

IDEAS FOR Jumpstarting Writing at Home

From Linda Rief, author of *The Quickwrite Handbook*

A Note
from
Linda Rief



As a teacher who left the classroom last June I can only imagine how stressful remote learning is for kids of all ages, teachers, and parents. I asked Heinemann if they would be willing to let me send out some quickwrite ideas for you to use with your kids. They agreed without hesitation. So, ask kids to grab their Writing-Reading Notebooks (or really any paper) and do some quickwrites to jumpstart their thinking and writing.

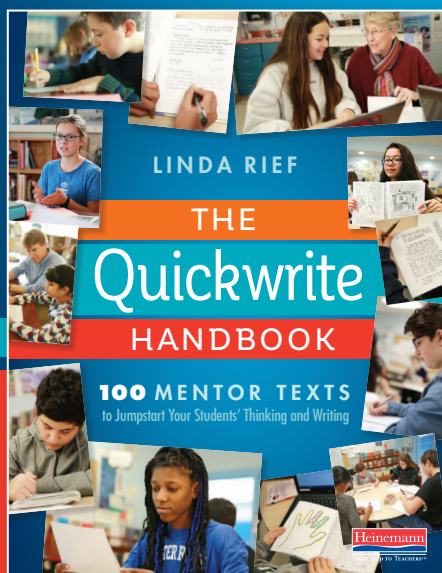
A quickwrite is a first draft response to a short piece of writing or drawing. On the following pages, we will include several of those mentor texts, along with prompts to help each writer get started if needed. We have included both teacher-facing and student-facing versions for each text. The writer writes fast either in response to anything the mentor text brings to mind, or borrows a line and lets the line lead their thinking. The point is to outrun the censor in all of us and find the thinking we were doing but didn't know we were thinking until the words appeared on paper. It is writing to find writing, but using someone else's words to stimulate our thinking. Ralph Fletcher says it is "riding the wave of someone else's words until you find your own."

You can send your students the pieces in this packet. Tell them to write fast, as quickly and as specifically as they can for two to three minutes. There are directions with each mentor piece, but they don't need to be followed.

When your students have tried a few different quickwrites, have them read them over, find their favorite, and star it. Ask them to write out what surprised them, or what they liked the most about their writing, and what they think they could do to further develop the idea. As Don Graves so often said to young writers: Tell me more.

All my best,

Linda



Learn more about *The Quickwrite Handbook* at Hein.pub/QuickwriteHandbook



Connect with Linda on Twitter @LindaMRief



Rambling Autobiography

by Linda Rief

TRY THIS (as quickly and as specifically as you can for 2–3 minutes)

- ◆ Write your own “rambling autobiography.” Let each new phrase take you in any direction.
- ◆ If one phrase tends to send you in a direction about one topic, jot down all that comes to mind.
- ◆ If you are stuck, and not yet putting words to paper, start with one of the phrases in my piece: “I was born at . . .

I was born at the height of World War II just as Anne Frank was forced into Bergen-Belsen by the Nazis. I adore Brigham’s vanilla ice cream in a sugar cone and dipped in chocolate jimmies. October is my favorite month, when the air turns green pear crisp. I roll down the car window and listen to the maples turn apple red and the oaks pumpkin orange. I bought my favorite jacket for a dime at the Methodist Church rummage sale. I have lied to my parents. With four high school friends I cut down a tree in the town forest for our Holiday Dance. I didn’t know until the police arrived at the high school that each tree had been dedicated to a WW II veteran. I never read a book for pleasure until I was 38 years old. One of my students once leaned in to me in an interview and said, “My mother’s having a baby; this is the one she wants.” When I was 12 I set the organdy curtains in our bathroom on fire, playing with matches. My not-so-secret place to hide was high in the maple tree in our front yard where I could spy on neighbors. I can still smell wet white sheets pulled through the ringer washer when I think of Grammy Mac. I dated Edmundo in high school because it angered my father. I fainted when I heard the sound of the zipper as the mortician closed the body bag holding my mother. I gave birth to twin sons. I once had dinner with Judy Blume. I am a teacher who writes. I want to be a writer who teaches.

TEACHER NOTE Notice that each phrase could be developed into a more extended piece. Your students’ rambling autobiographies will also be filled with possibilities. Saying “Tell me more about _____” helps them develop those ideas.

Rambling Autobiography

by Linda Rief

TRY THIS: Set a timer and write as quickly and as specifically as you can for 2–3 minutes without stopping. Use one of the ideas below if you need help getting started.

- ◆ Write your own “rambling autobiography.” Let each new phrase take you in any direction.
- ◆ If one phrase tends to send you in a direction about one topic, jot down all that comes to mind.
- ◆ If you are stuck, and not yet putting words to paper, start with one of the phrases in the piece: “I was born at . . . I have lied to . . . One of my friends once said . . .” Change anything to make it yours.

I was born at the height of World War II just as Anne Frank was forced into Bergen-Belsen by the Nazis. I adore Brigham’s vanilla ice cream in a sugar cone and dipped in chocolate jimmies. October is my favorite month, when the air turns green pear crisp. I roll down the car window and listen to the maples turn apple red and the oaks pumpkin orange. I bought my favorite jacket for a dime at the Methodist Church rummage sale. I have lied to my parents. With four high school friends I cut down a tree in the town forest for our Holiday Dance. I didn’t know until the police arrived at the high school that each tree had been dedicated to a WW II veteran. I never read a book for pleasure until I was 38 years old. One of my students once leaned in to me in an interview and said, “My mother’s having a baby; this is the one she wants.” When I was 12 I set the organdy curtains in our bathroom on fire, playing with matches. My not-so-secret place to hide was high in the maple tree in our front yard where I could spy on neighbors. I can still smell wet white sheets pulled through the ringer washer when I think of Grammy Mac. I dated Edmundo in high school because it angered my father. I fainted when I heard the sound of the zipper as the mortician closed the body bag holding my mother. I gave birth to twin sons. I once had dinner with Judy Blume. I am a teacher who writes. I want to be a writer who teaches.

When She Was Fifteen

by Linda Rief

TRY THIS (as quickly and as specifically as you can for 2–3 minutes)

- ◆ Start with the line, “When I was ____ (any age) I believed . . .” and write all you believed at that age.
- ◆ Write out anything this brings to mind for you, thinking specifically of the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touch associated with those beliefs, happenings, or people.
- ◆ Change the third-person pronoun *she* to *I* or *he* or *you* and write down all that comes to mind when you change the pronoun. Let the writing take you where it wants to go, even if it is not the happening truth.

When she was fifteen she believed the world would be destroyed by an atomic bomb but Debbie and Pam would probably live because their fathers were rich and they had bomb shelters. She believed the most important thing in life was a date for the Junior Prom, but she’d never have one because her nose was too long, her hair was too short, her legs were too fat, and she wasn’t a cheerleader. She believed David loved Paula because Paula plucked her eyebrows.

She believed she was poor because her family had a linoleum floor in the living-room and only one bathroom. There was no Maytag washer or dryer at her house. Not even a Kenmore. When she was sixteen and in charge of laundry, she drove to the laundromat in Quincy, two towns away, where no one she knew could see her wash and fold her underwear in public.

Summers she worked two jobs. Days she pitched whiffle balls to five-year-olds and colored clowns from picnic benches. She made gimp bracelets and wove real Indian change purses for little kids who had no money and saved only sticks and shells and rocks. She awarded blue ribbons and red ribbons and white ribbons for jumping the highest, running the farthest, and crying the least. At night she filled Dixie cups with butterscotch sundaes floating in marshmallow. She poured strawberry frappes and chocolate milk shakes from The Fountain at Paragon Park, while the roller coaster screamed overhead with flailing arms, the gypsy lied, and the fat lady bragged about the two-headed calf.

Weekends she watched Babe Ruth baseball from behind the chain link fence at the high school. David at first, Charlie at second, and Mac at catcher. While their parents clapped and girlfriends cheered, she dated Edmundo because he was Puerto Rican and Jesse because he was black, but mostly because it angered her father.

When She Was Fifteen

by Linda Rief

TRY THIS Set a timer and write as quickly and as specifically as you can for 2–3 minutes without stopping. Use one of the ideas below if you need help getting started.

- ✦ Start with the line, “When I was ____ (any age) I believed . . .” and write all you believed at that age.
- ✦ Write out anything this brings to mind for you, thinking specifically of the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touch associated with those beliefs, happenings, or people.
- ✦ Change the third-person pronoun *she* to *I* or *he* or *you* and write down all that comes to mind when you change the pronoun. Let the writing take you where it wants to go, even if it is not the happening truth.

When she was fifteen she believed the world would be destroyed by an atomic bomb but Debbie and Pam would probably live because their fathers were rich and they had bomb shelters. She believed the most important thing in life was a date for the Junior Prom, but she’d never have one because her nose was too long, her hair was too short, her legs were too fat, and she wasn’t a cheerleader. She believed David loved Paula because Paula plucked her eyebrows.

She believed she was poor because her family had a linoleum floor in the living-room and only one bathroom. There was no Maytag washer or dryer at her house. Not even a Kenmore. When she was sixteen and in charge of laundry, she drove to the laundromat in Quincy, two towns away, where no one she knew could see her wash and fold her underwear in public.

Summers she worked two jobs. Days she pitched whiffle balls to five-year-olds and colored clowns from picnic benches. She made gimp bracelets and wove real Indian change purses for little kids who had no money and saved only sticks and shells and rocks. She awarded blue ribbons and red ribbons and white ribbons for jumping the highest, running the farthest, and crying the least. At night she filled Dixie cups with butterscotch sundaes floating in marshmallow. She poured strawberry frappes and chocolate milk shakes from The Fountain at Paragon Park, while the roller coaster screamed overhead with flailing arms, the gypsy lied, and the fat lady bragged about the two-headed calf.

Weekends she watched Babe Ruth baseball from behind the chain link fence at the high school. David at first, Charlie at second, and Mac at catcher. While their parents clapped and girlfriends cheered, she dated Edmundo because he was Puerto Rican and Jesse because he was black, but mostly because it angered her father.

I'm From

By Linda Rief

With thanks to George Ella Lyon after reading her poem "Where I'm From"

I'm from hotdogs, baked beans and brown bread
 On Saturday nights—fish sticks on Fridays—pot roast
 On Sundays—from Sunday afternoon drives to Howard Johnson's
 For clam strips at Nantasket Beach—occasional treats
 Of sundaes swimming in hot fudge, whipped cream and walnuts
 Brought from Brigham's by my dad

I'm from paper routes, Sunday comics, Camp Aldersgate,
 Blood suckers, outdoor showers, bug juice, and gimp bracelets—
 Playing softball in the dirt field behind Dunning's, skating
 On Hornstra's pond in winter—hot cocoa, snow forts, and
 Icicles dangling from woolen mittens

I'm from the top of a ladder picking blueberries
 From high bushes, the plinking sound as they fell
 Into the coffee can—the playhouse log cabin
 In my backyard—the sound of rain washing the roof
 As I sat safe, enveloped in the smell of lilacs
 A Nancy Drew mystery stretched across my lap

I'm from the Maccombers of Scotland and the Gustafsons
 Of Sweden—a father who drank vanilla extract when he couldn't find
 His scotch or beer—a mother who sat her sadness behind
 The Quincy Patriot Ledger and held the car keys
 Tightly in her fist

TRY THIS (as specifically and as quickly as you can for 2–3 minutes)

- ✦ Write out all this poem brings to mind for you starting with the line "I am from," listing all the places, the people, the common expressions, the foods, and all the things unique to you.
- ✦ Think of the sights, sounds, smells, touches, and tastes that are all part of your childhood, from your earliest memories to today, and describe as many as you can.
- ✦ Borrow any line, letting the line lead your thinking and writing.

TEACHER NOTE Read George Ella Lyon's poem to your students. It is found in her book *Where I'm From* along with numerous other suggestions for stimulating more writing. Or read my poem to your students along with Ella G.'s piece in the following Interlude. Or just read Ella's piece. Find the one that sparks your students' thinking and share that one with them. You might point out that Ella concentrated on one place, Boston, whereas I wandered around a bit to various locations in my early childhood and adolescence.

I'm From

By Linda Rief

TRY THIS Set a timer and write as quickly and as specifically as you can for 2–3 minutes without stopping. Use one of the ideas below if you need help getting started.

- ◆ Write out all this poem brings to mind for you starting with the line “I am from,” listing all the places, the people, the common expressions, the foods, and all the things unique to you.
- ◆ Think of the sights, sounds, smells, touches, and tastes that are all part of your childhood, from your earliest memories to today, and describe as many as you can.
- ◆ Borrow any line, letting the line lead your thinking and writing.

With thanks to George Ella Lyon after reading her poem “Where I’m From”

I’m from hotdogs, baked beans and brown bread
 On Saturday nights—fish sticks on Fridays—pot roast
 On Sundays—from Sunday afternoon drives to Howard Johnson’s
 For clam strips at Nantasket Beach—occasional treats
 Of sundaes swimming in hot fudge, whipped cream and walnuts
 Brought from Brigham’s by my dad

I’m from paper routes, Sunday comics, Camp Aldersgate,
 Blood suckers, outdoor showers, bug juice, and gimp bracelets—
 Playing softball in the dirt field behind Dunning’s, skating
 On Hornstra’s pond in winter—hot cocoa, snow forts, and
 Icicles dangling from woolen mittens

I’m from the top of a ladder picking blueberries
 From high bushes, the plinking sound as they fell
 Into the coffee can—the playhouse log cabin
 In my backyard—the sound of rain washing the roof
 As I sat safe, enveloped in the smell of lilacs
 A Nancy Drew mystery stretched across my lap

I’m from the Macomers of Scotland and the Gustafsons
 Of Sweden—a father who drank vanilla extract when he couldn’t find
 His scotch or beer—a mother who sat her sadness behind
 The Quincy Patriot Ledger and held the car keys
 Tightly in her fist

Cities

By Catherine P.

TRY THIS (as specifically and as quickly as you can for 2–3 minutes)

- ✦ Write down anything this poem brings to mind for you.
- ✦ Borrow any phrase or line, letting the line lead your thinking as you write.
- ✦ Instead of the city, describe the country or some other location that holds significance for you.
- ✦ Describe the city or any other place that lets the reader know how much you like or dislike the place from the way you describe it.
- ✦ There are often two points of view to any place. Try describing that same place you described from the opposite point of view.

Hundreds of cars pack the streets,
Horns blaring,
Drivers screeching,
And tires squealing.

Enormous buildings tower above me,
Reaching for the stars,
Leaping for the moon,
Scraping the sky.

Thousands of people press against me,
Chatting on cell phones,
Hailing taxis,
Lugging filled-to-the-brim shopping bags.

“There are hundreds of things to do in a city,”
my mother tells me.
“And millions already doing them,”
I retort.

TEACHER NOTE Catherine’s mother tries to convince her daughter that the city is worth the noise and crowds. It is in her last line that she captures what she really thinks about the city. Have your students play with their first draft writing, trying to capture their stance toward a place in their last line or two. For contrast, you could also pair this poem with Allan DeFina’s poem “When a City Leans Against the Sky” in his book by the same title.

Cities

By Catherine P.

TRY THIS Set a timer and write as quickly and as specifically as you can for 2–3 minutes without stopping. Use one of the ideas below if you need help getting started.

- ✦ Write down anything this poem brings to mind for you.
- ✦ Borrow any phrase or line, letting the line lead your thinking as you write.
- ✦ Instead of the city, describe the country or some other location that holds significance for you.
- ✦ Describe the city or any other place that lets the reader know how much you like or dislike the place from the way you describe it.
- ✦ There are often two points of view to any place. Try describing that same place you described from the opposite point of view.

Hundreds of cars pack the streets,
Horns blaring,
Drivers screeching,
And tires squealing.

Enormous buildings tower above me,
Reaching for the stars,
Leaping for the moon,
Scraping the sky.

Thousands of people press against me,
Chatting on cell phones,
Hailing taxis,
Lugging filled-to-the-brim shopping bags.

“There are hundreds of things to do in a city,”
my mother tells me.
“And millions already doing them,”
I retort.

TRY THIS (as quickly and as specifically as you can for 2–3 minutes)

- ◆ Use Martha’s structure of “I like the idea of . . . But the truth is. . .” for describing something that can be seen from two very different perspectives.
- ◆ Write out anything this poem brings to mind for you.
- ◆ Write out the way you view the different seasons, whether it is from likes or dislikes.
- ◆ Use her title “The Idea Is Better Than the Truth,” letting that line lead your thinking.

The Idea Is Better Than the Truth

by Martha R.

I like the idea of spring,
Light showers, green buds, and the thawing earth.
But the truth is so different,
Brown slush, rotting leaves, and mud . . . mud . . . mud.

I like the idea of summer,
Pink lemonade, the smell of cut grass, and dripping popsicles.
But the reality is,
Sunburns, mosquitoes, and crowded public beaches.

I like the idea of fall,
Airborne kites, vibrant leaf piles, and geese flying south.
But it’s not at all the same,
Raking wet leaves, whipping winds, and wood to stack.

I like the idea of winter,
Hat and mittens, iced trees, and a roaring fire.
But it’s not at all like that,
Dangerous black ice, power lines down, and snow days
To make up in June.

TRY THIS Set a timer and write as quickly and as specifically as you can for 2–3 minutes without stopping. Use one of the ideas below if you need help getting started.

- ✦ Use Martha’s structure of “I like the idea of . . . But the truth is. . .” for describing something that can be seen from two very different perspectives.
- ✦ Write out anything this poem brings to mind for you.
- ✦ Write out the way you view the different seasons, whether it is from likes or dislikes.
- ✦ Use her title “The Idea Is Better Than the Truth,” letting that line lead your thinking.

The Idea Is Better Than the Truth

by Martha R.

I like the idea of spring,
 Light showers, green buds, and the thawing earth.
 But the truth is so different,
 Brown slush, rotting leaves, and mud . . . mud . . . mud.

I like the idea of summer,
 Pink lemonade, the smell of cut grass, and dripping popsicles.
 But the reality is,
 Sunburns, mosquitoes, and crowded public beaches.

I like the idea of fall,
 Airborne kites, vibrant leaf piles, and geese flying south.
 But it’s not at all the same,
 Raking wet leaves, whipping winds, and wood to stack.

I like the idea of winter,
 Hat and mittens, iced trees, and a roaring fire.
 But it’s not at all like that,
 Dangerous black ice, power lines down, and snow days
 To make up in June.