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Word into Idea: A Creative Writing Exercise

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Introduction/Abstract

This exercise updates my article in the March/April 1997 *Teachers and Writers* 28:4, 5-8. It begins from an aleatory technique that creates a list of 104 associatively generated words to provide each participant with a field from which they improvise, first a free-form poem using twenty of the words and then an experimental prose piece that uses all 104 words. The poem is written as a workshop activity and optionally shared in a "poetry slam" segment, following which the prose piece is done as a home assignment. The activity takes 90-120 minutes. A version for synchronous online application is in development.

Materials

A sheet of lined paper with at least 27 rows and a writing implement. The template at this link may be used. Random alphabet sequences are available at Deranged Alphabet Generator.

Procedure -- The facilitator also participates. Optional items/observations are in italics.

1. Seated in a circle, participants are instructed to fold the paper vertically into four equal columns. If the template is not used, each places the number 1 and their initials at the top of the left-hand column. On the template, they initial beside the number. Each writes, down the left edge of the paper, a predetermined sequence of the alphabet, one lowercase letter to a line.

2. Participants are prompted to use the list of letters to begin words "you think would be interesting to write with" and are given time to write the list. *Letting participants exchange ideas and help each other enhances the exercise.*

3. At completion, the paper is passed to the participant on each participant's right and each initials the right adjacent column and numbers it 2.

4. Participants are prompted to fill out the second column with words they associate from each of the words in the first column, one to each line, and given time to write the list. It is vitally important to stress that the initial letters no longer matter, a significant source of confusion!

5. At completion, column 1 is folded out of sight and each participant numbers and initials the top of column 3 and adds a new list of associations as before, but from column 2. *Hiding used columns is optional but may produce more "refined" associations. The exercise works either way.*

6**.** The first and second columns are folded back and passed right, the top of column 4 is numbered and initialed and the fourth column is filled in as before.

7. Participants unfold their pages and consider the 26 lines of four associations. They're asked to pick the four or five sets they find most interesting and to read them aloud.

8. Participants discuss the associations and are encouraged to make analytical observations and generalizations about them. This may be done as a group exercise, but with time constraints in mind. What do these chains of association show about how people think creatively?

9. Participants are prompted to tear their documents along the folds into four vertical columns. Each retains their own fourth columns and passes the other column to their left. Then each retains their third column and passes the remaining two columns and so on until each participant has their own four columns in numbered order.

10. Participants are prompted to read through these "second-level associations," to consider the new juxtapositions and to select five interesting lines that are then read aloud.

11. Participants discuss the associations and are encouraged to make analytical observations and generalizations about them. Again, small-group discussion is optional.

12. Participants are prompted to create a poem using all twenty of their own words they chose, first to choose one for a title and then to proceed. They are told they may use as many other words as they need and freely change the grammatical forms of any of their own words, as well as make any other changes that suit their creative purposes. *Effective transition to the freely creative part of the exercise is an important counterforce to the mechanistic quality of what's gone before. Discussion of questions like "What makes a poem a poem?" can add to the experience, time permitting, raising issues such as whether it must rhyme or be set up in stanzas and what makes a line. "Does it have to make sense?" often arises and allows for encouragement to try not to!*

13. At the point there is sufficient time remaining, those who are finished and willing to share are invited to share their poems, either to read them aloud or designate someone else to do so. Their freedom not to do so is emphasized.

14. . Participants are told to keep their own lists and given instructions for a take-home exercise, reproduced below. for which they will create an experimental prose piece.

15. A final survey is conducted in which participants respond anonymously to the exercise and the results are read aloud by the instructor. *It is useful to distribute notecards for this part of the activity.*

Instructions for the take-home exercise
<u>**Basic Rules**</u>
-- Use all 104 words you listed.
-- Use any other words you need to connect between your list words.
-- Feel free to change any of your words in any way necessary: make nouns plural, verbs into related
     nouns or *vice versa*, or change endings of verbs.
-- You may use any word more than once.
-- Be free; don't censor: free speech and experiment are our objectives. Don't worry about "making
     sense,"
-- Do not underline or otherwise call attention to your list words in your text.
-- Write it in paragraphs, text or any visual format that appeals to you.

<u>**Structural Rules**</u> -- These are arbitrary and may be any you choose but I avoid the alphabetic words in column 1.
-- The eleventh word in the third column is your title
-- The seventh word in the fourth column is the first word in your text.
-- The seventeenth word in the second column is the final word in your text.

Discussion

Originally developed in the course "Writing About It" which I taught with Ann Rower in the mid-1970s at the Free Association in New York City, this exercise has proved a high point of creative writing workshops at St. Mark's Poetry Project, Poetry in the Schools and Our Souls Bounce Like a Ball, a project in Marilyn Kaggen's Special Education Classes at Public School 15, the Patrick J. Daley School in Red Hook, Brooklyn. The activity has since been a mainstay of my introduction to the first freshman writing course at various branches of CUNY and Long Island University. It has been a high point of the term for participants at all levels.

To the best of my understanding, the usefulness of the exercise lies in how, functioning in much the same manner as a the word association projective test, through the distraction of the initial associative activity, it enables participants to access a significant quantity of preconscious content which, when presented all together – the "surprise" of the exercise when columns are reassembled for each author – allows each participant to form an unanticipated *gestalt* from which the poem and subsequent prose piece readily proceed. The reversal of the usual dictum that accompanies composition, "Put your ideas into words" allows for pleasurably effortless production of a completed work which speaks from a level of which the author may not have been fully aware, but ideally remains accessible for subsequent writing endeavors.

In pilot testing for development of an online version of this exercise, the element of anonymity, about which I have written in detail as described here, has emerged as an encouragement to participation. Able to post their poems anonymously on a shared document, participants enthusiastically collaborate in creating an online anthology, from which further exercises of an analytic or creative nature may be developed. Modifications which allow for anonymity in the physical classroom should offer similar benefits.