

For Starters

an anthology of prompts
volume one

For Telling Time:

Put 24 ice cubes in your pocket. Swallow 1 per hour.

For Dreaming:

Perch behind your bed. Your mind fills slowly with snow.

[Mark Radke]

For a Creature:

Write a dialogue between you and an animal. Then erase any trace of your speech. You may choose an animal you know well, or one you met in passing, but the animal must be real.

[Hannah Treasure]

For a True Poem:

Write a poem with a way out

Write a poem that forces me to read it aloud

Write a poem riddled with “ofs” – infinite cycle of belonging – a circle of replete predication – try to make it overflow into itself

Write a poem that unites the oceans

Write a poem that accounts for proprioception (lol)

Write a poem that never ends, and never repeats

[Ben Reymond]

For a Memory:

Recall a moment from very early on in your life, not your earliest memory but soon after that. Breathe slowly for some time while recalling this moment. What color is it?

If the moment is yellow: Who else might this moment belong to?

If the moment is purple: Consider choosing a different moment.

If the moment is tan, brown, sand, or beige: What does this moment sound like?

If the moment is blue: Remove one of the following from your current understanding of this moment: An heirloom, a parent, a splint, a rule, a carpeted room, a season.

If the moment is orange: Continue recalling this moment for as long as you can tolerate. Do not check your phone, or your computer. It is all right if you are late.

If the moment is red: To what degree was this moment constructed after the fact through lore or self-narrativization?

If the moment is teal, mint, or turquoise: Add one of the following to your current understanding of this moment: A shell, a siren, a sister, a flood, a diamond, a mess, a tooth, a song.

[Maddie Crum]

For an Escape:

Make like you' re running from the cops with a hanger in your jacket (elbows up at 90 degrees and dangling). Spin 6x and fall to the ground. Don' t think about a milkshake.

Shout the first word that comes to your mind. Write it down, and write the rest of your poem from there.

[Chime Lama]

For Clearing Congestion:

Isolate salt sensations behind left eye.

For Pampering Earlobes:

Dip each in wax.

[Reese Longshore]

For a Phoenix:

Write as many of your old poems as possible on one side of one sheet of printer paper

Light a burgundy candle using matches from a dive bar

Hold the sheet of paper with your old poems on it to the burgundy candle's flame until it catches fire

Let the paper with your old poems on it burn for 1.6 seconds

Write a new poem using the words that survived with the ash from those that did not survive

[Anneysa Gaille]

For Living in the Moment:

Every other moment has a possibility. A creeping sneezy
feeling fills your sinus. When the air has an orange tint?
Picture your hand is a needle. Weave a hole through the
moment' s eye. At first it will resist, like a fish on a line.
You may feel the altitude change.

[Will Wilkerson]

For Arbitrary Inputs:

1. List an excuse for starting over.
2. Give me a cue.
3. You' ll never really forget if it' s good.
4. Blame freak lightning.
5. Spill the rice.
6. Count nineteen when there' s thirteen.
7. Loop it like the morning news.
8. Nobody will notice how it' s taped together.
9. Count the pockmarks.
10. Call it black when it' s really dark blue.
11. Mark the epiphany 3 minutes in.
12. Expatriate it forever.
13. Keep it snappy like the weather.
14. Wake up your leg.
15. Hand it off to someone else.
16. Blow smoke into its empty stomach.
17. Get jealous jealously.
18. Douse it indiscreetly.
19. Read the curry lid condensation.
20. Burn some plastic until it reeks.

21. Pickle it in a parking lot.
22. Wind it tight then wind it again.
23. Pick the most stubborn scab.
24. Are you shimmering still?
25. Bury the nothing.
26. You' ll luck into more of it.
27. The neighbors will never know.
28. Honey the party.
29. Shhh (it' s undercover).
30. Look behind venetian blinds.
31. There' s a frog waiting at the door.
32. How are the teeth fitting?
33. What color was that motorcycle?
34. Tuckpoint the details.
35. Tarnish the hotel lobby.
36. Steal a drink order.
37. Get the paper wet.
38. Try not to serve it on a chipped plate.
39. Make this the ending.
40. Feel the gap in your shoe.
41. Make the copy the real thing.

42. Christen it a psalm.
43. Shower in lightning.
44. Save one then destroy the other.
45. Carve it out of cherrywood.
46. There' s a lighthouse in your eyelids.
47. Now it' s set in stone.
48. You can be a coward (it' s okay).
49. Build it on mud.
50. Look up from the bathroom mat.
51. Declare it a public space.
52. Swim back to saltwater shore.
53. Branch into the willing moss.
54. Throw off the palmist.
55. Soundproof the mattressing.
56. Smell the sewer steam rising.
57. You don' t have to light the powderkeg.

[Ananta Prayitno]

For a Fake Museum:

1. Make a list of five art styles, five adjectives, and five nouns. They can be any words you want. Set these words into groups with one art style, one adjective, and one noun in each group. Transfer these groups of words into an AI image generator or image search, and save the pictures that are rendered.
2. Looking at each image one at a time, write a description for it as if the image is a work of art in a museum. Pretend you are writing each image's wall label. Some questions you may consider: Who is the artist? Where are they from? What was their inspiration for the piece? What medium is the piece in? What is happening in the piece according to the artist? Why is the piece important to the art world?
3. After you have written all five labels, decide the layout of the room the art is featured in. What kind of exhibit are all the pieces a part of? What does the room look like? What city is it in?
4. Choose one of the artists in your exhibit. Write a short bio for them.
5. Choose another artist from your exhibit. Write a dialogue in which this artist interviews the artist from step 4 about their work.
6. Expand any part of the prompt as you see fit.

[Peter Soucy]

For a Novelette:

Write a 19th century Russian novel in one page. You are the protagonist, or someone exactly like you. In the center of the page, your protagonist reveals a gnawing secret to an absolute stranger. By the end of the page, the secret has become public knowledge, leading to your protagonist's ruin, but also enlightenment. The details are yours.

For a Pastoral:

Write a short prose paragraph about something a friend or loved one said to you recently that has been bothering you. Do it as quickly as possible. No more than four sentences. Read it back to yourself without editing. Oh no! This paragraph is now your entire vocabulary. Use it to write a detailed poem about ice skating.

For a Dream:

You are seated in a crowded convention hall. Your attention is drifting. During one presentation, your name appears projected on a screen. Under your name is a random political organization with which you are not affiliated, and which you lightly oppose. You are called to the stage to make a few comments about the importance of this organization and its mission. There is no time to correct the presenter – you are already headed to the podium. En route, you realize that criticizing this political project before this audience is a major faux pas that will cost you your living. Before you know it, the microphone is in front of you. What do you say?

[Zachary Lamalfa]

For Building a City:

Just as each kingdom is nothing but an accumulation of phylums, to build a city, you must first think of what it contains.

A suggested, though not exhaustive list of Categories: Graffiti of the City, Spells of the City, Factions of the City, Dreams, Passageways, Memories, Vistas, Nightclubs, Statues, Dining Halls, Guilds, Prophecies, Secrets, Lost Items, Astonishments, Bridges, Skies.

Once this is done, you must Letter your bookcases, alphabetically. By this I do mean your physical bookcases. Make note of how many bookcases there are, this is your Range (A-E, for example). Now, generate a random letter within your Range to select a Lettered bookcase.

Each Lettered bookcase will have its own Range of Numbered shelves (1-5, for instance). Generate a random number within your bookcase's Range to select a Numbered shelf. Now you have chosen a shelf.

Generate another random number. If your number is 20, count 20 books from the left on your selected shelf. Now you have chosen a Book. [N.B.: for this part, you'll probably need to estimate your shelf's Range based on how wide it is. My shelves are wide enough for about 30 books.]

Open the Book at random. Now you have chosen a Page.

Meanwhile, choose your first Category. For example: Signs of the City. Search your Page carefully for any traces of your Category. For example: what Signs are waiting here for the taking? Transfer them into a Document under the heading of your Category.

Repeat this process ad infinitum.

Remember - a city is not built in a day. Remember too that this kind of construction is as old as cities. The first city too was built from its predecessor' s ruins.

What bricks are used for support, which for embellishment? These are some of the basic structural questions any builder must confront.

There are many different opinions when it comes to stonemasonry. Some prefer simple mortar while others only trust steel beams. Commas are always beloved as an adhesive, and for good reason; this way, the city can go on growing forever. No zoning laws. Others prefer central planning, from the neighborhood level (grammar) to the level of districts, wards, arrondissements (story). What kind of city are you dreaming of?

How your Categories interact will proceed from your answer to the previous question.

Finally, a city is rarely built alone. Recruit fellow builders with a simple text message, apprising them of the Category you are currently quarrying for. Maybe they will find an Astonishment on their way to work and tell you about it. Or maybe they' ll start a city of their own. You won' t need worry about this, at least not on earth' s behalf. Of this kind of city we will never have enough.

[Joshua Wilkerson]

For Divination:

Divination techniques may be the earliest form of “constrained reading.” All involve to some degree scrying, that is, the discerning of images or words in an abstract gestalt, such as clouds, fire, oil on water, entrails, tea leaves, etc.

For the following constraint, you’ ll use constrained reading as the basis for a written text.

This constraint is inspired by the An-Yang Oracle Bones, an archaeological cache of oxen scapulae and turtle plastrons that is thought to contain the earliest writing in Chinese.

During the Shang Dynasty (1200–1050 BC) priests would ask questions (about crops, military matters and so on) by inscribing them on the shoulder bones of oxen or turtle shells. Then they would subject the bones and shells to fire... which would cause them to crack. The priests would then read the cracks – which often ran across the questions – as a kind of “divine writing” that constituted a response.

For this divination, write your questions on sheets of paper – one question per sheet. Ask four questions relating either to hidden knowledge or to the future:

- 1) one about oneself
- 2) one about one’ s beloved
- 3) one about the neighborhood, city or country where one lives
- 4) one about the world

Divine each question and write out each answer in turn. So, take the sheet of paper with your question written on it and crumple it up. Then uncrumple it. You will find a network of wrinkles, the crumpling's residue. With the same pen you used to write your question, mark the wrinkles in the paper, particularly in the area that contains your question. Then interpret this "over-writing" as an answer to the question, and write it down.

There are several ways to interpret the wrinkles that you have marked. You can read them as images in themselves (house, road, mountain). You can pay attention to the ways in which they interfere with and deform the words of your question. You can mark the lines of all the wrinkles and see if a pattern declares itself in the vicinity of the words (waves, fire, layers). Or you can make up another way of "reading" the answer. You can limit your reading to one approach or combine them.

When you have crumpled and interpreted the "replies" on all four sheets of paper, arrange your answers into a text. The answers needn't be placed in the order in which you discovered them - another configuration might make more sense, or be more poetic.

[Wendy Walker]

For Starters: An Anthology of Prompts, vol. 1 is part of an ongoing anthology of constraints, attempts, rules, directions, directives, dilations, gadflies, goads, come-hithers, what-ifs, now-nows. We believe the prompt is an art in its own respect, a way of constructing, as Raymond Queneau put it, the labyrinth from which we will try to escape. Starting is forever, beginning ongoing.

Please send us your own prompts for future installations to beautifuldayspress@gmail.com.

Below is the original call for prompts:

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Send prompts for poems AND stories AND art AND

for a new leaf
for finding hidden messages
for rearranging your room
for starting a secret world
for measuring a thought
for a side character's journey
for marching over a bridge
for an undiscovered dish
for founding a garden
for evading capture
for amateurs
for finding hidden passageways
for reconnecting with a friend
for resurrecting a mall

for trying new prayers
for a friendlier laugh
for reusing batteries
for a sweeter and healthier apple
for a restored commons
for an improved tubeway
for mentioning a new feeling
for a vacation
for a vocation
for a lazier verb
for noticing a color
for locating water
for planting free orchards
for summoning a familiar
for a sequel
for a warning
for asking the right question
for understanding ghosts
for blessing your neighbors
for choosing a battle
for a new kind of hour
for actually ending America
for beginners
for beautiful days

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