

DEPTFORD LITERATURE FESTIVAL AT HOME

For the 2024 Deptford Literature Festival, five of our writers and artists, Helen Bowell, Caroline Druitt, Troy Fairclough, Alice Frecknall and J.T. Williams have created writing activities for you to do at home, based on their events at the festival.

Deptford Literature Festival celebrates Deptford and Lewisham's creativity and diversity through words, stories and performance and takes place on Saturday 16 March 2024.

Deptford Literature Festival is run by Spread the Word in partnership with independent producer Tom MacAndrew, and is funded by Arts Council England.

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#DeptfordLitFest



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WRITING THE IN-BETWEEN

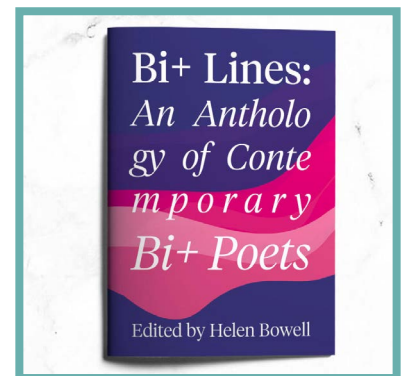
Helen Bowell

Hello! I'm Helen. I hope you're doing well today. I'm writing from my desk in wintry southeast London, and for a change it's actually sunny outside.

I've been asked to set a few writing activities based on the poetry workshop on in-betweenness which I'll be running at Deptford Literature Festival 2024. I wanted to give you a bit of background first, but you're very welcome to skip ahead to the writing exercises on in-betweenness.

ABOUT BI+ LINES

These activities and my Deptford Literature Festival workshop were inspired by [Bi+ Lines](#), a project I've been running this past year with Arts Council England funding. Bi+ Lines aims to raise the profile of and strengthen the community of bi+ poets – that's writers who identify under the bi+ umbrella, which includes bisexual, pansexual, queer, demisexual, questioning and many more polysexual identities. (I find [this definition](#) of bisexuality by Robyn Ochs helpful). I started the project because I wanted to meet and read the work of these poets, who I hadn't seen represented in the way that gay, lesbian and trans poets have been.



The theme for the project was in-betweenness, because bi+ people are often made to feel like they don't belong anywhere: whether in queer or straight spaces, they are less likely to be out of the closet, more likely to experience poor mental health, and less likely to join queer communities. I wanted to ask bi+ people to reclaim that in-betweenness, and see what they could do with it creatively. And, honestly, I didn't *just* want a book of poems about liking boys and girls – I wanted to read about the full spectrum of bi+ experiences, including the many ways that in-betweenness shows up in our lives.

I organised online and in-person writing workshops for bi+ people last year and, working with LGBTQ+ publisher *fourteen poems*, I edited an anthology of bi+ poets from around 2,800 submissions. We're going to use some of the poems in that book, which is also titled *Bi+ Lines*, as inspiration for our writing today.

You don't need to be bi+ or queer to take part in these writing exercises – we're going to explore the idea of in-betweenness in all aspects of our lives and identities, so there's sure to be something for you to latch on to.

Thanks very much for taking part and I hope you find these prompts inspiring! If you want to find out more about the project, you can head to helenbowell.co.uk/bi-lines or look up @bi_poets on social media. Happy writing, and I hope it's sunny where you are, too.

GETTING SETTLED

When I ask people about where they see in-betweenness in their lives, lots of things come up. Often, they talk about feeling like an outsider, or at least unsure what to call themselves when asked about their race, social class, nationality, disability, gender, career, relationships, family, appearance, size, languages, and so on.

As a starting point, take **5 minutes** and think of some terms or labels you would use for yourself. This could be anything from 'parent', 'mixed race' or 'straight' to 'someone who needs to go for a daily walk or they'll lose their mind'. Even if you're not sure of them – especially then – write them down.

WRITING PROMPT 1: WARMING UP – FREE WRITE OR OPPOSITES

You can get into the writing mode however you like. I'm sure other people in this booklet will suggest a free write, which is one of my favourite ways into writing – just set a timer for **5 minutes** and write about what comes up for you when you think about 'in-betweenness'. It doesn't have to be a poem, or even make sense – it's just to get you in the zone.

If you're looking for something a little different, think of a pair of opposites (e.g. big/small or open/shut). For **3 minutes**, use your first word as much as you can, in as many ways as you can, even playing with the sounds if you like. (The big bad wolf runs. / Don't big her up. / The earth begins to shake...)

Then, do the same with its opposite for another **3 minutes**. As with the free write, it doesn't have to be a poem or make sense. Be playful – there are no wrong answers here. You might surprise yourself with how many ways you can use these words, and how strange they start to sound!

WRITING PROMPT 2: ERASURE

A version of the erasure poem below by Astra Papachristodoulou appears in the *Bi+ Lines* book.



To make it, she cut up strips of colours that appear in the bisexual pride flag, and used them to cover up hateful words she has endured over the years. The result is a distilled version of that hate – it's still painful, but because she's taken control over it, put her own perspective on those words and crafted them into a poem, they carry a different resonance. Erasure poetry is magic like that.

Last year, Astra ran an erasure poetry workshop as part of the Bi+ Lines project. The name of this poetic form is telling – 'erasure' is something that bi+ people especially have to reckon with, with many people telling us to pick a side, or that bisexuality doesn't exist. But many people can feel erased or invisible – people with invisible disabilities or marginalised racial backgrounds, cleaners, mums, older people, those living in the countryside, just for starters.

This form is also called 'blackout' or 'found' poetry. All it means is that you take an existing text – any text – and cover up most of the words in it, changing the overall meaning and making a poem with the words left behind.

You can do this using a marker pen and an old book, magazine or newspaper. Or you can do it with any text online, copying and pasting it into a word processor and using the black highlight function, or turning the text white, to get rid of most of the words.

It's often fun to choose a source text that you disagree with. That way, you can manipulate the author's words to make them say the opposite of what they meant. But it can also be surprisingly rewarding to pick a totally random source text and unearth gold from it – in Astra's workshop, I somehow turned an article about home composting into a meditation on parenting.

I like the advice I once heard the poet Caleb Parkin give. He suggests leaving no more than three words from the source text in a row. That way, you won't be tempted to just reiterate the source's meaning – you'll have to make it your own.

And finally, before you scribble all over it, remember to take a note of the author and title of the source text, as you'll need to cite this if you ever want to publish this work.

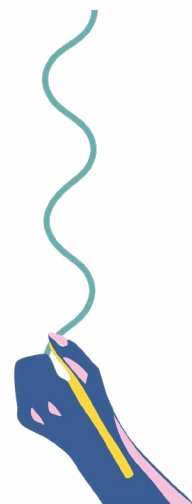
Suggested starting points: your (least) favourite newspaper, an old book you have lying around, a print-out from work, a flyer put through your letterbox, an email thread... For an even more creative way to make found poems, [get inspired by Tom Phillips' 'A Humument'](#).

Allow about **20 minutes** to craft your erasure poem, although you can easily spend all afternoon absorbed in this!

WRITING PROMPT 3:

I DON'T KNOW WHY I'M CRYING

Let's have a look at another poem in the book.



Chloe, On Chesil Beach

by Bebe Ashley

For Mícheál

I come away from Whiterock Road with two small loaves
of San Francisco sourdough and half a dozen white roses.

I thumb over the sticky strip of the post-it note
folded in my fleece pocket. thank you, it says.

I ignore the cars reversing in and out of the driveway,
their toddlers with wild fists squirming against car seats.

I walk the short distance red-faced in clothes that could
do with an iron, hair that could be better brushed.

I make it past the postbox with the last of the light.
It will rain again now and I should lock the back gate.

It is Mother's Day and I am growing more comfortable
with the notion of never becoming a mother.

Home, with the cats, I arrange the flowers in the jug
on the kitchen table. I don't know why I'm crying.

from *Bi+ Lines* (fourteen poems, 2023)

Two questions for you, now:

- *What would you say is the feeling behind this poem?*
- *Can you identify a couplet where you felt something changed?*

This poem is 14 lines long, which means we can think about it in relation to the [sonnet](#) form. The change you just identified can be termed a 'volta' or a 'turn' in the poem, key to any classic sonnet. The volta usually takes place in the final two lines, or around line 9 (though here I think it's unusually in line 11 – maybe to reflect how off-kilter the speaker is feeling throughout the day).

Your first challenge is to write a poem about a day in a life you could have had if one of those identity labels of yours was in a different category. So, what would a day look like if you were in a different social class, or race, or gender, etc? Like Beyoncé's 'If I Were A Boy' but with less dramatic vocal range (though you do you). You might feel loss or yearning, but equally you might feel relief, joy or gratitude. It could be a sonnet with a volta, but it doesn't have to be.

Your second challenge is to write a parallel poem about a day in your life now, but haunted somehow by the idea of that alternate life. That is closer to what Bebe Ashley's poem is going for, I think. An additional restraint: however many lines your first poem is, keep the same number in your second poem.

Allow just **20 minutes** for this exercise to keep it focussed, ten minutes per poem.

WRITING PROMPT 4: AN EXISTENCE THAT PERSISTS WHEN UNOBSERVED

Stay with me here, folks. We're about to queer quantum physics.

Now, don't recoil like that. You've just very willingly done an exercise where you imagined an alternate reality. That's not so distant from the philosophical questions raised by the quantum realm.

I've long been obsessed with quantum physics – the science of subatomic particles. On that tiny, tiny, tiny scale, absolutely bonkers things are happening to make the world around us possible. Here's just one paragraph, taken from the [New Scientist definition](#) of quantum physics:

"At a basic level, quantum physics predicts very strange things about how matter works that are completely at odds with how things seem to work in the real world. Quantum particles can behave like particles, located in a single place; or they can act like waves, distributed all over space or in several places at once. How they appear seems to depend on how we choose to measure them, and before we measure they seem to have no definite properties at all – leading us to a fundamental conundrum about the nature of basic reality."

In other words, quantum particles change when observed. If they're not being 'looked at', they are many things at once. They are all possibility. They could even be in two places at once. Then, when they are observed, they 'pick' one possibility to show us.

For me, that's immediately sparking ideas about how we as humans change how we behave, dress and talk depending on who we're being observed by. It makes me think, we, too, are many things at once, and we have to condense all that into just one label when we go out into the world.

What Schrödinger's Cat and My Bisexuality Have in Common by Freya Bantiff

A dry amusement at attempts to verify
their reality. An existence that persists
when unobserved. A sensual strut
that borders on slink. A tendency to walk
both feet first. Wakefulness at dusk.
Retractable claws. Recoil response
from strangers' hands. Ability to curl
into a question mark and not be seen.
Uncertainty as to whether trying to come
out would be a death or liberation.
Worlds that are full of reactivity.
Inane questions. Jokes where the punchline
is pussy. A suspicion carried
by the scruff of the neck that many
lives will be lived, but never all
recognised. Inner purr of conviction.
Fear of having no room to stretch
out. An innate loathing of boxes.

from *Bi+ Lines* (fourteen poems, 2023)

I love this poem, not only because I'm a big nerd, but also because it's really well constructed. It's a list poem, stacking different responses to the title on top of one another without any explanation. Each sentence is short, clean, almost brusque with those full stops – and that helps the reader to keep grasping the complicated ideas. The poem contains a certain amount of danger, only brought in halfway through the poem ('Uncertainty as to whether trying to come / out would be a death or liberation' – great line-break, by the way). It's sexy, smart and funny. I was chuffed to receive it as a submission.

Fittingly, I'm going to give you two options for this writing exercise. (See if you can do both at once, unobserved).

1 If this wild quantum talk is speaking to you, I encourage you to do some more reading around it and write a poem inspired by Freya Bantiff's, using a different concept or thought experiment. There are loads of wonderful terms in quantum physics, from 'superposition' and 'double slit experiment' to 'Heisenberg's uncertainty principle' and 'spooky action at a distance'. What part of quantum physics speaks to your particular understanding of your sexuality, or another part of your identity? Refer back to what you jotted down at the start of this session for ideas, and check the resources for further reading below.

2 If you're feeling very turned off by the quantum stuff, try this instead:

a Make a list of objects that are in-between categories. Depending on who you ask, tomatoes are both fruits and vegetables. Frogs can live on land and in the water. Sporks are spoons and forks! List as many as you can. You can find a few by skimming [this Wikipedia entry \(bit.ly/3wcAjoK\)](https://bit.ly/3wcAjoK)

b Now pick one (or one of the ones I've just given you). Pick one of your identities from our very first exercise – or something relating to that identity. Write a poem titled 'what [object] and my [identity] have in common', after Freya Bantiff. This could be 'what frogs and my race have in common' or 'what tomatoes and my time as a goatherd have in common'. It can be a list poem, or not. Be weird!

Resources for further reading:

- I encourage you to watch [this 3-minute video](#) of Amrou Al-Kadhi discussing 'what quantum physics taught me about queer identity' – they put it much better than me!
- I find [Veritaserum's YouTube videos](#) really clear
- There are some good, quick definitions of terms [on Caltech's website](#)
- This Guardian article '[What is Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle](#)' is another good introduction
- If you want to get really deep into physics, people say that Carlo Rovelli is a contemporary poet of physics – you can find some of his articles online [here](#), but I recommend reading his book [The Order of Time](#)
- More poems to inspire you using quantum physics:
 - '[Quantum Verse, or: Un/Read City](#)' by Alice Wickenden deals very specifically with these same themes
 - 'introduction to quantum theory' by Franny Choi ([watch it here](#), [read it here](#)) is stunning and heartbreaking
 - Page Lewis's *Space Struck* is full of physics-y poems – find some of their individual poems online [here](#)
 - Cynthia Miller's *Honorifics* is very inspired by Carlo Rovelli and parallel universes

WRITING PROMPT 5: THE ONLY THING YOU MUST DO IS LISTEN

Feeling like you don't fit in, having to explain yourself to others, or not having the words for who you are can be really exhausting.

I want to end our time together with the poem that also closes the *Bi+ Lines* anthology. It's a poem which reminds me that all of these anxiety-inducing categories are made up, and that deep down I know what I need to find peace. I just need to walk towards it, and keep walking towards it.

Your Heart's Echolocation by Jane Flett

The only thing you must do is listen
to happiness and I mean really
listen. Walk to where happiness
amplifies, use the echolocation
of your heart. When the hubbub
of happiness begins to dwindle:
stop. When you can barely discern
happiness murmuring: turn around.
Even if you'd rather blame the loud
of life's responsibilities for drowning
happiness out. Even if it's the fault
of your ears. Even if you've walked
a long way in the wrong direction –
especially then. Listen,
you have so far back to go,
start the hike as soon as you can.
Listen I mean really listen I mean
stop talking over yourself stop
telling yourself you're okay
stop trying to drown yourself out
just stop. You need to stand alone
with yourself in the dark. You need
to open your ears. And when happiness
hisses to you in the night I promise
you will recognise her voice. Even
if it's been a while. You know each
other you will take each
other in your arms and exhale
the long breath you've been holding
too long. Walk hand in hand
back to yourself soft grinning
while the cicadas sing in the night.

from *Bi+ Lines* (fourteen poems, 2023)

This poem reminds me of Mary Oliver's work – go and find '[Wild Geese](#)' if you haven't already had the life-changing experience of reading it.

Read 'Your Heart's Echolocation' again, now as a writer. What do you notice about the form and structure? Why has she ended her lines there – what would it have felt like otherwise? What draws the imagery together? What is 'echolocation' and why has she titled the poem that?

Your final writing challenge is to write a poem of instructions for yourself 'after' (or in other words inspired by) Jane Flett's.

Some people think that writing about happiness is harder than writing about sadness, but there are just as many tones in joy. I think the trick is not to oversimplify, or exaggerate. Flett keeps the poem taut, and keeps the reader's interest, by hinting that these are not easy instructions. She acknowledges all the difficult things that get in our way, but reminds us to keep choosing joy.

If meditation works for you, I invite you to do a 10 minute meditation before writing. There's a free guided meditation from Headspace [here](https://www.headspace.com/meditation/10-minute-guided-meditation). (bit.ly/42CjNud)

Then return to your notebook or laptop. How do you find calm? When do you feel most at peace? Do you have any rituals – whether that's running a hot bath, going for a walk with friends, or taking some deep breaths?

Pick a moment of peace to write about – either one in your memory, or the present moment. Spend **5 minutes** noting down at least three things you can see, smell, touch, taste and hear during that moment. Be specific.

Now note down some of the reasons why you needed that peace. What else was going on, beyond this moment, in your life or in the world?

Did anything interrupt you (or what might have interrupted you)?

Now you have the ingredients for your poem. Write some instructions for yourself to create that moment of peace. It might be very earnest and tender, like Jane Flett's, or it might end up being funny. Sprinkle in some of your anxieties and interruptions, but keep your eyes on the prize – keep your speaker 'walk[ing] hand in hand / back to yourself'.



ABOUT HELEN BOWELL

Helen Bowell is a poet and producer based in London. Her debut pamphlet *The Barman* was published by Bad Betty Press in 2022, and selected as the Poetry Book Society Summer 2022 Pamphlet Choice. She runs the Bi+ Lines project for bi+ poets, and edited the first anthology of bi+ poets in English with fourteen poems in 2023. In addition she is the co-director of Dead [Women] Poets Society, a Ledbury Poetry Critic and produces events at the Poetry Translation Centre.

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Photo credit: Hayley Madden

PLACES AND PORTALS

Alice Frecknall + Caroline Druitt

Hello! Alice Frecknall and Caroline Druitt here.

For this year's Deptford Literature Festival, we've been thinking about different ways we can write poetry about, and through, place. How can the objects, images, and sounds we stumble across in our day-to-day build a rich picture of somewhere, speak of its communities, reveal its history, or perhaps reflect our own personal narratives?

Across the next few pages, we'll guide you through a number of creative exercises that we hope will get you thinking (and writing) about these things.

Each exercise can stand alone, so feel free to power through the whole lot in one go or dip in and out at your leisure, if you prefer. Whatever the approach you take, we hope you'll find something in the mix that resonates with you and kick-starts some brand new writing.

All you'll need is your preferred writing tools, a comfortable place to be, internet access, and a timer.

Thanks for joining us – let's jump in!

THE RULES

Okay, but before we jump in for real, we've got some rules for our time together...

- 1 Nothing is wrong** – however you interpret an exercise is completely right and great
- 2 Get curious** – ask your writing: why, what else?
- 3 Keep everything you write** – you never know what hidden gem might reveal itself later
- 4 You don't have to go there** – if something is too raw to write about right now, it will wait
- 5 Stay present** – once you start writing, see if you can stay with it even if you get stuck (try not to reach for your phone)
- 6 Be playful** – have fun with it!

Right. *Now* let's jump in!

FREE WRITE WARM-UP 1

If you're not familiar with the term 'free write', all we mean by this is to write freely and continuously without censorship or conscious thought. Some people also refer to this as 'automatic writing'. If you get stuck, just write that you are stuck until another avenue presents itself.

Take **1 minute** to write a list of 5 objects that you use daily eg. toothbrush, mug, phone...

Choose one of the borrowed lines below and use this as your jumping-off point to free write for **5 minutes** about the place you're in or a place you know well. As you write, you must incorporate all five of the words in your list of objects.

'I know what it's like to come in here on a dark morning'
- from 'Kitchen' by Jay Bernard

'Not so much the missing of things but the nostalgia of'
- from 'Ode to the Clothesline' by Kwame Dawes

'Slip off your needs and set them by the door'
- from 'When You Meet Someone Deep In Grief' by Patricia McKernon Runkle

'Stare out from the mirror'
- from 'Miss you. Would like to take a walk with you.' by Gabrielle Calvocoressi

FREE WRITE WARM-UP 2

Find an object around you - it might be a pen, lipstick, plant, anything! Take a moment to look at it, pick it up if you can, turn it over, see it from a new angle. How does it feel? What does it weigh? Is it usually here, or is it in some way out of place?

Imagine you are the object - what can you see, hear, feel? For example, are you near a window, can you see out? Are you touching another surface?

Take **5 minutes** to free write as if you are the object.

Consider:

- Does it have a particular tone of voice?
- How does it feel about its role - is it content/frustrated/angry/joyful?
- Does the object have certain wishes?
- How does it interact with the environment and other objects around it?

EXERCISE 1

Read '[You Know a Market Where the Tulips are Still Three Quid](https://bit.ly/42AKIGY)' by Cecilia Knapp. (bit.ly/42AKIGY)

Take this as your title or opening: *I know a [place] where...*

You might want to insert a specific place into the line, as Cecilia has, or leave the opening more vague for the reader to discover what the place is as the poem unfolds.

Set a timer for **10 minutes**, and explore your chosen place through your writing, trying to really build a picture of that place as you go.

Consider :

- Things you 'know' about your chosen place, and things you don't.
- Different associations one might have with that place, personally and within a wider social context.
- Include a specific, concrete detail, such as the tulips in the example poem.

EXERCISE 2

Take a few moments to look at the pages of photographs (pages 13 and 14 below), all of which were taken in Deptford. Using these images as your stimuli, set a timer for **10 minutes** and write a 'portrait of Deptford' poem.

Think about how we as people shape a place and how a place shapes us through our interactions with it, the marks we make on it, the things we leave behind, its landmarks, culture, who comes in and out, who decides where you can and cannot go... etc.

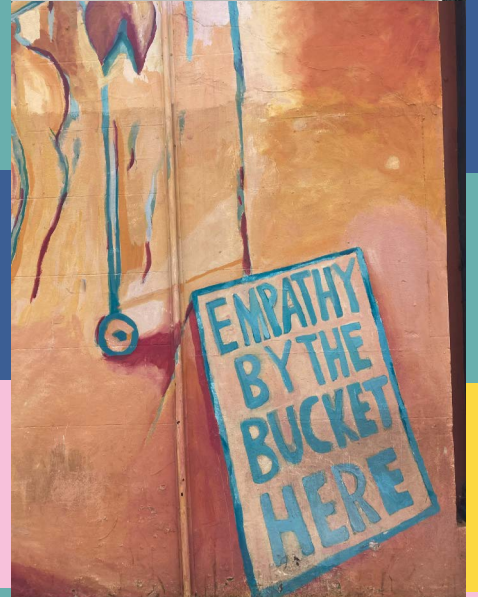
If you get stuck at any point, go back to the photographs and try to include in your writing some of the words and phrases, colours and textures that you can see in the images.

Exercise extension

You might want to use the premise of this exercise to also write a portrait of your local area. When you're next out and about, why not snap a few pics and create your own photobank to write from?







EXERCISE 3

Watch and listen to this video of 'Changes' by Maria Ferguson (bit.ly/3wfy9Vm) and 'Three Mangoes, £1' by Kandace Siobhan Walker (bit.ly/49f1cXK).

So, we've been thinking a lot about place... but what about people? Both of the example poems linked above use place to evoke memories and, more specifically, memories of people known personally to the speaker of the poem.

Over to you! Set a timer for **10 minutes**. Using a familiar place as your starting point, rather than writing about the physical landscape of a place, write about that place through the person or people who frequent it.

You could take this as an opportunity to write another version of your poem from the previous exercise, coming at the same place from this new angle. Or, you might want to write about a different place entirely. Remember, nothing is wrong!

Tip: You don't have to stick to literal facts – we give you permission to play with blurring the real, the imagined, and the remembered, like in the opening of Kandace Siobhan Walker's poem.

EXERCISE 4

Before even thinking about writing anything, sit quietly and listen to [this audio](https://bit.ly/3SVqdkT) (bit.ly/3SVqdkT), recorded in and around Deptford market. Don't write anything, just try to be absorbed by the sound. You might find it helpful to use headphones and close your eyes.

Notice how what you can hear builds an impression of Deptford. Listen again – do you notice any new sounds or voices you didn't pick up on the first time around?

Now, think of a journey that you do every day, e.g – home to work, bedroom to kitchen, a stroll around your local park...

Set a timer for **10 minutes**. From memory, take the reader through the journey you're thinking of using only the sounds that you can hear along the way.

You might want to literally retake your chosen journey with this poem in mind, paying particular attention to the sounds you encounter.

WHAT NEXT?

So, you've just been scribbling in your notebook or typing away at your laptop for some time now and you have reams of new and brilliant writing to show for it, right? But what should you do with it next?

Well, here are a few simple ideas and suggestions of how you might want to expand or edit to take your free writes and your first drafts to the next level...

Sometimes we need to dive a little deeper before we start to edit. Let the tree grow big and bushy before giving it a trim! Go through your free writes and highlight any lines or phrases that speak to you or that you feel are particularly strong. Copy these onto a new page and continue writing into the idea you've started, follow whatever direction your writing leads you – what else can you discover?

Read what you've written aloud to yourself, it might help you to begin to notice how the poem might work tonally, what rhythm you might already have and want to continue playing with, it might help you get to the 'truth' or heart of the poem.

A few simple editing tips:

- Get rid of any 'scaffolding' left by the exercise and make your poem yours
- Look for redundancies – things repeated or already implied – and cut them
- Make sure the words you've chosen are the most effective ones
- Look for any moments where you can be more specific
- Seek out any clichés and try to find a new angle
- Ask: where does the poem really start and end; do you need to cut a line or two?

Think about the form of your poem, how it looks on the page and what the impact of this is. Is this a poem that needs a lot of space and would benefit from being physically spread out, making more use of line breaks, word spacing, or stanzas? Or is this a claustrophobic poem that would be more effective in a tight box-like form or long inescapable lines. Similarly, you might want to think about how punctuation (or lack of it) could be used to different effects.



ABOUT ALICE FRECKNALL + CAROLINE DRUITT

Alice Frecknall is a poet and short fiction writer. Her debut poetry collection, *Somewhere Something is Burning*, is published by Out-Spoken Press (2021). Her writing has been widely anthologised, including in *The Stinging Fly*, *The London Magazine*, *berlin lit*, *And Other Poems*, *bath magg*, *fourteen poems*, and *Butcher's Dog*, and was most recently shortlisted for the Out-Spoken Prize for Poetry 2023 and The London Magazine Poetry Prize 2023. Alice has an MA in Creative Writing, is a Roundhouse Poetry Collective alumna, and member of the UniSlam Post-Emerging Cohort.

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Caroline Druitt is a poet and creative living in South East London. She graduated from the Creative and Life Writing MA at Goldsmiths in 2022 and facilitates creative writing, well-being and movement workshops at a number of schools, universities, community groups and corporations. Caroline's poems have been published by *Lucent Dreaming*, *New River Press*, *Trope* and The Poetry Business' *The North Magazine* and commissioned by Apples and Snakes. In 2023 she was long-listed for the Out-Spoken Prize for Page Poetry, shortlisted for the Bridport Prize and the Aesthetica Creative Writing Award and commended in the National Poetry Competition. With support from Arts Council England she is currently working on her first collection of poetry.

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THINGS WE SELDOM GET TO WRITE

Troy Fairclough

Hi there! How are you today? My name is Troy Fairclough, I am the founder of Black Gay Ink.

Black Gay Ink is a safe space where black, gay, men, interested in writing, can come together to explore their issues, and stories, free from prejudice and discrimination.

For my workshop (open to all) during the Deptford Festival, I want to explore 'Writers Block' and how it has the potential to be a gift. I'll be asking:

- Is there such a thing as Writer's Block?
- If so, how does it affect the LGBTQI+ community?

For those unable to attend the workshop, I have provided a few writing prompts and exercises here to help if you need help getting out of a creative block. If you stick to these exercises to the end, I will reveal a secret tip!

Enjoy, and be kind to yourself during the writing process.

Let us dive in!

WRITER'S BLOCK

The Wikipedia definition of writer's block states:

Writer's block is a non-medical condition, primarily associated with writing, in which an author is either unable to produce new work or experiences a creative slowdown.

Writer's block has various degrees of severity, from difficulty in producing original ideas to being unable to produce work for years. This condition is not solely measured by time passing without writing, it is measured by time passing without productivity in the task at hand. Writer's block has been an acknowledged problem throughout recorded history.

Some people believe that Writer's Block doesn't really exist, do you agree? Whether you agree or disagree about writer's block, write a short paragraph explaining why and outlining your reasoning.

Have you ever experienced writer's block? If yes, write a paragraph of how it affected you? What was the key thing that helped you solve your writer's block? Again, write a paragraph.

If you've never experienced writer's block, think about why. What are the things you do when you find writing or creativity hard? What do you think helps you prevent a creative block? Write a paragraph outlining what you think has helped you to avoid it.

Many successful writers have struggled with writer's block. Author and poet Maya Angelou was not fond of the term *writer's block*, which she felt gave the phenomenon a power that she wasn't comfortable with. But she did sometimes suffer from it and had a strategy for overcoming it: Just writing, even if what came out was not her finest work. She just kept writing.

STIMULATING THE IMAGINATION

Now here is the fun part! Answer the questions below. These are one-line answers intended to free up and stimulate the imagination.

- 1** Who was your celebrity crush growing up?
My celebrity crush when I was was.....
- 2** Who is your celebrity crush now?
- 3** Who would you like to invite on a date?
- 4** Name 7 LGBTQI+ people (past or present) that you would invite to your dinner party.
- 5** What advice would you have given yourself before coming out?
- 6** What 'note to self' do you give yourself now?
- 7** The Black Gay Ink manifesto includes all LGBTQI+ people being given the keys to the city when they come out! Plus, paying 50% less taxes. What two things would you include in your manifesto?
- 8** The writer George Orwell made many potent predictions for society in his novel 1984. What three predictions would you like to see for the LGBTQI+ community in 2084?

Did you answer all the questions? Well done you have earned a 10-minute tea/coffee break.

DEVELOPING YOUR WRITING

Welcome back! I want you to go through the eight questions you have answered and pick two to develop further.

Now that you have selected two of your answers (I know, it is not easy) I want you to write a page expanding on them. Which direction they take is entirely up to you! These are your thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

Get comfortable and give yourself **20 minutes** to develop each one. A break in between is absolutely, fine.

Now that you have your two developed answers, could one of these be developed into a short story?

So, here is a challenge, could two answers be combined to make up one short story? The decision is yours. Either way spend **10 minutes** (longer if needed) planning out your short story paying attention to plot, characterisation and any dialogue.

This is my secret tip that I always use after I've finished writing something. I always get different people to read it to give me feedback. It's important not to just stick to friends, try family members, and work colleagues, even good neighbours. I feel that a variety of responses to my work gives it added clarity and depth.

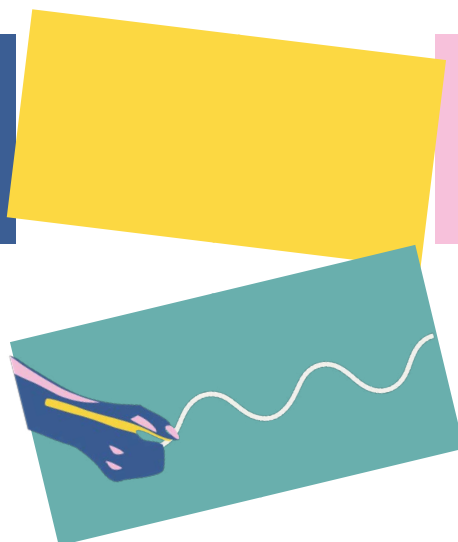
Thank you for taking the time today. I hope you enjoyed your writing and were able to push yourself outside of your comfort zone, which is where growth happens. Instead of trying to fit in as LGBTQI+ writers, let us work at trying to stand out!



ABOUT TROY AND BLACK GAY INK

Troy Fairclough is a former Black, gay, men's health worker. He has a B.A. and M.A. from Goldsmiths, University of London. Troy has written, directed, and produced his own work. He is a trained practitioner in 'Writing as Therapy' from the Metanoia Institute in London. This year, Troy, has been selected as one of the winners for the 'Writers On The Rise' program, organised by the Black British Book Festival in collaboration with Pan Macmillan.

Troy is the founder of Black Gay Ink. Black Gay Ink is a safe space where black, gay, men, interested in writing, can come together to explore their issues, and stories, free from prejudice and discrimination. It realises Troy's belief that there should be spaces for Black, gay, men to document their events, stories, and experiences through a Black, gay lens. Black Gay Ink provides workshops, courses, and one-to-one tuition.



WRITE YOUR OWN MYSTERY STORY

J.T. Williams

Hello! I'm J.T. Williams, author of *The Lizzie and Belle Mysteries*, a historical mystery adventure series.

History fascinates me. I love walking around the city of London and imagining what life was like there for people who lived in the past.

Georgian London was a diverse city. Around 15-20,000 Black people lived there and walked its streets. But we don't often get to hear about those communities, or see them represented.

I wrote my books to introduce readers to the families, the freedom fighters, the rebels and runaways, the writers and musicians – Black and British – who lived in London all those years ago.

My bold and brilliant, curious and courageous heroines, Lizzie and Belle, are based on real-life Black British historical figures Elizabeth Sancho and Dido Belle. As characters in my books, they come together as detectives to solve crimes and form a friendship as firm as family.

Join me on a journey to plan your own mystery story, with **you** at the centre.

STORIES START WITH CHARACTERS

Mystery stories are very plot-driven. What happens, when it happens and why it happens are all key. But character is what really excites me as a writer. Plot is driven by a character's needs and wants.

My characters are usually a combination of aspects of myself, people I know, and, well... creations of my imagination!

CREATING CHARACTERS FROM REAL LIFE

For your mystery story, you are going to create a main character, based on **you**, with fictional elements.

When I was growing up, I didn't see people who looked like me or lived like me in the books I was reading. So I based some of Lizzie's character on my younger self – and some of Belle's too.

Work through the list below and jot down notes for each bullet point, as well as anything else you want to describe about your character.

APPEARANCE

- What do you look like?
 - Physical appearance (take time to describe details like your hair!)
 - Clothing

BEHAVIOUR

- *What do you act like / what do you do?*
 - Hobbies, activities, skills
 - Body language, gestures

VOICE

- *What do you sound like?*
 - What language/s do you speak?
 - What does your voice sound like? (high / low, fast / slow, loud / quiet, etc)
 - What special words or phrases do you like to use?

THINK FICTIONAL

Now, we're going to think fictional and transform your description into a character sketch for your main character, the detective who will 'drive' your mystery story.

As detectives, Lizzie and Belle each bring different skills to their investigations. Lizzie is street-smart. From her family's tea shop, she gets to observe people from all walks of life.

'Helping out in the shop is how I have developed my extraordinary powers of observation. You see, I have a trick - a gift, Mama calls it - of noticing things that other people don't. I can tell all sorts of things about someone just by the way they enter a room, or eat an apple, or ask me for directions in the street. You'd be amazed at what you can learn about life just by observing people closely. And eavesdropping, of course.'

Belle, on the other hand, lives a quieter life, surrounded by books in her 'library' at home. She's a superskilled researcher: if the girls need to find out about something, Belle knows where to find the information! And spending lots of time with adults means she's not shy of asking suspects difficult questions!

What characteristics or personality traits do you have that might be useful for the active work of solving mysteries?

Think about **why** and **when** you might use these skills. For example, Lizzie is a superfast runner. And, she is small for her age, which means she can hide easily when she wants to eavesdrop on a conversation!

Make a list of skills and/or personality traits that fit the bill!

Give your character a name that you feel suits their personality - names are important for a sense of identity.

Now, you have a character sketch for the detective who is going to 'drive' your story.

SETTING

Setting is the 'world' of your story.

- Where and when does your story take place?
- How will you build the world of your story?
- What does it look like there? How does it sound?

As you build your world, try to imagine what your characters will see, hear, smell as they move through their world. You want to make it feel real for your reader.

Looking at pictures and listening to music is a great way of researching the world your story is set in. You could draw a map of where your story takes place.

COMMUNITY AS WORLD-BUILDING

Another way to build the world of your story is to think of the 'community' around your main characters.

In my books, Lizzie Sancho lives with her father Ignatius, mother Anne, and her brother and sisters next door to the family tea-shop. Ignatius is a warm and humorous father: an actor, writer and composer with a gift for conversation. Anne is a lively, loving mother: wise, strict, and always busy. Lizzie's relationships are an important part of the story. They give it 'emotional texture.'

Together Ignatius and Anne play host to musicians, writers, activists and freedom fighters in the tea-shop. The discussions, daring-doings and dilemmas of this community create the 'world' of Drama and Danger.

What other characters could you bring into your story to create a sense of community? Think about:

- Family
- Friends
- School
- People in your local community

Sketch out ideas for different people to create a sense of community in the world of your story. One of these might be a friend, a detective partner for your main character to work with.

PLOT

Plot is crucial to a mystery story. What happens, when, and why, is all central to the story. Your story begins with the 'inciting incident' or crime that kicks off the investigation. Intriguing mysteries can be built around different kinds of crimes. Great mysteries are all about **puzzle-solving**.

My books are not murder mysteries. My detectives have to work fast to *prevent* a murder or to solve a different kind of crime, like the **theft** of something significant. So, for a crime, think of something that matters in the world you have built for your characters. And make it disappear! Then get your readers trying to work out the how and the who and the why of it.

Now I'm going to give you a key tip for a mystery plot: Work backwards.

Yes! Work out how your mystery is going to end **before** you begin writing it. Decide **who** committed the crime, **when**, **where**, **how** and, most importantly, **why**. Motive is the most compelling aspect of your mystery.

TO THE INVESTIGATION!

Now that you have decided on the mystery that needs solving, your story will build around the investigation. How will your detective/s go about solving it?

For me, the friendship between Lizzie and Belle was the beating heart of my story. Giving your main character someone to talk to about the investigation helps the reader follow the plot.

TALKING ON PAPER

In real life, Lizzie's dad, Ignatius Sancho, was famous for writing letters that sounded like 'talking on paper'. His character comes alive through his voice on the page. In my book, Lizzie and Belle form a friendship by writing letters to each other. Each character sounds very different on the page. Lizzie is chatty, quick, informal. Belle writes in long sentences, using grown-up sounding words and a much more formal style.

Think yourself into role as your main detective character. Write a letter to your new friend and detective partner to start the investigation.

You could:

- Tell them what you have witnessed
- Ask them what they think
- Set out first steps for the investigation
- Make a plan to meet

How will your character's 'voice' sound on the page? What clues will you give your reader about your character's unique personality?

DEVELOPING YOUR STORY

You have done some independent research into the **Setting** of your story.

You have created a fictional detective **Character** based on yourself and given them a **Voice**

You have created a cast of characters to make up the **Community** of your story.

You have selected key **Plot** elements to drive the story forwards.

You have written a **Letter** from one character to another.

Now it's over to you to develop and write your story in full!

Here are some ideas you could use:

- My character Lizzie narrates the story in her own words, in her own voice. Will you tell the story from a 'first person' perspective, using 'I' as your narrator?
- Some stories are written entirely as a series of letters. You could make your story a 'conversation' of letters back and forth between your two detectives.
- Lizzie and Belle make case notes at each stage of the case to help them solve the mystery. Include observation notes or case files in your own story.
- The Lizzie and Belle Mysteries are illustrated, to help the reader visualise the story. You could draw your own illustrations or include photographs and images to help your readers 'see' the world of your mystery.
- I included snippets of other media like newspaper articles, theatre programmes, secret notes and pages from books to build the world of the mystery and include a range of voices. Include images and snippets of 'writing' from other places to add texture to your story!

Writing a story is like going on the most exciting journey imaginable of your own creation! Have fun!



ABOUT J.T. WILLIAMS

Joanna Brown, writing as J. T. Williams, has been a primary school teacher and after teaching full-time, became a programme manager at the Royal African Society leading creative writing schools workshops for the literature festival Africa Writes. Now a freelance educator and writer, her debut series *The Lizzie and Belle Mysteries*, published by HarperCollins, is a middle grade mystery full of daring adventure in Georgian London.

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