. The expression on her face was __________, and anyone could tell she was __________.

1Synesthesia can be induced through certain psychotropic drugs, but some very creative people, Kanye West for example, claim to suffer from a mild form of it naturally all the time.
List Poem: What are you?

Some people believe that a part of you gets rubbed off on everything you have ever touched. Some essence of you—more than residual fingerprints or skin cells containing your DNA—stays with the things you have handled. When my first wife died, I felt her presence more when I touched soft or fragile things she had owned like blankets, stuffed animals, or an old carved wooden box she kept her jewelry in. Her spirit was less noticeable in things made of glass or metal. For instance, I still have all of her kitchen knives because I can use them without bursting into tears.

But for this poem, imagine something slightly different is also true: Everything you have ever touched still exists inside you somewhere. This poem will be a list poem. It should begin with this line: “If it’s true that I am a little bit of everything I have ever touched and held in my hands, then I must be . . .” and what follows will be a simple list of objects you have touched during your life with descriptions of varying length to help the reader visualize each one. The descriptions are important; they make the reader know that you are talking about actual specific things.

For instance, here’s a bad example from someone who either didn’t read the directions or isn’t really trying:

If it’s true that I am a little bit of everything I have ever touched and held in my hands, then I must be a pencil, money, and my clothes.

Where are the short descriptions? Which pencil? What money? Which items of clothing? If you asked the kid who wrote the line above those questions, he would say, “I don’t know. I just meant those things in general.” And that’s part of the problem as well. No one cares about things in general. It’s the specific things that are memorable. The stories that make them singular and interesting.

Here’s another problematic example:

If it’s true that I am everything I have ever touched and held in my hands, then I must be the wisdom of the professional shoe shiner.

When I read that, I asked the writer if she had touched a professional shoe shiner? She laughed and said, “No. I was a professional shoe shiner!” Do you see how she missed the point of the assignment? It’s a common mistake. But look at how much better her revision is:

I must be the leather wingtips of businessmen and the cracked, old, dance shoes of cleaning ladies I shined as a professional shoe shiner.

So go ahead and write a list of things you are. What are you?