

## Secondary and Adult Writing Prompts

Please note that writing prompts should always be pursued in emotionally-safe environments with the supervision of someone who interested in encouraging good writing, self-awareness, and reflection. A wonderful resource is Pat Schneider's *Writing Alone and With Others*.

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When you introduce these prompts to students, consider using the matching quotations about writing, available at the [Great Quotations](#) link.

### Prompt #1: Ain't No Mountain High Enough

Describe a mountain you have climbed. A mountain can be a hill, part of a trail that's an incline, or an actual mountain. A mountain can also be an obstacle in your life, something big you've had to overcome. Talk about the easiest parts and the steepest parts. Talk about the side trails. Talk about the summit. Talk about the views. What did you discover while scaling this mountain? What makes you glad about this experience? What regrets do you have?

### Prompt #2: Seven Ways to Say It But Only One Can Stay

Describe a person whose features and looks you know well. Make a list of seven physical characteristics of this person and seven similes using the table below. For the first column, use the most specific, concrete words you can. For example, don't write "gorgeous eyes" or "piercing eyes." Use the five senses instead. For the second column, use the most unique simile you can think of to describe that facial feature. See the first two examples. It's okay if your descriptions are intense, overwrought, dramatic, overdescribed - go for it! Write whatever comes to mind.

<u>PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTIC</u>	<u>DETAIL</u>	<u>SIMILE</u>
eyes or nose	dull green	still as a
murky pond		
mouth or cheekbones	sunken	like
shallow basins		
hair or any other features of the head ....	now try your own....	
height, build (bone structure), or weight		
voice or facial expression		

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clothing item

walk or gesture

Now rate the characteristics. “1” means “doesn’t capture this person” and “10” means “completely represents this person.” If you don’t have any 10’s, try to get more specific, more unique, more startling in your descriptions.

Now you can only pick one feature to capture this person’s essence. Pick one characteristic and write a sentence where the character enters the room for the first time in the scene and we hear the detail and the simile.

### **Prompt #3: Pay No Attention to That Man Behind the Curtain**

Think of people, things, or experiences in your past that have marked you, but you don’t often talk about it with many people or even anyone at all. It could be

- A fight you had with someone
- A frightening experience you had
- A loss you suffered
- A secret you keep

Now write that story for your eyes only. Tell whatever details you are able to tell.

Put the story away for a few days.

Return to it and answer this question: how does this private story of your life affect your feelings, thoughts, attitude, and actions today?

### **Prompt #4: Cut to the Chase**

Choose one of the following sets of characters (parent and child, two lovers, or a teacher and a student) and one of the following issues (food, space, or time) and write a dialogue. Begin with a line of dialogue and write for ten minutes as fast as you can, letting character names, histories, and motivations emerge as necessary during the fighting. Choose an omniscient point of view for now and record every thought each character has privately; describe every gesture; record every detail of the setting as your characters move through it. After ten minutes is up, fold up your paper(s) so you can’t read the scene. On

a separate piece of paper fill in this blank: *This story is about \_\_\_\_\_*  
(insert abstract noun). The noun must be the intangible idea-word such as love, peace, jealousy, salvation – you get the idea. This is word is your “Home Base” to which you will return.

Now open up your paper again and home in on the parts that best communicate this idea. Strike out any details that don’t get at this idea. If you are having trouble homing in, share the word with a partner and ask him/her to do some cutting for you. **Prompt #5: Rejection**

Option #1: Have you ever tried to be someone’s friend but the person didn’t want to be yours? Have you ever been picked last for a team? Have you ever waited for someone and the person did not arrive? Think about a tough time when you felt rejected. It may hurt to remember it, but sometimes, we have to think about difficult times to understand how to get through them.

Tell the story of what happened, just as you remember. Include what you felt and what was said. Describe the place where it happened.

Now, tell another story. Choose between two directions:

Tell the story again. Tell it the way you wish it happened. Share your feelings, what was said, where you were. OR

Tell the story of a time when you rejected someone else. Tell the story of what happened, just as you remember. Include what you felt and what was said. Describe the place where it happened.

Share your story with someone you trust and talk about how to feel better after a time of rejection. If you have rejected someone else, can you do something to make the situation better?

Option #2:

There is power in faith. It takes two forms – saying yes and saying no.

**I Believe Manifesto**

Write a manifesto listing ten things you believe. Do you believe in love with honesty? Do you believe in silent cell phones? Do you believe in organic

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produce? Whatever you believe, from the sublime to mundane, list it.

Then write the yin to this yang, the I Reject Manifesto. Write a list of ten things you reject.

Let one of the lines from either manifesto inspire the beginning of a piece of writing.

### **Prompt #6: What Color Are You?**

We know people discriminate based on skin color. But we also know the famous phrase and vision of Dr. Martin Luther King that asks us to judge people not by race but by the “content of their character.” In fact, race is not well-defined by anthropologists and sociologists. So why shouldn’t we “color” ourselves? When we think of this societal convention identifying people by race and juxtapose it against the color wheel we know from art class, suddenly skin color can lose its significance. Which is not to say that race and racism don’t matter, but rather, that if we can step away from the world and all its judgments for a moment, we can ask, How do I color myself?

Name all the colors you know, from primary to secondary to every shade of color that is important to you. Then pick one of the following two prompts.

Color Me Red, Color Me Blue: Pick the colors that best suit your personality, your interests, and your life experience. Write a self-description that begins, “Color me \_\_\_\_\_ (pick the color) because...”

Inventing Idioms: You may have heard, “I’m blue” when someone is sad or other colors used to describe emotions. Name some other colors and how they are used in common expressions (also known as idioms).

Now invent some new expressions.

You can use metaphor, such as “I’m blue,” where you give an emotion a color.

You can use an action with an implied metaphor, such as “I’m seeing red,” where red represents the emotion of anger and the action of seeing is part of that metaphor’s vehicle.

Start a story or a personal essay where this new idiom begins the description of your emotional experience.

### **Prompt #7: Up on High**

Are you an introvert or an extrovert, meaning, do you tend to get your energy from being alone, or do you get your energy from being around people? Or are you a person who truly enjoys both states of being?

Write about a time when you or someone did what's called "helicoptering": hanging around, hovering, trying to help another person.

- Express your feelings and the feelings you imagine the other person had.
- How did the situation unfold?
- What choices did people make? What were the consequences?
- Would you experience that situation again if you could? Why or why not?

### **Prompt #8**

#### Option #1: The Critique - What Works and What Doesn't

Think of a time when someone - a parent, coach, teacher, tutor, older sibling, relative - gave you feedback on something you were doing or had done. What criticism did you receive? Was it helpful criticism?

Write a mini-meditation on criticism: what works and what doesn't. Give examples of times when you received constructive or destructive criticism. Let your thoughts meander from one anecdote to another, analyzing the ways you have been told what's good and not so good about your actions and accomplishments. End your meditation with epiphanies you have about criticism. What kind of criticism works? How important is how it's said? When is criticism tough love and when is it tough hate? What advice do you have for critics you've known? For yourself when you offer criticism?

#### Option #2: A Response to Criticism

Think of a time when someone - a parent, coach, teacher, tutor, older sibling, relative - gave you feedback on something you were doing or had done. What criticism did you receive? Was it helpful criticism?

Write a letter to this person telling the person how you feel about the criticism. Give your honest reaction. Weigh the person's words and see if there is truth from which you can learn. This may be a letter you never send, but say what needs to be said.

Or you can write a letter to a person whom you criticized and tell them how you feel now about that choice and experience.

### **Prompt #9**

#### **Option 1: Publishing CEO Writes a Memo**

Imagine that you own a publishing company and you can publish a book of any length. Write a memo to the people who work with you explaining the best number of words or pages for a book and why you believe this length works the best. Then ask for your employees to offer contradictory opinions and argue for different lengths. Step into the shoes of two other employees who argue for different lengths than you, and write their responses to your memo.

Then write a memo to the company sharing your final decision and your justification for it.

#### **Option 2: Books of the Future**

What's the longest novel you've ever read? Estimate its page or word count. Did you enjoy reading a novel of such length? Why or why not?

It's been argued that the reason the average novel is 150,000 words is because that's what most paperbacks – and people – can handle. If books are all someday offered electronically, a novel could have the option of being twenty times this size or any length the writer chooses.

Will books always look the way they do now? Will they be made of paper and a certain length? Imagine what books will be like 25 years from now. Describe a scene where you picture yourself reading a book. What will the book look like? Feel like? Sound like? Smell like? Where will you get your book? Do electronic options – e-books – enhance or detract from the reading experience? Why or why not?

### **Prompt #10: Doing Without**

Sometimes we go through hard times. People lose jobs, prices rise, and the economy struggles. We are asked to make sacrifices.

Describe a time when you have given up something you liked or something someone else in your family liked. It could be a favorite food or a special activity. It could be the phone or heat or air conditioning. It could be eating less or giving up a habit. What was given up? Why was it given up? Is it for just a little while or for a long time?

Then share your feelings about the experience. How did you or others feel about giving it up? What is the hardest part of giving something up? What would you tell someone else who has to go through the same experience?

If you don't want to write about your own experience, make up a story about someone who has to give something up.

### **Prompt #11: Fear Factor**

Do you believe in what's called a healthy amount of fear? Or do you believe it's best to steer clear of the adrenalin-fueled emotion?

Write about an incident when you were very scared but your fears did not come true. What did you fear and why? What happened to eradicate your fears?

Rewrite this scene from your life, living it moment by moment, only imagine yourself progressing through the incident without fear. What choices do you make that are different? Does the outcome change?

### **Prompt #12**

Option 1: Thinking Globally and Acting Locally

Do you tend to see the big picture or look at the details of things? Whether you see one or the other or both, the chances are one of your acts of kindness had a broader impact and meaning than you think.

Think about a time when you did something kind, fair, or just. Tell that story with as many details as you can, reliving the experience. What was done, said, thought? What was the outcome? What was the purpose behind your action? Why did your action matter? Frame your actions in light of larger reasons, purposes, or movements occurring around you.

### Option 2: The Moral Universe

Dr. Martin Luther King once said, “The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.”

What do you think he meant? Explain his thinking in this quotation.

Then respond to it. Explore your opinion about

- whether the world is getting better or worse,
- whether morality is increasing or decreasing, or
- whether you have hope for the future about the goodness of society and its ability to improve.

### Prompt #13: The Big Questions

There are many types of questions that excite us or keep us up at night or haunt us during our days. Factual questions are those ones that will eventually yield a yes/no or data-based answer – and it may be just a matter of time to get there. Analytical and evaluative questions result in more open-ended answers and require more critical thinking.

Analytical and evaluative questions can begin with words such as how, could, what if, and should. Write ten open-ended questions that get you thinking hard.

Select one and answer it. Answer it by listing what you already know, what you want to know, and how you will find the answer.

Optional: Write a query letter to someone who can help you answer this question.

### **Prompt #14: Electable**

Have you ever run for an office or a club leadership position? Have you been a team captain? Why do you think you chose to run? Or why do you think you were chosen? Every person is different and brings different strengths to a campaign and to the table of leadership.

List all the qualities that you possess that make you electable. Then list all the qualities that you possess that would make - or do make - you a good leader.

Now write one of the following: a brief speech to an audience you would like to convince to elect you, or, a brief analysis of the differences between certain qualities that make a person electable and certain qualities that make a person a leader. Which qualities overlap? Which do not? Why?

### **Prompt #15**

#### **Option #1: An Ode to Difference**

How is difference a strength? Think about all the ways you are different from your family members or from your friends. Make a list of personality traits, looks, physical abilities, talents, interests, hobbies, beliefs, and experiences that distinguish you from other people you know well.

Now select one element of your difference and celebrate it. Describe this part of you in detail and write an ode, which is a poem that celebrates something. In this poem describe all the wonderful parts of having this difference.

#### **Option #2: How Hybrid Am I?**

The dictionary defines a hybrid as “a person or group of persons produced by the interaction or crossbreeding of two unlike cultures, traditions, etc.”

How are you a hybrid? Think about your race, ethnicity, religion, customs, beliefs, or any other part of you that makes you a hybrid.

Now write a description of yourself in the third person by writing a letter to President-elect Obama. He has just joked that he is a “mutt” or a hybrid. Explain to him how you are a hybrid, too.

### **Prompt #16: Thankfulness**

What things and people make you happy? Who or what are you grateful for?

Make a list of ten people and things – places, objects, events – that give you joy. Choose one and write a poem, a song, a letter, or a prayer (or a combination of any of these) that explains why you are thankful for this part of your life.

### **Prompt #17: Holiday Songs**

Many people celebrate special holidays in the fall and winter. Part of the celebration includes music. What special songs do you love to sing and hear during the holiday season?

#### **Option #1: Favorite Song**

Pick a favorite song and write down some of the lyrics you remember. It can be one or several sentences. Then think about why this song is so special to you. What feelings does the song give you? What memories? What special events happen when you hear the song? Does the song have a special history in your family or your community? Think about how this song represents part of your heritage and culture.

Write a PSA – public service announcement – which is a short film of 1 minute or less, like a commercial, that helps educate the public about an issue, idea, or tradition. Write a script where the holiday song is explained and described in a compelling way.

## Option #2 Holiday Soundtrack

Imagine that you have been asked to make a special holiday album of songs.

What are the top ten songs you would want to include?

List the songs and include the liner notes, explaining your choice of each song. Name the album based on the theme, and if possible, explore how your family and cultural heritage is reflected in your choice of songs.

## **Prompt #18: Hot or Cold**

Temperatures can be very intense this time of year. When was a time when you were really, really cold – or really, really hot?

Step back into that moment. Remember how your fingers and toes felt and nose felt; what your eyes saw; what your ears heard; what your tongue tasted; what your nose smelled. Write a scene where you step back into that setting and describe how the temperature was unforgettable. Use simile, metaphor, hyperbole, and personification to convey this experience. Create a mood where all details contribute to a unified feeling in the same way that a scene in a film creates a mood. Think lighting, soundtrack, camera angles, camera position, and all the features that draw you into a film and use figurative language as your cinematic techniques.

## **Prompt #19: Breakthrough**

We call it a breakthrough when we undergo a transformation. You might be living your life one way, and suddenly, you have what's called an epiphany. You decide you need to start making different choices. You know something new you didn't know before – such as who your true friends are, or where you want to work, or how you wish to live. You make a change.

Write about a breakthrough you've had. Describe yourself before and after this change of mind or heart, and discuss how it's impacted you since.

## **Prompt #20: New Year's Resolutions**

### Option #1: My Take on Resolutions

Did you make any resolutions this New Year? Why or why not?

Choose a quotation and comment on how it does or doesn't reflect your views about New Year's resolutions. Or, create your own quotation and discuss

#### **Charles Lamb**

New Year's Day is every man's birthday.

#### **Oprah Winfrey**

Cheers to a New Year and another chance for us to get it right.

#### **Mark Twain**

New Year's Day... now is the accepted time to make your regular annual good resolutions. Next week you can begin paving hell with them as usual.

#### **Oscar Wilde**

Good resolutions are simply checks that men draw on a bank where they have no account.

#### **Brooks Atkinson**

Drop the last year into the silent limbo of the past. Let it go, for it was imperfect, and thank God that it can go.

### Option #2: I Resolve, for the World...

Write a New Year's resolution for humanity. What do people of the world need now, more than ever?

### Option #3: Dream It and It Will Come

Visualize that it's December, 2009, and your goal for the year is met. What will you be doing? Describe yourself in detail, using the five senses. Show yourself enjoying the fruits of your resolution.

### **Prompt #21: A Time for Toughness**

You have survived many different periods of your life. There were, as Charles Dickens writes, the best of times and the worst of times. Consider one of the worst of these moments in your history. What got you through it?

Write about the toughness in you that helped you survive it. You might not have thought yourself tough at the time, but you're still here, aren't you? What was the challenge, and how did you face it? Return to a moment where your toughness manifested.

### **Prompt #22: Grandpa's Gumption**

Who is an ancestor you admire deeply or an older role model in your life, representing a particular kind of courage?

Define gumption as you have seen it in those you admire. Gumption – guts, spunk, courage – is the stuff of survival. Some also define it as shrewdness. Think how gumption has shown itself in those you respect.

Tell an anecdote that is one you could tell for many years and to future generations. Record a bit of history for posterity.

### **Prompt #23: Deadlines and Me**

What is your relationship with deadlines? Are they friend or foe? How often do you meet them?

Write a dialogue with Deadlines. Deadlines is the thing, entity, person, or whatever you wish it to be, as long as you have a conversation with it, and your only job is to have a conversation. The only rule is that Deadlines gets the last word.

### **Bonus Prompt: Tougher Than the Rest**

Read the lyrics to Bruce Springsteen’s “Tougher Than the Rest,” and if you can, listen to his singing or a cover of this song.

What kind of a character does Springsteen paint for us? What does “tough” mean in this context?

Write the lyrics of a new version of “Tougher Than the Rest.” Take the first-person point of view of someone or something that believes s/he’s tougher than the rest.

### **Prompt #24: The Happiness Ladder**

What choices do you make that make you happy? Have you ever helped someone, made a tough choice or sacrifice, or worked really hard, and then found happiness? Have you ever made a friend who brought you great happiness?

People sometimes use a ladder to refer to the path toward success. Describe your ladder and give details about what choices, people, and places are at each rung. Most importantly, what’s at the top of the ladder?

### **Prompt #25: Mantras**

A mantra is a saying, often sacred, that you invoke when you need it. If you don’t think in spiritual terms, consider it a formula and counsel; if you consider yourself spiritual, think of it as an invocation or incantation. You can create it or borrow it from someone else.

Write down several short sayings that come to you when times are tough. These might be one word or several; they might be famous quotes, quotes from friends, or lines you devised yourself when you most needed them.

Then write about a time when this mantra helped you or could have helped you.

### **Prompt #26: Public or Private?**

To some people, privacy is essential and where they must retreat to find energy; to others, being out in the public sphere is the only place to be, and they are energized by being around others. Are you one of these types of people, or are you a little of both?

Discuss what gives you more energy - private or public spaces - and identify those places, times, and events that are energy giving or energy depleting.

### **Prompt #27: Dream Retreat**

Imagine that you are designing a Dream Retreat for someone like you, providing every benefit, amenity, and luxury you can think of. The features of this retreat must leave you relaxed, happy, and ready to go back to work. What would such a place look, sound, smell, taste, and feel like? Use sensory detail, simile, metaphor, and personification to capture this place. If you're feeling inspired, write the radio or TV commercial describing such a place.

### **Prompt #28: Sounds Different This Time**

Sometimes, after hearing a story or song or reading a book for the tenth time, it suddenly sounds different. Something leaps out at us that did not before. What is it that strikes us this time?

Take a favorite story you were told often as a child or a book you often read, or take a song you heard over and over again. Jot down all the details and lines you can remember. Then pick a favorite part and analyze it. What makes it so special and revealing? How does the story or song relate to you? Why does it matter so much to you?

Write a letter to a child who needs to hear this story or song. It could be someone you know, a child of the future you imagine, or the child within. Explain to the child why this story or song could make a difference.

**Prompt #29: No is Good**

When is someone telling you no a good thing?

Think about a mistake you have made or even a good choice you once made where someone stopped you or told you no. Even if the encounter was unpleasant, looking back, you now see this person was helpful to you. Why? How? How can no be a good thing? Explain by describing the time or writing a letter to that person in thanks for what s/he did.