



# **WRITING AND MINDFULNESS**

**Creative Writing Exercises**

**BY LESLIE CONTRERAS SCHWARTZ**

# writing and mindfulness

Creative Writing Exercises

by

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A writer is a person who cares what words mean, what they say, how they say it. Writers know words are their way towards truth and freedom, and so they use them with care, with thought, with fear, with delight. By using words well they strengthen their souls. Storytellers and poets spend their lives learning that skill and art of using words well. And their words make the souls of their readers stronger, brighter, deeper.

— Ursula K. Le Guin, “A Few Words to a Young Writer”

I like to walk along country paths, rice plants and wild grasses on both sides, putting each foot down on the earth in mindfulness, knowing that I walk on the wondrous earth.

In such moments, existence is a miraculous and mysterious reality ... But I think the real miracle is ... to walk on earth. Every day we are engaged in a miracle which we don't even recognize: a bluesky, white clouds, green leaves, the black, curious eyes of a child—our own two eyes. All is a miracle.

— Thích Nhất Hạnh, “The Miracle of Mindfulness”



## INTRODUCTION

Writing as an activity, done with intention, can be healing. In its most basic form, writing is information set to paper or computer, with the goal of solidifying thoughts into a physical form. Even without an intended recipient, when only the writer themselves serve as a reader, the act of writing is to capture the swirling chaos of our consciousness, to name and describe the contours of our mind and spirit, to say: I am here. To do this is indeed powerful and empowering.

But sometimes writing can be painful. In fact, some would argue that writing can be emotionally and mentally excruciating, at times worsening one's mental health as the writer re-visits traumatic experiences on the page. However, it is my belief that one can create a conscious creative writing practice—one built on boundaries and safety, while allowing room for imagination and creation—to use the act of writing to foster mental resilience and healing.

This writing workbook contains exercises based on the tenets of mindfulness, particularly those outlined in Buddhism by spiritual leader Thích Nhất Hạnh.<sup>1</sup> However, rather than a spiritual text, this workbook focuses on the ways in which writing can provide the artist with more peace, joy, and release from suffering. Exercises are centered around the mindfulness concepts of living in the present moment, finding joy in the everyday, confronting suffering in an empowered way, and creating a writing practice that doesn't simply promote mental well-being but allows it to flourish.

The content of this book focuses on writing to practice mindfulness, with exercises on grounding, attentiveness, and cultivating a consciousness filled with authentic joy. Exercises guide writers through the challenge of examining difficult experiences and trauma while using mindfulness practices to protect themselves, create healthy boundaries, and write in a way that generates both wellness and embraces the truth.

As with all creative guides, take what helps and leave the rest. You know the best way to write about your experiences.

Wherever this writing journey takes you, I wish you well and hope your writing is both fruitful and a source of joy and comfort.

Please note that links to recommended poems may have been updated after the publication of this book. (Some of the links do have misspellings but are active links at the time of the release of this book).

In peace,

Leslie

Houston, July 2022



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# 1.

## GROUNDING

An essential part of mindfulness, of being attentive and consciously aware of your actions, thoughts, and bodily experiences, is to be able to ground ourselves using our senses, to go back to the present moment.

“Mindfulness,” Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh said, “is remembering to come back to the present moment.” In these exercises, you will describe the physical realities of the world around you as you experience it. This is a useful exercise if you feel overwhelmed, depressed, or anxious. Grounding takes you out of an emotional state by re-focusing your attention. *Note: A simple version of this activity is especially helpful during times of distress, heightened emotion, or after a traumatic event.*

1. Go outside, or a quiet place inside, and find somewhere to be that comforts you. Write a list of everything your body perceives the senses that are available to you (such as sight, smell, hearing, taste, touch). For example, you may wish to put your bare feet on the earth to feel the grass, the earth, which you can describe. If you have mobility, you can take mental notes of the feeling of walking or riding down a path, the sensations that you perceive.

Keep your descriptions simple. Write about at least ten elements that you observe, and describe them in great detail.

2. Continue adding details to your list. Be specific and reserve judgment. No sensory detail can be too small.
3. If you feel inclined to do so, write a poem using your list, focusing on the most detailed image and sensory descriptions.

## RECOMMENDED READING:

“Ode to My Socks,” Pablo Neruda: <https://poets.org/poem/ode-my-socks>

“To the Fig Tree on 9<sup>th</sup> and Christian,” Ross Gay: <https://poets.org/poem/fig-tree-9th-and-christian>

“I Look Up from My Book and Out at the World through Reading Glasses,” Diane Seuss: <https://poets.org/poem/i-look-my-book-and-out-world-through-reading-glasses>

## 2.

### NON-JUDGMENT

It is surprisingly difficult to make observations that are not colored by our own opinions, viewpoints, and judgment. It can cloud our engagement with the world and take us away from experiencing it. Constant judgment also leads us to getting fixated on challenges or stuck in emotional states.

You might even ask why one would even want to make observations that are not shaped and rendered by one's own thoughts. When we allow ourselves to observe the world around us, our own thoughts and interactions with others—free from judgment—we make room to see things as they are—not as we want them to be.

One of the gifts of mindfulness is the idea of radical acceptance (see the origins of this term on page 14), or the notion of accepting difficult or painful realities while remaining removed from the constant pain and suffering it might cause us. This exercise practices making observations (internally and externally) and removing our need to attach value or emotional weight to what we observe.

Thích Nhất Hạnh calls this act of observation as nourishing the object of your attention. What do you see, truly, as it is?

1. **Breathing:** Find a place that is calm and without distraction. Sit for a minute and focus on breathing slowly. Gently begin turn your awareness to each thought that comes into your mind. Imagine the thoughts running along a river and passing by, without the need for you to comment, judge, or make further clarifications, etc. Just notice them. Practice listening to your own thoughts as they come naturally. Do this for at least five – ten minutes.
2. **Writing:** Write down your thoughts for an uninterrupted 15-minute session. If you find yourself making judgments, adding emotional weight or opinions, cross it out. Write the thought as it came to you, in all its ugly beauty. No one has to see what you write. This is a chance to honor your own thoughts. They are neither good nor bad; they are thoughts that pass

in your mind. View them as part of your living brain activity.

3. Find a quiet place to sit, outside or inside. Focus on the external world rather than your inner life. Notice what is happening around you in real time, and the experiences you have as you process the world around you. Write down what you observe in the outside world for ten minutes. Practice writing these observations without adding opinion or emotional weight. Just view the world and reflect back what you see in your writing.
4. Reflecting: Take a moment at the end of a busy day to reflect on the events that occurred that day, as well as the past week, and the past month. Write down the narrative of events, the interactions you had with others, what you observed happening around you in whatever environment you occupied. List the narrative, your observations of what occurred, without judgment or need to clarify or explain. Say what happened. Spend 10 minutes writing about these events.

#### **RECOMMENDED READING:**

“I Have Lived My Whole Life in a Painting Called Paradise,” Diane Seuss, <https://poets.org/poem/i-have-lived-my-whole-life-painting-called-paradise>

“Gate-4,” Naomi Shihab Nye, <https://poets.org/poem/gate-4>

“To the Fig Tree on 9th and Christian,” Ross Gay, <https://poets.org/poem/fig-tree-9th-and-christian>

### 3.

#### GRATEFULNESS

In his book, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, Thích Nhất Hạnh describes deep attention to the objects around you, and the life of your mind, as an essential part of mindfulness. As you give deep attention to both the outside and internal world, he writes, “you also see your own storehouse full of precious gems.”

True gratitude is looking honestly at both the outside world and your mind, and begins by describing what you find. What do you see? What do you see and understand about what is there that brings joy, relief from suffering, peace and love? We spend a lot of time focusing on problems and challenges—it's part of how we make a living, how we are able to grow or make changes in our communities or ourselves or our families. Make time to focus on what you do have in your life outside of those challenges.

Spending time being grateful in an intentional, authentic way can fill your storehouse of emotional energy, so to speak, so that you can face the challenges of daily life with a foundation of joy and love, appreciation, and acceptance for what is beautiful and good in your life. Challenges may not become easier, but we will feel more mentally healthy to be able to meet those challenges if we can feel the goodness that lives around and inside us.

1. Make a list of all the pleasurable activities, relationships, and daily experiences you have that bring you joy. The list can include small pleasures (such as feeling the sun on your face), or it can be a greater concept that brings fulfillment, such as volunteering. Be exhaustive in your list and name each activity, relationship, or experience as specifically as possible. Spend 15 minutes writing down anything that comes to mind.
2. Look into your interior space, your mind and spirit, and observe what strengths and abilities you have at this moment for which you are grateful. List descriptions of mental, spiritual, and emotional abilities that you have that are helpful and bring you the ability to experience joy.

#### RECOMMENDED READING:

“testify,” and “Affirmation,” Eve L. Ewing, <https://poets.org/poem/testify>,  
<http://www.liberationlib.org/affirmation-poem.html>

“You are Who I Love,” Aracelis Girmay,  
<https://poets.org/poem/you-are-who-i-love>

## 4.

### MIDDLE PATH

In Buddhist terms, the concept of the Middle Way is a term refer to following a spiritual path that avoids the extremes of either avoid all physical pleasure or overindulging in physical delights. For our purpose, the Middle Path can be seen as a way that avoids being led by emotions and emotional states and using pure logic and analytical approaches to problems.

Acknowledging both emotional and logical truths and acting from this Middle Path is a practice that helps you handle emotional challenges. You can use these creative writing exercises when dealing with a difficult emotions or circumstances, because it forces you to consider the practical elements, such as actions available to you, or engaging yourself intellectually as you look at your challenges from a logical viewpoint. This practice can empower you to use both emotion and logic to your advantage.

Write a list of all of the sensory experiences you associate with the emotional circumstance. Go beyond a description of feelings and describe what this emotional state is like for you in the physical world (for example, “my grief makes the sun feel strong and too bright”).

1. Write from the point of view of someone outside your experience, looking at the situation as an outsider. Using the refrain, “I see,” write a list of sentences of the actions, truths, and logical conclusions about the situation.
2. Write a list of emotions associated with the same experience. (Both steps 1 and 2 should take 15 minutes).
3. Write a poem or story that combines your emotional truths and logical observations from steps 1 and 2.

### RECOMMENDED READING:

“Taking It,” Vievee Francis,

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/155837/taking-it>

“From Blossoms,” Li-Young Lee,

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43012/from-blossoms>

“A Small Needful Fact,” Ross Gay, <https://poets.org/poem/small-needful-fact>

## 5.

### **REDIRECTING, RETELLING**

Sometimes we get stuck in a rut—obsessing over an issue or idea, a person, or a situation, a bad experience, a memory or a dream. Or we are so emotionally torn up by something we’ve experienced that is unjust, that goes against our values, and we want to do something about it but can’t see a productive way to do that. We can’t get it out of our head no matter what we try to do.

Our minds are powerful and we have the ability to create new narratives in which we change the ending to something that is empowering, inspiring, joyful. Retelling or redirecting our energy to a creative pursuit is a healthy way to use our obsessive thinking—and create something that gives you agency.

First, write down the obsessive thought or situation in detail. (If it is upsetting, do so only in a way that is safe (i.e. write only the parts that do not trigger your emotions in a way that you cannot handle at the time.) Try to give the idea a narrative, characters, and use images and sensory detail.

Using the writing from exercise 1, re-tell the narrative. Write a poem or story in which you change and imagine a different scenario. Re-write what you want the story to be, in poetic or narrative form.

### **RECOMMENDED READING:**

“a retelling,” eve l. ewing: <https://www.guernicamag.com/three-re-tellings/>

## 6.

### **RADICAL ACCEPTANCE**

The term radical acceptance is the concept that we can confront a reality that is awful, horrific, or repellent to us and find a way to continue with its presence through mindful actions. (The concept and term, radical acceptance, has its origins in dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), proposed by psychologist Marsha Linehan in 1993. (See suggested reading.) One of those actions, or forms of accepting its reality, is to write about those realities.

Elements used in poetry and creative writing, such as the use of metaphor, symbols or images, often help writers grapple with difficult emotions or situations by using the logical part of their brain to create something out of words, out of language. Writing about our internal struggles—and the horrors of the outside world—provides distance for us, helps us construct meaning or process emotions, if we do it in a way that involves our logical mind, through word play, using figurative language, or imagery.

1. Write a sentence about the difficult emotion or experience you are struggling with the most. Then, think of parts of that experience that can be explained through metaphor (such as frustration being described as being on a boat far from shore with a broken engine and no oars, no radio). Try to come up with as many metaphors, images, symbols, or other figurative language that you can think of. Write it in a list form, a draft of phrases and sentences.
2. Create a poem in which the poem is told through “a speaker” who is not you. The “I” of the poem is someone like you, but is not you personally. Write the piece in the first-person, creating distance for yourself by imagining this person as someone else. Work the figurative language and images into the poem. (If you like, this “speaker” could become a completely different character, like a fisherman, or a pilot, thus making the piece a persona poem.)

### **RECOMMENDED READING:**

“The Gift,” Li-Young Lee, <https://poets.org/poem/gift-1>

“Letter Beginning with Two Lines by Czesław Miłosz,” Matthew Olzmann, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/149969/letter-beginning-with-two-lines-by-czesaw-miosz>

“Citizen: You are in the dark, in the car,” Claudia Rankine,  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/56848/citizen-you-are-in-the-dark-in-the-car>



7.

## **SELF-CARE PRACTICES AND DISTRESS TOLERANCE**

There are a range of self-care practices and skills available here, which I highly recommend at <https://dbtselfhelp.com/dbt-skills-list/>.

Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, created by Marsha Linehan, is constructed around the concept of dialectics, that the world is more complicated than black and white notions, and that seeing complexity and the gray areas of reality can help us accept and live a healthy way of life. It also involves practicing mindfulness skills to deal with distress, practice self-care, and regulate emotions.

I recommend looking at the skills list for insight on daily practices that you can enact on a daily basis.

## 8.

### **SAFETY AND STRUCTURE**

#### **FOCUS ON WHAT HELPS.**

Writing about dark emotions or traumatic events without an attention to purpose, without a plan to set limits on how you protect yourself or set boundaries, can be detrimental and can actually harm you. If you choose to write about circumstances or incidents that are disturbing to you, focus on small, manageable parts of those experiences. You can also write about the event by describing what happened before, or what happened right after, and leave out the most disturbing or difficult part.

#### **DON'T GO THERE IF YOU DON'T WANT TO.**

For example, instead of writing about bullying or feeling misunderstood, which might be triggering to you, write about a moment in which you felt accepted and what that felt like. Try to focus on aspects of the situation in which you can describe, nonjudgmentally, what was around you. At the same time, it can be healing to write about bullying or feeling misunderstood (to use the same examples). Do so with your own intuition and understanding of whether you have the emotional space to handle writing about it.

#### **STRUCTURE.**

Set aside a time that you can carve out of your day where you will not be distracted. This could be a quiet place outside in the shade or a locked bathroom in a crowded house with headphones. It should be time you dedicate every day to your writing practice. Begin with 10 minutes and gradually increase your writing time by 5 minutes, at whatever pace is comfortable to you. There are no rules as to how to use this workbook. Use the lessons and recommended readings as springboard to write what you need, what helps you, and what empowers you to say what you want to say.

#### **A FINAL NOTE.**

As a conclusion, I want to say that I personally practice these skills in my life as a writer and as a woman, wife, and mother. These skills help me manage chronic life-long depression, anxiety, and Complex PTSD. Most of my work is about difficult material, including sexual assault, living with mental illness, or violence. If you are interested in reading more about my work, visit [lesliecschwartz.com](http://lesliecschwartz.com).



## FOOTNOTED OR RECOMMENDED TEXTS

Linehan, Marsha M. *DBT® Skills Training Manual*. 2014, New York: The Guilford Press.

Nhất Hạnh, Thích. *The heart of Buddha's teaching: transforming suffering into peace, joy, and liberation: the four noble truths, the noble eightfold path, and other basic Buddhist teachings*. 1998, Berkeley, Calif: Parallax Press.

As the Houston Poet Laureate, and a native Houstonian, Contreras Schwartz identified a need in the community for mental health care resources, particularly creative outlets for healing, storytelling, and mental wellness. For the 2021 Academy of American Poets Laureate Fellowship civic project, this workbook of writing exercises promotes the practice of mindfulness skills through self-guided writing prompts, with the goal of helping participants deal with difficult experiences, trauma, or managing emotional and mental health challenges in daily life.

This book contains writing exercises that promote the practice of mindfulness skills through self-guided writing prompts. It is a book to write for healing, to help process difficult experiences and emotions, and to manage living with a mental illness through the act of writing.

Writing and Mindfulness: Creative Writing Exercises is a resource for the general public, including young people, and students and other writers, as well as for teachers and community outreach leaders leading writing workshops and mental health group therapy. The book can be downloaded for free at: [lesliecschwartz.com/poet-laureate-civic-projects](https://lesliecschwartz.com/poet-laureate-civic-projects)



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