



## **A guide to personal writing**

Activities and advice to help young people write from experience

**Age 12-18**

**CFE Levels Third, Fourth and Senior Phase**

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## About this resource

This resource will help you introduce and explore personal writing with your pupils.

The resource has several aims:

- To introduce pupils to personal writing
- To build pupil confidence in writing from experience
- To support pupils to add detail to their work and develop their individual voice

The resource is designed to be adaptable, so use and differentiate as you see fit.

The activities in this resource are flexible and can be used for writing both fiction and personal writing.

## About personal writing

Personal writing is writing from experience; experiences which are unique and individual to each of us. To support pupils to create rich and interesting personal writing, encourage them to write in an honest voice about their own experiences.

**Please note:** personal writing is not suitable for every pupil. Some pupils may be facing circumstances that mean the reflection involved in personal writing can put them in the difficult position of confronting traumatic experiences. If you're worried

about a pupil in your class, [Mind's website has a list of resources and organisations](#) that can help support young people with their mental health. **We advise you use your discretion about delivering personal writing**, and adapt activities in this resource with the children you work with in mind.

## Pre-writing activity

It can seem daunting to write from or about your own experiences. But personal writing is a popular form of writing and is prolific in books, poetry, and television. Just think of the many memoirs or bibliographies by celebrities, or TV programmes and documentaries about someone's personal experience of a topic or theme. Before you start writing, it can be useful to explore different forms of writing personal writing. Here are some examples to explore:

- [Tiny Moons by Nina Mingya Powles](#) - read an extract from Nina's food memoir based on a year in Shanghai.
- Read Jackie Kay's poems about her memories of her grandparent's in ["My Grandmother's Houses"](#) and ["Grandpa's Soup"](#).
- [Listen to Nikesh Shukla](#) talk about how his personal experiences shaped and fed into his fiction novel *The Boxer*.
- Watch spoken word artist Deanna Rodger present poems based on her own experience in ["Being British"](#) and ["Terminals"](#).

Here are some questions you might like to either discuss or think about after watching or reading the above suggestions:

- How did you feel after reading this? How did the author make you feel?
- Do you feel you gained an insight into the authors life or experience?
- Was there a distinctive narrative voice? How do you think this was constructed?
- Did you spot any devices that helped the writer create mood or drew you into their experience? E.g. use of description, metaphors, or the senses.

## Quick prompts for writing

If you are unsure where to start, there are many ways to get inspiration for writing. Here is a selection of exercises you could try to generate ideas for personal writing.

### Pictures and postcards

Take a postcard or a picture that is mainly of scenery. Write down what you can see. Now add a character to this landscape or add yourself. Why are you there? What are you doing? Where are you going? What do you want? See if a story comes out of putting yourself or a character into the landscape you have studied.

Another activity with the same postcard is to ask yourself what it makes you think of. Does it spark a memory? Or remind you of a place you have visited? Or even a TV programme you have watched? Write down everything you can associate and think of that relates to the postcard or picture.

### Food

Do you associate anyone in your family with a special recipe or meal or food? Perhaps your mum's mince and tatties or your dad's roast dinners, your sister's pancakes, or your granddad's egg in a cup? You can look back at the pages of [\*Tiny Moons\*](#) by Nina Mingya Powles for examples of using food in personal writing.

Can you show us how they make their special meal, describe what it tastes and smells like and why it is so special to you? What does the meal say about their personality? Tell us about your relationship with this person.

### Making metaphors

A metaphor is a sort of poetic lie. It allows you to say that something actually is something else – and when you stop to think about it, the 'something else' is usually connected; it gives a new way of seeing the object.

Think of somebody you really admire – a public figure or a person in your life. Then answer these questions:

- If, by magic, they were a time of day, what would it be?
- If they were a type of food, what would truly suit their personality?
- What season?
- Colour?
- Animal? What would that animal be doing?
- What piece of furniture would they be? Where would that piece of furniture be found?

You should choose your answers to suit their personality and character, not their physical appearance. You can generate lots of useful questions – think about musical instruments, forms of transport, types of book, clothing, countries, trees, flowers, weather...the list is endless!

You can use the metaphors you have created to write a poem about that person, using the repeated line starter “X is...” to structure your poem. Or you can keep the metaphors for a later date and use them in another piece of creative writing.

### Free writing

Freewriting or mindful writing is a great way to generate ideas quickly. Free writing is when you write for five or ten minutes non-stop on whatever comes into your head. The only rule is that your pen has to keep moving so if you're thinking 'I don't know what to write' or 'what shall I have for lunch?' you need to write that down. It is a way of freeing up space in your head for your creative writing. If you find drawing helps you to generate ideas, you can do the same activity with drawing. For free drawing, do not take the pen or pencil off the paper and just doodle whatever comes to mind.

## One-minute writing prompts

You could try using words as prompts and allowing yourself to write for one minute on each word. For example, one minute on each colour – red, yellow, green, blue, purple; writing down everything that comes to mind. Or you could do one minute on sea, sky, moon, stars, sun. You might find that you have started off writing about the sea and you have gone on a tangent and are writing about memories of the sea, or mermaids, or sea salt on fish and chips. You might find that these tangents spark further ideas for personal writing.

## Poetry stones

Another way to get ideas for writing is to use physical prompts, such as poetry stones (or story sticks), which give random prompts to help idea generation. You can use these with the one-minute activity above or use them for word association games and free writing. You can find Scottish Book Trust resources on how to make your own [story sticks](#) or [poetry stones](#) on our website.

## **Furthering idea generation**

### Using objects as a stimulus

Sometimes exploring an object is a good way to spark writing ideas. You can use your senses to explore objects and stimulate ideas for personal writing. Take any object that you can hold in your hands. Look closely at it, give it a sniff. What does it feel like, sound like, smell like? If the object is edible, taste it. Make some notes on about these observations. You might make the object central to your writing, or it might end up just being a way to get you to a piece of personal writing.

Objects can also remind us of significant events in our lives. For example, does an apple spark a memory for you? Does the apple remind you of your granny peeling a green apple with a sharp knife? Tell us about your granny. Show her peeling the apple. What were you talking about? Were you waiting for someone to come home or the postman to bring a parcel – your new football boots? Was she peeling the apple on a special occasion? Or does the apple remind you of something else – the

time you went on a school trip to a castle and you had it in your packed lunch? Note down all the details you can remember about this memory.

### Using memories as a stimulus

It is the unique details that bring a piece of personal writing to life. For this activity you will need to think of a memory – for example, your first day at school or a birthday party or the first time you went on a bus by yourself.

The exercise will help you dig deep into that memory and recall lots of interesting detail about the experience which can be used to add description to your writing.

1. Take a memory. Maybe a first memory, maybe a recent experience that has made an impact on you. What is the memory? Write it down in a few words.
2. Now focus in some more, as if you had a telescope and were twisting it to let you see more clearly. How old are you in this memory? Where are you? What are you doing?
3. Now, focus in more closely. What else is happening? Who else is there? What are they doing?
4. More closely still. What else can you see around you, what objects or scenery?
5. Now, twist the telescope again and sharpen the focus still further. What could you hear, smell?
6. And focus in again. What do you remember feeling or thinking?
7. And focus in once more – what other details do you recall, however small, that stick in your mind from this moment?

Once you have made your notes you can shape them into a piece of writing about your memory. This could be a poem or piece of prose but be sure to include as much detail as you can using the notes you have made as an aide to writing.

## Adding detail to your writing

### Using your senses

A great way to include lots of small, interesting details in your work is to use the senses in your writing. We tend to write about what we can see, but what about what we can hear or smell?

In this activity, you are to write five short paragraphs. Each one will begin with the line: *Here in the room I can . . .*

First, write 'here in the room I can see'. Write down everything that you can see around you. Take a good look at the walls, the ceiling, the table and the people around you. Don't censor yourself, just write down everything you can see.

Next, write 'here in the room I can hear'...Same as before, listen carefully to what you can hear and write it on the page.

Next ...here in the room I can smell...

Next ...here in the room I can feel...

Lastly ...here in the room I can taste...

What senses were most easy to write about? How did it feel to really tune in to your senses? Read or listen to Seamus Heaney's poem "[Digging](#)" to see an example of a poem that refers to lots of the senses.

Now, think back to a memory or an event in your life. What happened? Who was there? As you are writing about it tell us what you could see, hear, smell, taste and feel.

Once you have got your words on the page and done your first draft think about where exactly you want to place these sensory details. Remember, we don't want a long list of everything you could feel. Cut up all your writing about the senses into paper strips, and experiment with rearranging the order. Once you are happy with the order, you can rewrite your poem or story.



## Writing from different narrative viewpoints

When starting a piece of personal writing, it can be useful to think about your narrative viewpoint. Whether you want it to be from the first or third person. This activity will help you experiment with different narrative perspective and find the one which suits your writing.

Pick a simple scenario involving two or more characters – for example, a parent and a child choosing a prom outfit, or two people shovelling snow so an elderly relative can leave their house, or two friends lost in the city centre.

First, write a couple of paragraphs as an omniscient narrator who can see inside the heads of everyone in the scene. An omniscient narrator knows what has happened and what is going to happen and what is happening two miles down the road. They can ‘see’ the ‘big picture’ as well as what every character is thinking. If we take one of the examples above – the two friends lost in the city centre – the omniscient narrator would know that five minutes ago the friends almost went down a street that would have led them back to the train station. The narrator knows that one of the friends is blaming the other for getting them lost and that the woman who bumps into them by accident was preoccupied with her job interview later that day.

Ask yourself how it felt to write in this way. What words did you choose? What length were your sentences? Did you like the expansive feel of writing this way? Or did you lose focus because there was so much you could write about?

Now rewrite the paragraphs using the voice of one of your characters. Write only from their point of view, from inside their head. They do not know what other characters are thinking, they do not know what is going to happen in the future and they only have one version of the past, theirs.

As you are rewriting, think carefully about what exactly you want them to see and experience in this scene. Does some interesting tension reveal itself from writing in their point of view? Does the world look completely different through their eyes?

Now ask yourself questions again. What words did you choose, what length were your sentences? What was the mood of the piece?

Compare the two pieces of writing. Look at your word choice and the 'feel' of each piece. Is there any one you think is more effective? How does it feel to write from these different points of view? Was there a voice or way of writing which you felt most comfortable with?

### Writing dialogue

In all writing, dialogue plays a vital. It demonstrates conflict, pushes the writing forward, provides or summarises information, comments on actions and place, and reveals characters, emotions, and relationships. The activity below will help you explore writing dialogue, which you may want to include in your personal writing.

Try writing a conversation about two people making a shopping list. The characters need to include the following items on their list: pasta, milk, bread, cheese, post-it notes and washing up liquid. For more dialogue prompts, see Worksheet 1 at the end of this resource.

First, write the conversation in full. It could start something like this:

'I know we need milk so you could put that on the list.'

'Yes, what else do we need?'

'I don't know.'

'Bread. We need bread. What else?'

'Um...'

'What else?'

'I'm trying to think.'

'I know. Post-it notes.'

Carry on writing the dialogue until you have got all your items down and add a couple more things for luck. Now, ask yourself some questions about your characters. Who are they? What is the relationship between them? Do they like each other? How do they speak to each other? Are they polite or casual or cheeky? Why do they need post-it notes? Why are they even going shopping? (I say 'characters' but these questions apply to when you're writing dialogue in your personal writing too.)

Now re-write your dialogue and try to reveal a little about the characters. Cut out the lines of dialogue that are not necessary. For example:

'I know we need milk.'

'I'll remember milk. I don't need to write it down.'

'You'll forget it.'

'No I won't.'

'Yes you will. It's a thing. You always forget the one thing you really need when you go shopping.'

'OK then. Milk. M.I.L.K. What else do we need?'

Which character gives in? One of them is bossier than the other. How does the other feel about being bossed about? Will this change as the story goes on?

Have fun with your dialogue. You might find that your dialogue becomes only about milk and none of the other things on your list – that is fine! The main thing is to reveal your characters' personalities and move the story on.

There are a few key things to consider or remember when writing naturalistic dialogue. You can:

- Leave questions unanswered
- Answer questions that have not been asked

- Include interruptions
- Leave sentences unfinished (we don't always finish sentences when we talk)
- Include dialogue which reveals how characters relate to each other
- Think about the rhythm in your dialogue
- Intersperse dialogue with narration
- Explore what is unsaid. Think about what is behind what the characters are saying.

Remember you can listen to the conversations you hear around you and write them down for inspiration. This could be on the bus, overheard in a café, or just from a family member or friend. You do not need to faithfully record every word from the conversation- just use it as inspiration. Good dialogue isn't verbatim speech.

Note: Don't worry about writing how someone says something. 'Said' is perfectly fine instead of 'he exclaimed' or 'she declared.' The way a character says something should be clear through their words rather than any speech tag you might use. Equally, you might not even need to use 'said'- just let your dialogue flow.

### Final comments

All the activities in this resource have been to help you experiment and explore your own writing, and to help you understand your personal writing style. Hopefully, you will now feel confident enough to create your own piece of personal writing.

Finally, remember that writing can be an enjoyable experience, as can sharing our own story and personal experiences. We all have stories to tell that are unique and interesting. All of us.

## Worksheet 1: Dialogue prompts

Print this page

The best way to practise writing dialogue is to write it. Here are some scenarios you could have a go at writing.

1. Imagine two characters are stuck in a lift. How do they react to being stuck? What do they talk about when they realise that help is on its way?
2. A father and son are pegging out washing. The father must tell the son that they are moving to another country.
3. Two people in love plan to run away together but on the day they are meant leave, one of them changes their mind.
4. A child has lost their mobile phone for the second time this year and must tell their parent.
5. Write a short scene in dialogue where one of the characters is lying.
6. Write a short scene of dialogue where one person has betrayed their friend, but the friend doesn't know it was them.