

PLAYTIME for your subconscious

In three freewheeling exercises, the author invites you to take risks and follow the unexpected wherever it leads. Try them and you just might become a more imaginative, powerful writer.

By Andy Couturier

COULD YOU BE open to the proposition that the murky and quirky part of your mind is wiser than the thrust-and-parry datebook mind? Here we have discovery by means of imagination. No need to grip the steering wheel so tight. Enjoyment is what it's all about. Let go. The mind likes that. It responds well to indulgence. People talk about "free writing." Free. Writing.

What would it be to write totally free? To be liberated from all the niggling habits, the tendency to adopt a certain stance? What might your mind do and say if it weren't in the office drafting memos? A sassafras hallelujah hickey zowie brainstorm.

Writing discovers your own life. Don't box it. Don't expect it or force it to be this or that. The way most of us approach writing, we're stuck in the detention room. But when we give ourselves permission to play, the subconscious is liberated and makes patterns outside of the analyzing mind, and those patterns are far more complex and rich than a strict Euclidean geometry cleansed of all the burrs, rough edges and tangled seaweed clumps.

The reason I wrote *Open the Mind: Tapping the Subconscious to Free the Writing and the Writer* was to give you a delicious compendium of tricks, stratagems and experiments to let you into your own sub-

conscious world. I offer you three of my experiments below.

Remember, these gateways to the subconscious work when you remain open and watching and delighted. Let us be interested in the New. Inexplicable. Bonk!

1 Cobblings

The first liberation involves listing. Writing a list, there's nothing you can do wrong. The fact of the list asks you to add to it: It's an endless cabinet of blank spaces, with invisible slots that ask to be filled.

Choose something you've been wanting to write about. Anything is good. Surgery. Archery. Cliques in high school. Global warming. Anything at all. You've got things you want to write about. Choose one.

Now write five column headings. We're going to be playing here with abundance—plenty, lots. The headings are: Scenes, Moods, Questions,



Concepts and Faces.

Scenes are places. Moods are feelings. Questions—or "Mysteries," if you prefer—are things you still don't know. (Not knowing is interesting, and just because we don't know an answer we don't have to avoid writing about the question.) Concepts are ideas, thoughts you have about something. And faces are people, people associated with this topic, and you can see them in your mind.

Now take about seven minutes

and write down every single association or connection you have in your brain about said Topic, and fill up all of these columns. You will not be held accountable for using or even explaining all your list items, so just put down whatever you think you might use. This is because plenty is good. You don't need to fill a single column first—jump all over the place. For example, you could let the question “Why *does* she act like that?” lead, inexplicably, to the concept “trust,” which engenders then, in rapid succession, “doubt,” “lies,” “frangipani,” “my second-cousin's messy car” and “Bob Hope.” Bob Hope, of course, is a Face, and it reminds you of despair. God knows why, it just does, and there it goes, down under Moods.

Keep moving like this. Don't stop. You won't have to *use* all these kernels and nuggets in the next part of this experiment, so if you have a little inkling to put something down, do it.

writing for each number. A chunk might be a few sentences. It might be a paragraph. It might be only a disconnected phrase. You write that chunk in any way or style that you want and then move on to the next item, *with no transition or padding*. That's important. We've been taught to move smoothly, putt-putt-putting the reader along. We've been taught transitions of logic, indoctrinated into a regular Ex-Lax ideology of slithering from one concept to the next. No! The mind likes to move around haphazardly: Let it jump. Try to fit in all nine chunks in 25 minutes, even if you have to stop midway in a bunch of them. Move ahead one leap at a time. If something unexpected and disconnected comes up, put it down: “Welcome, friend!”

Questions for the curious (for after you're finished):

So there it is. You can walk away from the page, get a cookie, stretch,

flash together and stored-up energy is released.

2 Wild and stuffy What is wild writing? Lots of cuss and swear words? A kind of rampage? Lewd? Screeching? Ask yourself, “If I were to write something irreversibly wild, what would it be? What instructions would I give myself?”

By swinging back and then forth, our Wild and Stuffy is going to give us the width of the spectrum. The stretch marks and the proofreader's marks. The loan sharks and the Noah's arks. By oscillating back and forth, we create space in between and freedom at the edge.

Let me also, professorially, say something about stuffy. We used to hate “stuffy”: the polysyllabic pomposity, the passive voice always ducking the blame, the insecure and baroque flourishes to make oneself sound important. But now “stuffy” can be a tool, a permission to go farther. Allow yourself (on occasion) to get *exceedingly* stuffy. Polarization stretches the limits.

Again you'll want to get “something” to write about. Put it down now at the top of the page. What we will do is go back and forth between stuffy and wild, oscillating six times.

Start with stuffy. Explicate carefully the theme under consideration. Speak genially of its nuances and aspect ratios. Adopt a thoroughly genteel air. Your countenance is cool, your manner precise. The timer is set. You have four minutes to pomp and to circumstance.

Suddenly!

Suddenly you go wild, you freakin' freak! The barrel over Niagara, the stalker, the football hooligan. Tear down the goalposts with a hoard of other screaming maniacs. Bark out commands. Let the furor roar. Four minutes, no more.

Now back to the library and the small pinch of snuff, decorum and sanity, “enough is enough.” The understatement, or the contrite soliloquy, the desideratum, not the fantasy. Four minutes.

And back! Ha haaa! You're horse-

Ask yourself, “If I were to write something irreversibly wild, what would it be?”

Writing has a mind of its own. That's OK. It's temperamental that way.

Got your lists? On to step 2. Now choose just one list item from any one of the columns that you think it would be interesting to start with, one that intrigues, and number it 1.

Next, range your eyes all over that piece of paper—any column is OK—and choose another item to “happen” after the first. We are not going for “flow” here. In this instance, we think flow is *bad*. We're looking for disjuncture. What would be an interesting leap? What would be a non-opposite, dissimilar connection here? Not logical, not illogical, just interesting to you. Write 2 next to that, and keep going. Choose one link/leap after the other and go up to 9.

Now for step 3: the writing of this, the cobbling together. What you'll do is write one “chunk” of

take a short footbath, and come back to the page. You could, of course, skip the footbath and all that, but sometimes it's a gift to read a piece with a different mindset than the one that wrote it.

So how do those gaps you've created work? How is this different from the way you normally write? Did the leaps create new connections in the wiring of your brain?

The mind of it: In this experiment, what we did is to *juxtapose* different parts against each other. The orangutans right up against the international financial markets. What's the connection? That's an interesting question. Really interesting. Let's not pre-decide an answer to it.

Each word in the world connects to a series of memories, ideas and emotions all over the brain. And when we juxtapose chunks, synapses

meat now, sucker! Four minutes.

And back, “Thus, the upshot of our thorough analysis is decidedly such.” Four minutes.

And again, mud wrestling amid the shameless hussies and the high-stakes bingo grannies. Four minutes.

Oscillate wider and wider, to the furthest extremes. Each apogee-parabola-hyperbole on one end goads on the next. Watch what your mind does as it goes on its spree. Finish when you have the six chunks.

Questions for the curious:

Well ... which was easier? Which felt more natural to the right-now you? When you swung back and forth, were there interpenetrations between Yin and Yang?

The mind of it: Different mind-states fertilize and intensify each other. On the stuffy side, the wildness gives bite and storm to the pompous gut and pretentious clog. On the wild side, we find that we’ve been living too small. We thought wild was only dirty words, or epithets and expletives. But lo! It turns out it was also monkey screechings and lice scratchings and warlock bellyachings and maniacal seed-saving and long, intense glares. Who would have thought? Polarization is your friend.

3 Shuffle the nuggets, resequence the mind

One thing leads to another. A headline leads to an explanation, which leads to a quote. A long, long time ago leads to a galaxy far, far away. The coffee leads to the bagel; showing up at work leads to the paycheck, which leads to the rent. The same thing happens tomorrow. Patterns repeat themselves, and we know what to expect. The synaptic electrons flow down one neuro-rivulet in the brain and not down the other. Soon the trickle turns into a gully, and it’s hard to think new. Language does it, too: newspapers, weather reports, phone conversations, self-help books: All have their sequences. Each grooves a track.

You’ll want to start this exercise with something, anything, already written. It could be a page from your

teen diary, a letter you found in the attic, a short story that seems stuck. You can use the newspaper. Anything where the words have something in them still lurking for you.

Now go through the text and look for outcroppings of interest. Underline a short phrase, three or eight words, but nothing too long. Underline another. Get at least seven bits. Odd numbers are good. And when you choose phrases, follow your instinct: Follow what seems to be calling or troubling or intriguing you for a reason you may not yet know.

Copy each one of these phrases onto a separate scrap of paper. Index cards work swell. Now take these little shards and shuffle them around. Invite the holy god of Random into the core of your piece. Let chance be your birthright. Yes—shuffle them blind. With your pen and paper at the ready, lay them out in a row.

Look now at the flow of the chunks, and get ready to write. You will expand the piece back out again, but in between chunks you can put in anything at all. The freedom part is this: It can become a *completely* different piece. Maybe the same topic, maybe another. Maybe you turn it into a tone poem, perhaps a farce. Maybe you don’t *know* what it is. The secret to transforming the piece is to allow anything to come in. You can insert jelly doughnuts or NASCAR dads or nitrogen phosphate—anything. Just keep these very same words in the order that they’re in. Set the timer to 15 minutes, move all the way through in the time that you have, and see what you find.

Questions for the curious:

What grew in the cracks? Connections unlooked for, oblique turns of phrase? Was the new piece like the old, or did it keep just the faintest tracery, rabbit footprints in snow?

The mind of it: In rearranging a sequence—whether you use random arrangement or intuitive intention—words connect and combine. Juxtaposed objects spark the mind to create. Most of the time, we write

by connecting pieces of text by logic, by chronology, or by association that creates the feeling of “flow.” But shuffling the nuggets sparks a “huh?” and a pause, and a wanting to know. Suddenly a field of speculation appears, of guesses and clues. And since words connect to synapses, new leaps are fomented, and new patterns are born.

So, *why* write this way?

There are aspects of writing you can learn with the right techniques and tools. You become a carpenter of words. Yet there’s a certain point when that will carry you no further. When we come up against that point, we wonder what to do. But we’ve forgotten what the child understands intuitively: that language comes from the deep wilderness of life itself, that it comes from and through play, and that the unsuspected appears from nowhere again and again.

The trick to stumbling upon the unexpected is to give yourself a little break from the tyranny of ends-means rationality, to try a more relaxing way: to simply write.

Do these exercises with the sole purpose of seeing what happens. You might make your brain more limber. You might find a phrase that seismographs your entire readership, or the exact word that you needed, the pivot of your piece. You might discover some information or data or wisdom. All of this can happen with these exercises, I guarantee it. But it works best, really, to do it just to do it. You are your own mad scientist; you are your own sage. #

Andy Couturier

Essayist, poet and teacher Andy Couturier has written for many publications, including *Creative Non-Fiction* and *The North American Review*, and had an essay nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He teaches writing workshops in Oakland, Calif., and is a student of improvisational theater and Buddhist meditation. Web: www.theopening.org.

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