

A SIMPLE GUIDE TO FULFILLING MY WEEKLY WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

In 2011 I'll be posting a writing assignment every week on my blog:

<http://ElaThier.com/blog>

WHAT ARE THESE ASSIGNMENTS FOR?

My weekly writing assignments are designed to accomplish two things simultaneously:

- Undo writing blocks
- Hone your craft/structural skills as a story-teller

WHO ARE THE ASSIGNMENTS FOR?

I myself am a screenwriter and that's what I teach, but these assignments can work for anyone interested in any type of writing.

Although the assignments are designed with film in mind, you can execute the assignments in other mediums if what you write are novels, plays, or short stories

Below is a simple guide to enjoying and getting the most out of these assignments:



INSTRUCTIONS

1) FREE-WRITING:

My weekly writing exercises should be done as free-writes. What is a free-write? You set a timer to a fixed amount of time and you begin to write, with pen on paper, (better not to use a computer), with the only rule being that you can't lift the pen off the page until the beeper goes off.

I suggest not using computers because they make everything look like a final draft, and you're likely to be editing rather than just *writing*. By writing on paper you'll free more free to make a mess, which is what we want. We want messes.

Whatever comes out is what comes out. It is not your concern to do the assignment well or to produce good writing. Get that out of your head. Good writing will come from practice. It's not your job to write well. Your only job is to write.

Keep putting words on the page no matter what, until the beeper goes off.

Could be that all you write is “I don’t know what to write, I don’t know what to write, when will that beeper go off, I don’t know what to write, etc. etc.” That would be fine. As long as you’re putting words on the page, you’re fulfilling the assignments correctly.

If you get really, really stuck: write the same word over and over again again again again again again again again, until the beeper goes off.

Don’t show your free-writes to anyone. Don’t even read them. They’re just a way for you to practice relaxing on the page. Ultimately, your goal is for writing to become a way to relax, and not a way to feel judgment and anxiety. This is the road to you doing your best work.

2) HOW TO SEGUE FROM FREE-WRITING TO SCREENWRITING

My assignments will all include some premise for a scene that is imbued with conflict. But writing a scene can be scary. Fortunately, there is a gentle way to transition from free-writing nonsense to writing a scene:

Step 1: Begin by free-writing anything at all. You may need to blabber on about your to-do list, or someone’s facebook posting, or whose birthday you forgot, or what happened to you today, or whatever.

Step 2: At some point, gently segue from the free-write to improvising a conversation between yourself and one of your characters. Write it out like a scene. Ask your character what s/he thinks about the scene, how you should begin it, whether she likes the scene or not, etc. It’s an improvisation.

Let your character answer your questions any way he or she wishes. She may cooperate, or she may resist. She may try to be helpful, or try to trip you up. She may even start to interview you instead. Let your character be exactly who they are and have a natural conversation with her as you discuss your work.

Step 3: While you’re in conversation mode and your character is coming to life, gently slip yourself into the scene.

In summary: move from random free-write, to improvising a conversation between you and your character, to writing the actual scene.

This doesn’t have to be seamless. You can go back and forth between them. Let’s say you’re writing a scene and get stuck, go back to improvising a conversation with your character, or go back to just free-writing anything at all if you need to.

Remember: as long as you’re putting words on the page until the beeper goes off, you’re fulfilling the assignment correctly.

There is no rule to how much time you ought to spend writing non-sense, or improvising a conversation, or writing the scene itself. This will vary from writer to writer, and from assignment to assignment. You may find that you are mostly free-writing and spending little time on the scene. That is fine. You may also find that you have no need for free-write and are ready to dive in and write a scene. That's great too. No hard and fast rule.

Trust your brain. As long as the writing comes easy, you're doing it right. If you're straining, go back to free-writing or to improvising a conversation until the writing becomes easy again.

Most important thing is for the pen to keep moving until the beeper goes off.

As long as words are placed on the paper, you're doing this right.

3) HOW MUCH TIME TO SPEND ON EACH ASSIGNMENT

While I usually say that 10 minutes is minimum, I would advise that you **set your timer for 30 minutes**. This will give you enough time to blabber on in a free-write, transition to an improvised conversation, and then transition to writing a scene to completion.

Of course, if you are done writing the entire scene in ten minutes, that's great. You can certainly stop there.

And needless to say, if 30 minutes are up and you're totally in the zone and want to keep writing: keep writing!

Don't let *me* stop you. You can write as long as you wish.

4) IF YOU DON'T FINISH THE SCENE

While I do advise writing each of these assignments in one sitting, you may find that you're not done after 30 minutes, need to stop because of scheduling and obligations, but want to continue the scene. That's fine!

When you are ready to return to the scene, whether it's the next day or the next week, just set your time to 30 minutes again and do the same thing: free-write, segue into a conversation with your character (discussing what happened in the scene last time, where you should pick up, and what will happen next, etc.) Eventually you'll feel ready to slip back into the scene you were writing and pick up where you left off.

I wouldn't spend more than 2 or 3 writing dates on one scene unless you find that it has grown into a full-blown script and you're on a roll! In that case: I can't wait to watch the movie when it's made! 😊

5) SPEAKING OF WRITING DATES

I strongly encourage you to write with company. Writing alone has no staying power, even though that's what most writers do, most of the time. (That's also why most writers don't have staying power...?)

Give it all you got to find a writing buddy. Find a hapless victim who will be happy to join you in following my weekly writing assignments and meeting with you every week to do them.

Meet at a café or some hotel lobby. You don't need to be writing collaboratively (unless you want to, of course). It's perfectly fine, expected in fact, that you each work on your own material (even though you're both writing the same assignment).

One of you should set a timer for 30 minutes and you both hop to it. After 30 minutes, decide if you want to keep going or if you're good and done.

(Done doesn't have to mean that you finished writing the scene. Done can mean that you're done writing for the day and will pick up where you left off another time.)

You may choose to share your work with each other (type it up later and send it to each other?) But sharing it should always be optional, and should involve NO FEEDBACK. Only allowable feedback is for the other writer to say *what they like*. Nothing else.

These exercises are intended to work out the writing muscle and make writing easy. If you give each other feedback you will pile in the anxiety that you already have about writing, and I promise you that there will be nothing constructive about it. Zip the mouth. Don't give feedback, unless you wanna say what you like.

I have found over the years that across the board, writing dates give writers more staying power than *anything* else.

6) THE WEEKLY FORMULA

It had become clear to me in working with several hundred writers over the years that more than 95% of the time, the problem in scripts is the lack of conflict.

Conflict does not stem from a series of bad stuff that happens or from people yelling at each other. Conflict comes from WANTING SOMETHING BADLY, and ENCOUNTERING OBSTACLES.

Until further notice, all of my writing assignments will be built around creating conflict. This means that the assignments will follow a basic formula:

CHARACTER WANTS _____ (the goal)
BECAUSE _____ (what's at stake? what are the consequences?)
BUT _____ (insurmountable obstacles)

7) FINAL WORD

These exercises are designed to increase both the quantity and the quality of your writing.

Poor writing is not an indication of an incompetent writer. Talent is nothing more than the ability to be yourself on the page.

Poor writing comes from being too anxious to let your ideas flow out, and from meandering around the page without introducing conflict.

The weekly writing assignments that I'll be posting weekly this year are designed to remedy both.

This year, make it your New Year resolution to fulfill every one of my weekly writing assignments! By the end of the year, you will have completed 52 writing assignments!

Have fun! ☺

Additional articles that will help you get the most out of my writing assignments:

Go to: http://TheIndependentFilmSchool.com/ela_thier_articles.html

Read:

Writing Exercises to Help You Write Badly (for clarifications about free-writing)

How to Give and Receive Useful Feedback (in the hope that you have writing dates)

The Molecular Structure of Stories (for clarifications about infusing your work with conflict)