

from Metro: Journeys in Writing  
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**Building-Block Stories:  
Practice Mixing Sentence Styles**

This exercise is designed to keep you writing, in Richard Hugo's terms, "off the subject." It assumes that: 1) your subject will prevail in your text only if it is somehow protected from most earnest intentions, and 2) the smallest unit of particular attention in fiction is the sentence. It is adapted, in part, from a similar writing exercise developed by Ken Waldman.

Below, find a number of opening sentences for the exercise. Select one and go on to the following directions. Work to develop a narrative sequence—that is, each sentence should lead to the next. In the end, does a story emerge? What can you say about it?

Note: You may need a dictionary and a book of English usage.

**The First Sentences.**

One day I was listening to the AM radio.

—Grace Paley

The last time I saw my father was in Grand Central Station.

—John Cheever

I started when I was six.

—Jane Martin

The quail came just before the lilacs bloomed in the green time of their first year married.

—Rolf Yngve

No one knows what they are about or, for that matter, where they come from.

—Tom Whalen

We decided to stop drinking and spend Sunday at the zoo.

—Stuart Dybek

The bank robber told his story in little notes to the bank teller.

—Steven Schutzman

My sickness bothers me, though I persist in denying it.

—Max Apple

She knew it was only boys in the field, come to watch them drunk on first wine.

—Jayne Anne Phillips

For my eighteenth birthday Jack gave me a five-year diary with a latch and a little key, light as a dime.

—Elizabeth Tallent

Hecht was born a late bloomer.

—Bernard Malamud

One of Irina's grandsons, nicknamed Riri, was sent to her at Christmas.

—Mavis Gallant

One morning Senorita Cordoba received a letter from her mother.

—Jane Bowles

In Palm Springs the poor are as dry as old brown leaves, blown in from the desert—wispy thin and almost invisible.

—Alice Adams

When you're the sheriff of Nowhere, you encounter strange crimes.

—Hans Ostrom

Karl kept one cannon on the front porch and one on the back.

—Chuck Rosenthal

Early that day the weather turned and the snow was melting into dirty water.

—Raymond Carver

For years the children whimpered and tugged.

—Barbara L. Greenberg

Lately I begin each day beside myself with a question: so, what is DeVeda Spaulding to me?

We live with acts of God.

I talk to my tumbler of Dewar's.

—Darrell Spencer

### Optional.

Look for your own first sentence, one that compels you. Or write one yourself.

### The Directions.

1. Write a sentence that repeats one word, but no more than one, from your first sentence.
2. Write a sentence that repeats one word, but no more than one, from your second sentence.
3. Write a sentence that repeats one word, but no more than one, from your third sentence.
4. Write a sentence that includes: a place name.
5. a dash.
6. a color and a name.
7. more than thirty words.
8. less than ten words.
9. a colon.
10. a part of the body.
11. the conditional tense. *if ever there*
12. a first person pronoun. *"I"*
13. an interruptive clause.
14. quotation marks.
15. two interruptive clauses. *non-identical ones, referring to the sentence*
16. three articles of clothing.
17. a simile. *like, as, resembling*
18. any form of the word "try."
19. a geographical formation.
20. italics.
21. a dictionary definition.
22. a metaphor. *like as comparison*
23. a parallel structure. *using what you know, trying to be impressive, need going to school*
24. exactly twenty-nine words.
25. exactly seventeen words.
26. exactly five words.
27. a comma and a semicolon.
28. the same words four times.
29. a second person pronoun. *"you"*
30. a question mark.

- 31. reference to a past event.
- 32. a familial relationship.
- 33. parentheses.
- 34. alliteration.
- 35. a paradox. *apparently self-contradictory of something which can have a truth value*
- 36. exactly ten words.
- 37. exactly twenty words.
- 38. exactly thirty words.
- 39. exactly forty words.
- 40. exactly fifty words.
- 41. a comma splice.
- 42. two dashes.
- 43. something seen.
- 44. something tasted.
- 45. something heard.
- 46. something touched.
- 47. something smelled.
- 48. an equivocation. *ambiguity*
- 49. the future tense. *will*
- 50. the present tense. *am*

Write a sentence, a paragraph, a page, and finish. Remember that the rules are minimums.

Don't cheat.

(K.H.)