

# Introduction

“One line of a poem, the poet said—only one line, but thank God for that one line—drops from the ceiling. . . . and you tap in the others around it with a jeweler’s hammer.”

—Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*, pp.77-78

“The simple rhythm of copying someone else’s words gets us into the rhythm (of writing), then you begin to feel your own words.”

—William Forrester, *Finding Forrester*

“. . . because, for one thing, becoming a better writer is going to help you become a better reader, and that is the real payoff.”

—Anne LaMott, *Bird by Bird*

Several times a week, at the beginning of class, I put a short piece of writing on the overhead projector, read it out loud, and ask students to do a *quickwrite* in response. The results of this simple routine are astounding. Consider the following example, written by Lindsay O. after I read aloud Cynthia Rylant’s picture book *When I Was Young in the Mountains*.

## **Remembrance**

*For my grandmother, Clarice Smith Chapman, 1914- 1989*

I remember . . . we collected wild strawberries  
And made mud pies and built  
Block houses and guided  
Our cart down the supermarket aisle  
And picked carrots and washed  
Dishes and baked cookies and cut  
Paper dolls and watched chickadees  
And played checkers and ate scrambled eggs and  
Took our time on the stairs  
And you never told me you were dying.

I wanted the chance to say goodbye.

Powerful. But not so exceptional that other students couldn’t do just as well. I’ve found that inviting students to write off a found idea or borrowed line for just two to three



minutes produces good writing—often *really* good writing. Students are always surprised by the thinking that spills out on the page. I used to be; I'm not anymore. (I now use Lindsay's poem as a model for quickwrites, to stimulate the thinking and writing of other students; it's included in this collection on page 64.)

## What Is a Quickwrite?

A *quickwrite* is a first draft response to a short piece of writing (usually no more than one page of poetry or prose, or a short picture book). To do a quickwrite, students and teacher write for two to three minutes off a found idea or borrowed line from a text, responding to something that sparks a reaction in the mind of the reader/listener. This process helps writers generate ideas and get words on paper. When I have students do a quickwrite, I specifically ask them to:

- write as quickly as they can for two to three minutes, capturing all that comes to mind in response to the work as a whole, or
- borrow a line or part of a line (one of their own choosing or a particular line that I suggest) from the work and write off (or from) that line nonstop for two to three minutes, or
- use a specific line or particular style as a model from which to write, as in the example of suggestions for Lindsay's poem, "In Remembrance: For My Grandmother, Clarice Smith Chapman."

The main purpose of doing a quickwrite is simply to get words on paper. For years I watched students staring into space, claiming they had nothing to write about. Just telling them to "write anything" didn't help; they already couldn't think of "anything." Quickwrites stimulate their thinking so that they can find words. Joel, an eighth grader, told me one day, "The quickwrites help me write down some things I didn't remember I knew. When I see them it makes me *want* to write, so I *do* write."

I can't work in a void, and neither can students. Quickwrites help them find words for their ideas in a concrete way. Once students have words on paper, I can help them develop those thoughts into effective, compelling pieces of writing. Quickwrites help all of us get out of the void.

## The Benefits of Quickwrites

Writing and teaching writing can be intimidating. It is hard work, and it takes time. Quickwrites offer an easy and manageable writing experience that helps both students and teachers find their voices and develop their confidence, as they discover that they have important things to say. This quick exercise pulls words out of the writer's mind, and I am always surprised at the precision of language, level of depth and detail, and clarity of focus I hear when a student reads a three-minute quickwrite out loud. When the models for quickwrites are compelling and carefully chosen, students are able to focus closely and write clearly.





Over the years of using these invitations to write with students in my classroom and with teachers in workshops and courses, I've discovered so many of their benefits:

*Quickwrites bring out the writer.* They:

- give students ideas and frames for their writing so that they are not working in a void.
- focus students' attention and stimulate their thinking at the beginning of a class.
- provide and capture the seeds of ideas for more expanded pieces.
- encourage writing about important ideas, chosen to make us think and feel as we learn.
- give students choices about what they write, how they write, and what works and does not work.
- help students focus on one subject in great detail by giving them examples filled with sensory detail.
- introduce students to a variety of stylistic devices and craft lessons they might try in their writing.

*Quickwrites build students' confidence.* They:

- offer surprise when students discover that they didn't realize how much they knew, or what they were thinking, until they began writing.
- build confidence when students see the quality of their writing.
- make writing accessible to all students, even those who struggle the most with words and ideas, because quickwrites are short, quick, non-threatening, and directed toward a specific task.

*Quickwrites develop fluency.* They:

- keep students writing several times a week.
- keep students writing beyond the quickwrite when they find themselves committed to a topic that matters to them.
- offer ongoing practice for writing in sensible, realistic, and meaningful ways on demand or in timed situations.

*Quickwrites bring out the reader.* They:

- teach students to become better readers as they hear, see, and craft language.
- teach students critical reading as they choose significant lines, and then draft and reconsider their ideas in the clearest ways.
- provide examples of fine, compelling writing from their peers, their teacher, and professional writers.
- introduce students to a variety of writers: poets, essayists, and fiction and nonfiction writers.

*Quickwrites help teachers grow as writers.* They

- allow us time to write for two to three minutes each class period.
- help us find ideas for writing and our voices as writers.
- clarify our understanding of the difficulty of the task we are asking students to complete, because we're doing what we've asked them to do.



## Dandelions

I am a dreamer.

I want to fly,  
but I run instead.

I see myself in the eyes of a cat,  
a shadow even at night, and  
I am a shadow too.

I am the dandelion nobody loves.  
I am softer than peach fuzz,  
not sleek like the cat,  
curled on the sill  
basking in bubbles of sunlight,  
sunlight and feline,  
bright and warm and beautiful.

Not like me.  
Not like me.

Don't relate me to daffodils,  
I am neither fair nor sweet.

Don't say I am a lion,  
I am not brave.

Don't match my petals to the locks  
of a golden-haired girl.

Please *feel* my radiance.

Brush my pollen kiss across each cheek.  
Glance my way and see my  
sunny smile.

Watch me stretch,  
though I do not compare to the agile cat.

Watch me mourn with the earth  
as raindrops slide from my foliage;  
I have a heart that can be broken.

Watch me shudder  
when the wind tries my strength,  
and in the end I will  
stand tall still.

Watch as each petal is replaced  
with tufts of clouds, each clinging  
to a single seed, each seed  
a synonym of life itself,  
floating on the breeze.

Watch these words become my wings  
and then  
Watch me fly.

*Graeham D.*

### Try this:

- Write as quickly and as specifically as you can all that this poem brings to mind for you.
- Borrow any line from this poem and write as quickly as you can all that the line brings to mind, letting the line lead your thinking.



## Jen

I asked you to dance,  
But you were still crying.  
I gave you a rose,  
But you were still depressed.  
I gave you a teddy bear,  
But you never received it.  
I gave you a porcelain unicorn,  
But you were still broken up.  
I tried to be nice,  
I tried to comfort you,  
I tried to help you,  
But none of it worked  
So I cried.  
And you don't know  
How much it would mean to me  
Just to see you,  
Smile.

*Jeff B.*

### Try this:

- For 2–3 minutes, write as quickly as you can about any experience this brings to mind for you.
- Borrow any line from this poem and write for 2–3 minutes, letting the line lead your thinking.

*When I first started liking girls, about the time I was thirteen and in seventh grade, I often couldn't concentrate on my homework, which I did at the public library. I would look up, and there would be a girl I could like. G.S.*

## That Girl

The public library was saying things  
In so many books,  
And I, Catholic boy  
In a green sweater,  
Was reading the same page  
A hundred times.  
A girl was in my way,  
Protestant or Jew.  
And she was at the other end  
Of the oak table,  
Her hands like doves  
On the encyclopedia, E-G.  
England, I thought,  
Germany before the war?  
She'll copy from that book,  
Cursive like waves  
Riding to the shore,  
And tomorrow walk across lawns  
In a public school dress  
With no guilt pulling at an ear.  
And me? I'll kick  
My Catholic shoes through  
Leaves, stand in the  
Cloakroom and eat

A friend's lunch. My work  
Was never finished.  
My maps were half-colored,  
History a stab in the dark,  
And fractions the inside  
Of a pocket watch  
Spilled on my desk.  
I was no good. And who do I  
Blame? That girl.  
When she scribbled a pink  
Eraser and her pony  
Tails bounced like skirts,  
I looked up, gazed for what  
My mother and sister could not  
Offer, then returned to  
The same sentence: *The Nile  
Is the longest river in the world.*  
A pencil rolled from the  
Table when she clicked open  
Her binder. I looked up,  
Gazed, looked back down:  
The Nile is the longest river...  
*Gary Soto from A Fire in My Hands*

### Try this:

- For 2–3 minutes, write as quickly as you can all that Soto's words bring to mind for you.
- Borrow any line and write as quickly and as specifically as you can all that comes to mind, letting the line lead your thinking.

## Time Somebody Told Me

Time Somebody Told Me  
That I am lovely, good and real  
That I am beautiful inside  
If they only knew  
How that would make me feel.

Time Somebody Told Me  
That my mind is quick, sharp  
And full of wit  
That I should keep on trying  
And never quit.

Time Somebody Told Me  
How they loved and needed me  
How my smile is filled with hope  
And my spirit sets them free  
How my eyes shine, full of light  
How good they feel when they hug me tight.

Time Somebody Told Me  
So, I had a talk with myself  
Just me, nobody else  
'cause it was time  
Somebody Told Me

*Quantedius Hall from You Hear Me?*  
*Edited by Betsy Franco*

### Try this:

- For 2–3 minutes, write as quickly as you can all that this poem brings to mind for you.
- Borrow any line and write as quickly and as specifically as you can all that comes to mind, letting the line lead your thinking.
- Borrow the line “Time Somebody Told Me . . .” and write as quickly and as specifically as you can, letting the line lead your thinking, or write about all that you wish someone did tell you.