

Writing exercises and reflections to do in your own time

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Writing Happiness

Happiness. We think about it, care about it, seek it out. It's marketed and sold to us in a million different ways. The pursuit of it surrounds us, in adverts, self-help books, resolutions. It motivates us and fuels how we behave, how we organise our lives, how we interact with others, the goals we set for ourselves. It has a thousand faces, from a second of ecstasy to life-long contentment. So, why are we so often told not to write about it?

We've both experienced writing tutors telling us that writing about happiness is 'boring' or 'bland' or, in an expression that we loathe, that 'happiness writes white'. For a while, we took this advice on board without questioning it.

Writing has helped both of us explore difficult and personal issues such as mental illness, grief, trauma and loneliness. We've found catharsis, comfort and space to process in writing about these themes. But we've both also felt that this wasn't the whole story, that we have much more to say than the sum of our worst experiences.

The first conversation we had about writing happiness was a revelation. We were sitting in a tiny garden shed, having a chat on a writing retreat that we were lucky enough to get subsidised places on. It was early 2020 and Covid-19 had started to make headlines before we left, creating a sense of unease but not yet dominating our thoughts. Spring was just beginning to make its presence felt. Birds were chirruping outside the round window of the shed and snowdrops were giving way to daffodils.

We started talking about what we felt we were expected to write about, and how the poetry world can emphasise and demand the re-telling of trauma. We talked about how writing workshops often expect you to churn up your worst moments in the name of creativity without much forewarning or aftercare. We talked about how we both love to read books that contain joy, from fantasy to rom-coms, how we love to revel in a happy ending. Rachel shared that in writing her first pamphlet, exploring her experiences of mental illness, it had felt just as important, if not more important, to include the love and laughter present between people living with mental illness, as well as the suffering and pain. Otherwise why will anyone care if we die, if our lives are portrayed as pure misery? Elspeth talked about how when writing about post-traumatic stress and climate crisis (two topics she frequently writes about in her nature writing) she always wants to include hope and joy in the interstices, foregrounding the possibility of change and glimpses into possible futures.

We talked and talked and realised that as readers we certainly didn't find reading about happiness tiresome or dull. We also realised that this was an area we wanted

to explore creatively, and to hold space in for other writers. This felt particularly important for us as writers living with disabilities and chronic illnesses, as so often D/ deaf, disabled, neurodivergent and chronically ill writers are expected to write from a place of trauma, hurt or sorrow. Or, if we write about happiness, the stories permitted to us are 'inspirational' or wholly positive. These expectations and imposed limitations hold true for many underrepresented writers, including queer writers, Black writers, writers of colour, trans writers and working-class writers. There are mainstream narratives that underrepresented writers are frequently expected to occupy, and they don't often allow for joy, happiness and tranquillity in all their diversity, nuance and complexity.

We have found that writing, thinking and talking about happiness can help your writing practice. It can help us remember in more detail a joyous memory on a difficult day. It can inspire a free write which acts as a pick-me-up. It can allow us to reflect on the everyday things that make us happy. It's shown us the ways in which writing can not only be an outlet for catharsis or processing but also form an active part of sustaining good mental health.

Writing about happiness can also be instrumental in developing craft. It allows us to challenge ourselves and gives us new ways into new stories. It can help us reframe everyday happy-making things in ways that highlight their wonder. In terms of characterisation, it can also be hugely helpful - your characters are bound to have things that they enjoy doing or brighten their day. Similarly, having moments of happiness or wins for your characters can help vary pacing and plot, and make your work more engaging for readers. Writing about happiness also heightens other emotions too; something sad happening for one of your characters is likely to hit harder for the reader if we've also got to experience their joy too. We've all had the experience of reading a book where tragedy after tragedy occurs and we just switch off because the steady stream of misery feels overwhelming or meaningless!

Our interest in writing happiness has led us to running workshops and related projects designed to inspire and encourage writing happiness, ever since that conversation in the shed in early 2020. We've put together the following exercises to help you try out writing happiness at home, in your own time.

We've designed these exercises so that they lead you on a journey. It's possible to do them sequentially but you don't have to do them that way! If a particular exercise really speaks to you, you could dive in there or spend longer on that exercise. If you do want to do them in order, you can take all the time you need. You could do one a day, a week or a month. They will be here whenever you need them and you can return to them whenever you'd like.

These exercises are not specific to any form or genre. We hope they'll be useful to you if you write poetry, prose or anything in between. To do them, you will just need something to write with and some kind of timer.



Exercise 1 – Warm-up

There are many different kinds of happiness. This first exercise will get you warmed up and also help you explore different types of happiness.

This first exercise is a free write. To 'free write' is to keep writing for a limited, usually short, amount of time without stopping writing, editing your work, or reading back over it. There are no right or wrong answers and the same prompt may lead different people in completely different directions! Be open to what comes up. Just try to keep writing and resist any urge to edit until the free write is done. You can write nonsense, you can repeat yourself, you can veer wildly off topic, you can get distracted by loud and unrelated thoughts, you can write 'I don't know what to write' over and over again. Just carry on. You will probably find it helpful to set a timer for 3 mins each time, so you know when to move on to the next prompt.

Free write to the following prompts for three minutes each and see what comes up:

- Joy (3mins)
- Pleasure (3mins)
- Tranquillity (3mins)

Exercise 2 – Why Writing Happiness?

Well done! If you've just done Exercise 1, you've got some words on the page. You've done some writing. Congratulations.

This second exercise builds on the practice of free writing that we've started and will give you some time and space to explore why you are interested in or drawn to exploring writing happiness.

For this exercise, free write in response to the following questions, for 4 mins each. Again, you'll probably find it helpful to set a timer so you know when to move on. Check back to Exercise 1 if you want a reminder of what free writing involves.

Questions:

- What makes you happy in your daily life? Or, if you're not experiencing much happiness at the moment, what used to make you happy in your daily life? Think back.
- Why do you enjoy writing? Or, if you're not finding much joy in your craft at the moment, why do you write?
- Why are you interested in writing about happiness?
- What do you want to communicate when you write about happiness?



Exercise 3 – Everyday Happiness

This next exercise encourages you to look for happiness in the everyday. When we think about happiness as writers, it is useful to consider the full spectrum of happiness, and not to assume that only the best days or most dramatic highs will make for interesting reading.

Building on your first free write from Exercise 2, make a list of everyday rituals or activities you do to take care of yourself. These could be, for example, making a meal, talking to a friend or family member, washing your hair, choosing your clothes, just some small part of your day that brings you pleasure.

Pick one of these activities from the list.

Then:

For 3 mins, free write about the details of that activity – what do you do? where are you when you do it? what time of day is it? who else is there, if anyone?

Then, for 3 mins, free write about how that activity makes you feel, both in your body and emotionally.

Then, for 3 mins, free write about what that activity means to you. Does it connect to anything else that is important to you, or meaningful to you?

Optional extra:

spend some time bringing this piece together and add in a magical, deliberately fantastical, element to your description of the activity. There's no need to be rigidly truthful. What does the activity symbolise for you? What elements of magic are there in this ritual, for you?

To get you thinking, you might find it interesting to have a look at the excerpt below from 'Joy', an essay by Zadie Smith.

Zadie Smith, 'Joy'

It might be useful to distinguish between pleasure and joy. But maybe everybody does this very easily, all the time, and only I am confused. A lot of people seem to feel that joy is only the most intense version of pleasure, arrived at by the same road—you simply have to go a little further down the track. That has not been my experience. And if you asked me if I wanted more joyful experiences in my life, I wouldn't be at all sure I did, exactly because it proves such a difficult emotion to manage. It's not at all obvious to me how we should make an accommodation between joy and the rest of our everyday lives.

Perhaps the first thing to say is that I experience at least a little pleasure every day. I wonder if this is more than the usual amount? It was the same even in childhood when most people are miserable. I don't think this is because so many wonderful things happen to me but rather that the small things go a long way. I seem to get more than the ordinary satisfaction out of food, for example—any old food. An egg sandwich from one of these grimy food vans on Washington Square has the genuine power to turn my day around. Whatever is put in front of me, foodwise, will usually get a five-star review.

You'd think that people would like to cook for, or eat with, me—in fact I'm told it's boring. Where there is no discernment there can be no awareness of expertise or gratitude for special effort. "Don't say that was delicious," my husband warns, "you say everything's delicious." "But it was delicious." It drives him crazy. All day long I can look forward to a popsicle. The persistent anxiety that fills the rest of my life is calmed for as long as I have the flavor of something good in my mouth. And though it's true that when the flavor is finished the anxiety returns, we do not have so many reliable sources of pleasure in this life as to turn our nose up at one that is so readily available, especially here in America. A pineapple popsicle. Even the great anxiety of writing can be stilled for the eight minutes it takes to eat a pineapple popsicle.

My other source of daily pleasure is—but I wish I had a better way of putting it—"other people's faces." A red-headed girl, with a marvelous large nose she probably hates, and green eyes and that sun-shy complexion composed more of freckles than skin. Or a heavyset grown man, smoking a cigarette in the rain, with a soggy mustache, above which, a surprise—the keen eyes, snub nose, and cherub mouth of his own eight-year-old self. Upon leaving the library at the end of the day I will walk a little more quickly to the apartment to tell my husband about an angular, cat-eyed teenager, in skinny jeans and stacked-heel boots, a perfectly ordinary gray sweatshirt, last night's makeup, and a silky Pocahontas wig slightly askew over his own Afro. He was sashaying down the street, plaits flying, using the whole of Broadway as his personal catwalk. "Miss Thang, but off duty." I add this for clarity, but my husband nods a little impatiently; there was no need for the addition. My husband is also a professional gawker....

Exercise 4 – Observing Happiness

It can be challenging to even consider writing about happiness when we are feeling very far from happiness ourselves. Another way to ease into writing happiness is to observe the happiness around you.

To start this exercise, make a list of people, animals, plants or inanimate objects that you've observed around you lately that have seemed happy to you. This could be a person across the street greeting someone they know, your pet when they get their favourite treat, or a smug washing machine seeming to enjoy refusing to open after a cycle.

Then:

Pick one example from your list. Spend 4 mins describing what you observed, as closely as you can. What were they doing? Where were they? What did they look like, sound like, feel like? What happened next?

Take 4 mins to add in, build on, or continue your piece, focusing on how observing their happiness made you feel, both in your body and emotionally. Did their happiness affect your feelings? If so, how?

You might find this poem, 'Instructions on Not Giving Up' by Ada Limón, a helpful reference point.

'Instructions on Not Giving Up' by Ada Limón

More than the fuschia funnels breaking out of the crabapple tree, more than the neighbor's almost obscene display of cherry limbs shoving their cotton candy-coloured blossoms to the slate sky of Spring rains, it's the greening of the trees that really gets to me. When all the shock of white and taffy, the world's baubles and trinkets, leave the pavement strewn with the confetti of aftermath, the leaves come. Patient, plodding, a green skin growing over whatever winter did to us, a return to the strange idea of continuous living despite the mess of us, the hurt, the empty. Fine then, I'll take it, the tree seems to say, a new slick leaf unfurling like a fist to an open palm, I'll take it all.

Exercise 5 – A Better Tomorrow

Writing happiness doesn't have to be based on reality. It can also be a vehicle to imagining something better than what we have in front of us.

For this exercise, start by taking 5 mins to write about what your day would be like tomorrow, imagining that everything goes your way. (If you're likely to have a particularly challenging day tomorrow for any reason, maybe pick a different day – perhaps the next one that will be typical for you, or the next one that you're looking forward to).

Then add in a magical element to the piece. This can be anything you like, big or small, just go with the first thing that comes to mind. Spend 5 mins adding this element in, in whatever way makes sense to you.

Finally, take 5 mins to add in a second character to the piece, and then make their day better.

You might find this poem, 'A Wish' by Nikita Gill, interesting to read before you start.



'A Wish' by Nikita Gill

A man at a poetry event shows me a photo of his daughter. She can't be more than six. She has a crooked smile that shows a missing front tooth, and in her hands, there is a triumphant painting of a red, red house with two tall, blue people and two purple little people. It is made with the exuberant joy I only see in children these days. He says

He says
"It's what I want her to be when she grows up."

I ask him what he means. He looks up at me and smiles, "Happy, of course. What else?"

Exercise 6 - Review

We often attend writing workshops ourselves so we know it sometimes happens that you write a lot in a workshop, but then don't come back to that material afterwards.

We'd like to encourage you now to give yourself at least 10 minutes, or longer if you want, to read back over what you've written in response to the exercises above.

Here are some suggestions for things you could do while you're reading back:

- Underline any phrases or sections you particularly like
- Make a note to yourself of anything you'd be interested in carrying on developing
- Observe any running themes, images or patterns that have come through what you've drafted
- Put stars by ideas you might want to explore in more depth

Now that you've read back, we hope these exercises have sparked something for you that you're interested in working on and developing further into a finished piece. We want to see more writing out there exploring writing happiness. If you develop something you started here into a finished piece, let us know!



Even More Writing Happiness!

If you enjoyed these exercises and want to delve deeper, we run workshops on writing happiness regularly. Follow us @disabledjoy on Twitter and Instagram to stay up to date on how to get involved (we run a mix of workshops specifically for deaf, disabled and neurodivergent writers, and accessible workshops open to everyone). You can also check out the free exercises we've shared over on Ko-fi.

If you want to make sure you're notified of our upcoming workshops and projects, sign up to our newsletters (Rachel's and Elspeth's) and follow us @rachel_lewis_poet and @elspethwrites.

We hope to see you around soon!

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