True stories, well told.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

HOW WE TEACH

In the classroom, the kitchen, a rehab center, the dentist’s office, overseas, and everywhere

ISSUE 63

PLUS: Ted Conover on the importance of crossing boundaries; MFA students should leave campus more often; writing at high speed; tiny truths; and more

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WHAT IS the Statue of Liberty thinking?

Brainstorm a little, but then just go. Write for twenty minutes. Don’t worry about spelling or grammar or if your idea is good. Try to write neatly since you’re doing this by hand and I’ll need to read it later. Put away all screens, and pop out your headphones. No tech or talking for twenty minutes. After time is up, we’ll go around and share first lines. OK, begin.

I gave this prompt to my freshman high school writing classes at Avenues: The World School, located in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan, the week after the 2016 presidential election. I’d planned the lesson far in advance, hoping the question would provoke thought no matter who won. It didn’t hurt that a palpable sense of disorientation hung in the air above our heads, which is not always desirable for life but often makes for bold writing. Here are some of Lady Liberty’s musings:

I should have stayed in France.
You people are in my head, so you think you know me.
Dear America: You’ve changed a lot since 1776.

It’s one of my greatest pleasures as a teacher to hear these fun and inventive lines read aloud in class. The students learn to overcome their fear of being judged—a huge psychological component of the writing process—and they hear the class react to their words.
Having everyone share is key. Avenues classrooms have circular tables so students can look each other in the eye.

Inevitably, with this type of prompt, one or two students insist on being literal. “The Statue of Liberty cannot think. It’s made of steel.” This is fine. Without calling out the students in class, I make a note on their essays and encourage them to imagine that the Statue of Liberty can think, to try and leap into the head of an inanimate object and bring it to life on paper.

And for the next class, I prepare a lesson on literal versus metaphorical thinking. I want them to think in metaphor, to see the hills as white elephants, to make a foray into the world of language, what Robin Wall Kimmerer calls “a metaphor.”

This is the format for every class: twenty to twenty-five minutes of writing, ten of sharing, and ten more of micro-instruction from me—forty-five minutes total, twice a week. Every class, I give new prompts; in fact, I often give a choice of three in case one proves more inspiring than another. My students write in notebooks, not on computers, to minimize distraction. (Never mind the temptations of the Internet—imagine eighteen pairs of hands clacking away.) It’s also so we—and they—can monitor their progress.

If, flipping through the history of the notebook, I notice a student writing in strict essay format each time, I suggest they next compose an answer using a scene, dialogue, or even, if they want, a poem. If they write poems all the time, I suggest they try a formal essay. One student, an aspiring vocalist, sometimes writes in lyrics.

At the start of each class, I choose two students who produced strong essays from the previous prompt and have them read their works to the class. Then I introduce the new prompt. If they’re feeling sluggish, we brainstorm a few ideas on the dry-erase board, but then they’re off, foraging on their own, and I’m left supervising a table of silent writers, which epitomizes the old teaching canard: “The one doing the most talking is the one doing the most learning.”

In this case, the one doing the most writing is the one doing the most learning. And our students write a lot. Class after class. All year. Our intimate team of five teachers conducts sessions for the sixth to eleventh grades, with twelve to eighteen students in each class. We don’t give lectures on, say, empathy. The students’ job is to jump into the sandbox and play with a prompt such as “What is the hardest read, read, read. We don’t give grades or homework, and we don’t look for polished mechanics. As my supervisor, Todd Shy, says, “We’re in this for the long game.”

This process is formally called High Intensity Practice writing, or HIP. As far as I know, the acronym was born at Avenues, and the program is unlike anywhere else. (If I’m wrong, I’d like to hear from you.) The long game is to develop in these young minds the major habits of creativity, empathy, and critical thinking—all under the umbrella of cognitive flexibility. We’re trying to mold writers who can write from the perspective of their least favorite relative on the holidays or of

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**What better way to inspire young minds than by allowing them space to experiment outside the normal pressures of the school day?**

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own. (Wouldn’t it be great if we had them
take the “alternate facts” of a historical event?
Hey, that gives me an idea for a story.)

And lest one think we are not prepping students for the “real world”
or college admissions, consider the
following questions, which have appeared on university applications and
job postings for major corporations:

University of Chicago: So where is
Waldo, really?

Wake Forest University: Give us
your top ten list.

University of Richmond: Tell us
about spiders.

Google: How many ways can you
think of to find a needle in a haystack?
and If you could be remembered for one
sentence, what would it be?

As you can see, HIP isn’t just ahead of
the curve—it is the curve. But while
our team may have created the frame-
work for these methods, we’re just
circling around to another shopworn
maxim: “Practice makes perfect.”

By the end of the year, students will
have spent a total of 1,200-1,500
minutes—that’s twenty to twenty-five
hours—generating fifty to sixty pieces
of writing. If they spend their whole
career at Avenues, multiply those
numbers by seven.

Naturally, some students are hostile
to the idea that HIP will make them
better writers, but they’re also in
high school and hostile to a great deal
of their work. I get it; I’ve been in
their overworked, hormonal shoes.
I often wish I’d practiced HIP in
high school, although I did have the
next best thing: a “Writing Lab”
(or workshop) run by the novelist
Wally Lamb before he sold his first
novel. A writer himself, he provided
a quiet place amid our hectic days,
a place where our work was read
aloud, shared, and valued. My fellow
students fondly remember Mr.
Lamb’s lab as one of the best parts of
our education.

Now, in my adult life, in my daily
writing practice, I’m still amazed that
so basic a skill takes so much time to
master, even after one has clocked
Malcolm Gladwell’s ten thousand
hours—the number he claims you
need to be a successful outlier. (If I
dared tell my students this stat, I’m
sure they’d spontaneously combust.)

I’ve tried to adapt the HIP method
to the college and adult education
writing classes that I’ve taught in New
York City, but I’ve found a slight
resistance, from both teachers and
students. I can empathize with this, too.
For a professional faculty of working
writers, the exercises are one more
thing to read. For older students, it
somehow feels childish and a waste of
time. How will these pitiful exercises
lead to the Great American Novel?
Or publication in the New Yorker?
They just want the secrets of writing.
Quick! They’re not young anymore,
and their time on this planet is short!

RECENTLY, at Avenues, we flipped
the script, instructing students to
create prompts of their own and vote
on the ones they liked best. We made
it into a contest; the five best essays
resulting from the prompts would
win a Moleskine notebook and gift
cards, and the class that produced
the prompt that produced the best
writing would get a snack during
class. Most prompts were excellent—Write a believable fake news story.
Was 2016 really that bad?—but the one
that proved the most popular made
me cringe:

Why did the chicken cross the road?
Really, class? Really? We gave you
carte blanche to come up with any-
thing, and you chose the undisputed
king of rhetorical clichés? Though

I dreaded this chicken would be a
turkey, I didn’t undermine their vote;
if we learned nothing else in 2016, it’s
that democracy is sometimes a bitter
pill to swallow.

But as my Catholic mother used to
lecture, “Oh ye of little faith.” I’d for-
gotten our mission, my own teaching.
The cliché produced some of the best
writing: chickens escaping from fac-
tory farms to start a new life, chickens
questioning the need for asphalt roads
in farm country, chickens crossing the
road as a metaphor for the refugee crisis.
Wonderful stuff. A teacher’s dream.

Recently, a junior admitted to me
he once disliked HIP but had changed
his mind. “I realize,” he said, “that if
a HIP prompt doesn’t seem interest-
ing or relevant, that’s more of a
commentary on me than the prompt,
and I need to ask myself to think
about it differently.”

Bravo. That’s HIP in a nutshell.

That same week, I started taking
kung fu classes, precisely to get off my
writing butt and sweat through a dif-
f erent kind of high intensity practice.
Surely, I thought, there would be a
little instruction for novices before
we started. Nope. Form a line! Show
me your bow stance! Stop looking at your
feet! Are you looking for spare change?
Look ahead into your bright future! Faster!
Harder! More Chi!

So I kicked, flailed, flopped, and
cartwheeled across the temple, not
caring how I looked, just trying
to keep up. I’d like to imagine our
students’ minds operating in much the
same way, the HIP mantra—Cognitive
flexibility via creativity, empathy, and
critical thinking—ricocheting from
synapse to synapse, bending and
bouncing from brain to pen to page,
producing critical thought and em-
pathic thinking, and planting, hope-
fully, the seeds for a more nimble,
creative, and empathic future.