

An Exercise in Automatic Writing

Introduction

The following is an automatic writing exercise for a group of 3+ participants. Anybody can use this exercise, whether they've been writing for a million gazillion years or have never written a thing, whether they're looking for inspiration or looking for a different way to connect to the written word or just interested in working within other states of consciousness.

Below is a transcript that a facilitator of an automatic writing workshop can follow, but first, I've jotted down a few words on automatic writing and how it works as a collaborative process. I would also suggest that the facilitator get acquainted with the history / idea of automatic writing before hosting the workshop / session, and I've provided some recommended readings after the exercises. Have fun!

On Automatic Writing

First of all, automatic writing is the writing of doing. It is not representing. It is alive and it is live.

Collaborative automatic writing, that is, writing automatically in a group setting, connects us as a group and connects us to writing as a gesture; it de-envelops writing from a product or any sense of "ownership" and as such it is a subversive gesture.

Automatic writing is driven by curiosity. It's not a writing whose desire is to entertain, it is a writing whose desire is to learn.

With automatic writing, we're working directly with the elements of time, space, and material, where the work cannot be separated from the body. In this sense, automatic writing is similar to other automatic functions, like walking, breathing. Automatic writing destabilizes preconceived notions of "owning" the things we write. Do we imagine we author our footprints? Our breath? When we apply this line of thinking to writing, the demands of authorship fall away.

In collaborative automatic writing, we're not isolated as writers but rather working together, falling into rhythm and working at different paces within this rhythm.

This exercise is a suggestion on how to practice automatic writing and writing as a collaborative act, where body, medium, and work become interchangeable, and where any easy assumptions between the focused and wandering mind become challenged.

There is an entire history of this kind of automatic writing—also called

spirit writing, trance writing, or psychography—stretching back to the Spiritualists of the 19th century, a largely female labour force of mediums who deferred authorship and referred to themselves not “writers,” but as “transmitters” or “recorders.”

The focus in this exercise is on the process of writing—so, writing as an act rather than writing as a product.

Note: depending on the facilitator and the participants, this exercise could involve being put into a light hypnotic state. This is not everybody’s cup of tea, so please give the participants fair warning!

Setting up the Exercise

To create a setting that fosters collaborative writing, I recommend handing out graph paper for the participants to write on so that each participant has a similar page-space.

Ask participants to take out their pens/pencils and put them in the center of the table. Each participant should then select a pen/pencil that is not their own.

This exercise is best held around a table, where each person has ample space to write but is not separated from the writer on either side of them.

That’s it: writing utensil, paper, and a quiet and comfortable place to write. Anything else can of course be brought in by the facilitator as they see fit.

Before beginning, tell the participants how long they will be writing for. I would suggest 10–20 minutes, but this can vary depending on your timeframe.

Optional: before beginning, you can prompt the participants to ask a question they would like the writing session to answer. If they choose to do this, they can write the question at the top of the page before beginning.

Facilitator’s Transcript # 1: Automatic Writing

The following transcript is an example of how to lead participants into a state of automatic writing. It should be tailored to the situation.

Opening the Session

Put your hands flat on table in front of you with the paper and the pen also in front of you.

Take 3 deep breaths, eyes open.

1, 2, 3.

Now, close your eyes.

Feel your hands on the table in front of you. Feel the air in the room. Feel the light coming through the windows.

Feel the people on either side of you and in front of you.

Feel how everything is connected. Even my voice is connected not only to my body, but also to the room, to the people next to you, to the paper in front of you.

Listen to the sound the air makes. Feel your self as connected to the air.

Now imagine all the objects in the room. The table. The walls. The computers.

Feel that everything has its own life, the different lives are just slower or faster, heavier or lighter, but everything is alive in its own way.

Now imagine yourself looking at your own body from outside of yourself.

Feel how you are at once in your body and you can see your body from the outside. Look down at your body from a bird's-eye view. Look down at the room.

You see yourself, the people beside you, the paper and the pens on the table. See how relaxed and how ready you are and how relaxed and ready the people beside you are.

Now come down into your own body, fully, and feel your limbs. Feel how your feet touch the floor. How your hands touch the table. Feel how relaxed you are and alive you are. You are connected to the people around you.

Imagine the page in front of you. Know that it is alive and it has a mind of its own.

Imagine the pen in front of the page and know that it is alive and has a mind of its own.

You feel connected to this pen and this paper and you feel that you are getting ready to begin.

If you picked a question you would like to ask, remember it now and know that as you do this, the paper and pen already know the question, so you do not have to try to think about it.

Without moving, imagine that you have already begun to write on the paper. Take a second to see this in your mind. You have already begun.

What you are writing is not important. Maybe they are words you are writing. Maybe they are shapes. Maybe you are drawing on the paper. Maybe you are writing.

I'm going to count from 10 to 1 and when I get to 1 you will open your eyes and you will start to write.

It does not matter what you write or how you write because this writing has

already been going on for a very long time before you. In fact, this writing has been going on before you were born and will continue when you are not here anymore.

I'm going to count backwards from 10 and when I get to 1 you will open your eyes and begin to write.

10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

Now, open your eyes and when you are ready, begin to write.

Closing the Session

Now, very slowly, you are starting to come out of the writing and back into the room.

Very slowly, you can feel your pen like a magnet moving itself away from the page and the page like a magnet moving itself away from the pen, and all the writing that exists on the page, all this writing that began before you started writing it, will continue after you stop writing it. Very slowly, you feel the pen stop moving against the page.

Now, put your pen down beside the page and place your hands flat against the table. Close your eyes.

Feel your palms against the table and your feet against the floor. Feel the air against your skin. The light against your skin. Feel all the bodies and all the objects in the room and feel yourself as a part of them and at once as separate from them. Feel yourself alive and awake and present in the room.

I'm going to count forward from 1 to 10 and when I reach 10 you will open your eyes and be present in the room and awake and relaxed.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10.

Can we perform what we wrote?

Recommended Readings

- David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon Books), 1996.
- Giorgio Agamben, *The Open*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 2004.
- Jane Bennett, "The Force of Things: Steps Toward an Ecology of Matter," *Political Theory* 32.3 (June 2004): 347–72.
- Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *Collected Writings* (Madras: Theosophical Publications House), 1950–91.
- CA Conrad and Frank Sherlock, *End-Begin w/ Chants* (Philadelphia: Mooncalf Press), 2001.
- Hélène Gauchou, et al., "Expression of Nonconscious Knowledge via Ideomotor Actions," *Consciousness and Cognition* 21.2 (June 2012): 976–82.

- Bette London, *Writing Double: Women's Literary Partnerships* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 1999.
- Steve McCaffery, ed., *Imaginary Languages* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press), 1998.
- Gisèle Prassinos, *La Revanche* (Paris: Librairie G. L. M.), 1939.
- Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press), 2000.
- Isabelle Stengers and Phillippe Pignarre, *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 2011.
- W. B. Yeats, *A Vision* [1937] (New York: Collier Books), 1966.