

Take it Away!

Inspired Summer Writing Ideas from Writers in the Schools Across the Country

School's out for summer, but for those students who love to put pen to paper, or who are, perhaps, just discovering the thrill of finding their own voices, the summer doesn't have to mean a break from writing. The long, lazy days ahead offer countless opportunities to dive into writing in a way that is not always possible during the school year. We've asked teaching artists from Teachers & Writers Collaborative and from other writers-in-the-schools programs around the country for their best summer writing prompts, and have put their creative, fun, interesting, and off-beat ideas together here to help inspire writers from kindergarten through high school. Happy writing!

Elementary School

HARRIET RILEY

Write a letter. Write to your grandmother in Guatemala or to your favorite football player or your favorite singer. Tell them about what you are doing this summer and what your interests are. If you are writing to someone you don't know, tell them why you admire them. Then be sure to get an envelope and stamp from your parents, and address and mail the letter. The best part is you might just get a letter back from someone.

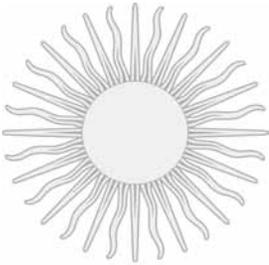
Explore alliteration by making a list of words that all start with the same letter. Just choose a letter and create a word avalanche—use nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, anything. Just list all you can think of. Then order the words into a poem. Think shape and line breaks, think meaning or be as silly as you can. *Have fun with it!*

MAYA PINDYCK

If you find yourself at a beach, a lake, a river, or a stream, look for five stones on the shore that you consider to be special or beautiful in some way. Sit down with those stones—either right where you are or back home—and study each one very closely. Come up with a different metaphor for each stone. Then write an “Ode to the Stone” that explores one or more of the metaphors you came up with.

ANTHONY CALYPSO

Ask an adult in your family for a photo that was taken before you were born. Do not ask any details about the picture. Instead, take the picture and create a very short story based on the details you see in it. When you are finished, return the photo to the adult and show what you wrote about it.



SUSAN BUTTENWIESER

Write a list of all the games that you play. Your list should include at least ten games, and they can be anything: card games, imaginary games, sports, and games you play at recess. Pick one and write about it in as much detail as possible. Pretend you are describing it to a space alien who has never been to earth, and you need to explain absolutely every single step. Don't leave anything out. Please include where to play your game, how many people you need, what time of day is best for playing it, what things you need to play your game, and even what is good to eat or drink with your game.

*When you get into a car,
whether it's for a drive
to the local market or
hundreds of miles away
to a vacation destination,
imagine a vacation
without limits. Where do
you go? What do you see?
What do you do? How
do you get back home?
Compose a poem that
takes the reader on an
amazing trip with sights,
feelings, and sounds.*

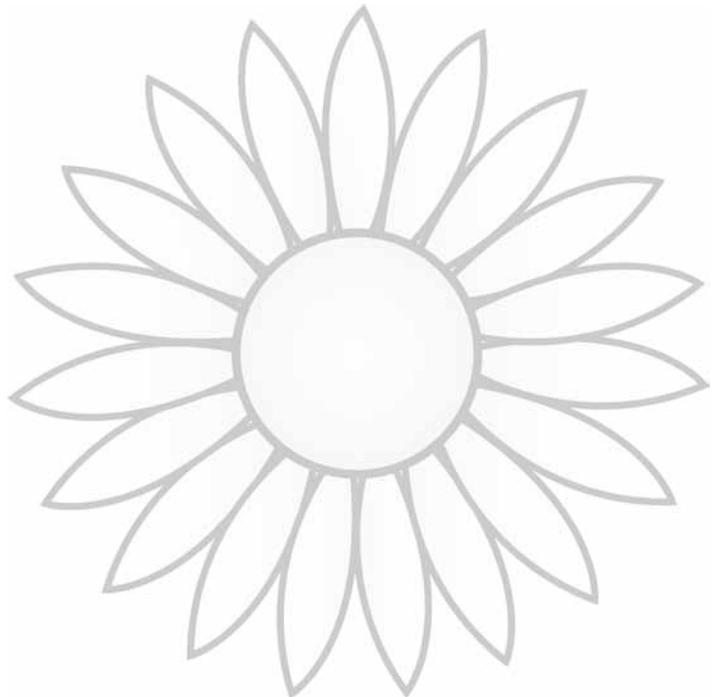
NORENE CASHEN SMITH

*Write a letter or letter
poem from summer
to each of the other
seasons.*

PETER MARKUS

PETER MARKUS

In your imagination transport yourself to an exotic place—a place you've never been to, though a place that you'd like one day to go to—and write a postcard to yourself that captures the essence of that place.



Middle School

SARAH LABRIE

First: Purchase a notebook. The notebook should be about the size of your hand. If it's too small, you might lose it. If it's too big, it will be difficult to carry around. Put some thought into the color, and to whether you want a blank cover or a decorated one. This is a piece of equipment you should want to keep with you for a while.

Second: Open the notebook. Write the day's date on top of the first page. Underneath that, write anything. Write about what you had for breakfast. Write about your most recent crush. Write sentences you think you might like to use in a short story or novel. Come up with a list of people (famous or not) with whom you would like to have tea. Think about the weather and then write down those thoughts. No matter what you write, make sure you fill up at least one page.

Third: The next day, at the same time, repeat this process exactly. The point is to get yourself into the habit of producing words for a certain amount of time every day. Learning how to write daily is the first step to becoming a writer.

For help getting started, check out *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13 and ¾* by Sue Townsend and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky.

KAREN BENKE

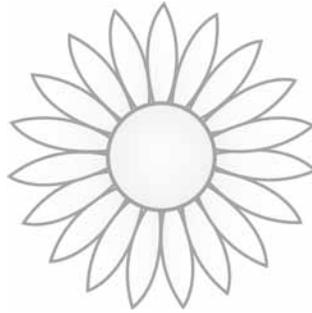
*D*rape over a chair, your bed, across your desk. Hang in a forward bend. You can't do this stretchy-bendy stuff wrong. Ditto creating a poem. Just consider all things that stretch: a wishful thought, revengeful lie, the truth, history, rubber bands, a parent's indecision, your curfew... Really let your mind stretch into the truth—whatever the truth is to you—of right now. This includes noisy demands, itchy worries, rash-like anxieties. Invite it all to crawl out and stretch across the page. Then leap off into writing, using the following lines: *Life keeps giving me... Here's why I stay... Why I leave... Here's what lights me up... What can darken my heart...*

Look at a map of the world. Find three countries you don't know anything about. Only on the basis of the sound of the country's name, the shape of the country, and where the country is on the map, write a paragraph speculating on what that country is like (the way people live, the languages they speak, the things they eat, what they believe in, and so on). After you're done, check your speculative paragraphs against the Wikipedia entries for each of those countries.

KANISHK THAROOR

Write a list of sensory details from a place that is important to you (your summer camp, kindergarten cubby closet, your grandparents' porch, your bed, your favorite chair, your favorite country, etc.). Be sure to include all five senses. Then write a poem or story that includes all of those sensory details.

RACHEL M. SIMON



SUSAN BUTTENWIESER

Cut out photographs from newspapers and magazines and write about them. Make up stories about what is happening in the picture. Make up names for the people in the photographs. Write about what happened right before the picture was taken and what will happen next.

GARY EARL ROSS

With a group of your friends, use poster board to create a Scrabble-type grid. Use Post-it notes (of varying colors if preferred) to create enough letters of the alphabet that each player may have 7-14 letters. Each player takes a turn or two placing his or her letters on the board. Once the letters are all used up, everybody writes a poem using the words created on the board, then reads their poem aloud.

SUSAN BUTTENWIESER

Take a notebook outside and sketch with words. Write down an overheard conversation, or descriptions of street scenes, the park, playground, library, swimming pool, beach—anywhere you find yourself. Be sure to include descriptions of people and the setting.

HARRIET RILEY

Mark Twain once said, “Water, taken in moderation, cannot hurt anybody.” Since it’s summer there’s a good chance you are thinking about jumping in the water, or drinking a cool sip of water, or the relief of a cool rain shower, so why not try writing about water? You can write a poem or short essay about swimming, or a trip to the beach, or the joy of your bath, or taking a drink of water—anything about water.

High School

MAYA PINDYCK

Ride the subway (or the bus) five stops in any direction. Write down everything you observe on this subway or bus ride: the sounds around you, the people, the motion, the seats, the advertisements, anything you notice at all—don't stop writing until the five stops are over. Then get off the subway or bus and take it back home. On the ride back to your home, look at your observations and write a short story, essay, or poem that describes this particular experience. Try to finish a first draft by the time you reach your stop!

Rewrite a fairy tale from a different character's point of view. For example, re-write "Little Red Riding Hood" from the wolf's perspective or the grandmother's.

SUSAN BUTTENWIESER

KANISHK THAROOR

Read about the Voyager 1 and 2 space probes. Look at some of the pictures that NASA keeps on the probes in case of contact with extraterrestrial intelligence (voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/spacecraft/scenes.html). Think about why NASA might have chosen those pictures to represent our civilization. Then imagine your own fantasy world/civilization. Describe five images that would be kept on a space probe sent from your fantasy world. What do they convey about your fantasy world?

Write a poem in two voices. Consider giving the voices very different attitudes and be sure the reader is able to determine where one voice stops and the other starts.

RACHEL M. SIMON

JASON LEAHEY

Ride the train or bus (or, if you're out in the wilds of America and thus not in a public transit city, ride your bike or catch a ride from a buddy) to a stop/neighborhood you've never been to before. Once you get there there, eavesdrop on a few conversations. Write down ten lines of dialogue from at least two people. Make notes about the scene: the people, the colors, the smells, the businesses, the advertisements, the looks on the faces of the people passing by. Drink a cup of coffee or eat an orange and hang out for a bit. Then write a scene (or story) in which one character wants to leave the neighborhood and another, who loves the 'hood, tries to persuade him/her to stay. Use at least four lines of the dialogue you noted as a snoop.

*Use a random line from
a book, personal ad,
billboard, or overheard
conversation as the first
line of a poem.*

RACHEL M. SIMON

RACHEL M. SIMON

Go to a bookstore or library and sit in the poetry section. Read a few poems from a book by a poet you've never heard of and then become a poetry thief. Steal your favorite title (you can even read only the table of contents) and write your own poem or story.

Write a free-verse poem that takes its title from a headline that appears in a tabloid (supermarket or *The Onion*). You are not required to purchase the tabloid to complete this assignment. Feel free to use the check-out line as a mini-library.

LIZ ARNOLD

Before you visit a new place (anywhere, from the zoo to the Jersey Shore to a new friend's house) make a list of the sensory impressions you think you'll experience there. What will you see there? What do you think the place you are going will smell like? What sounds will you hear? What will you taste there? What will you feel? Be specific: The sound of buses or a ferry on the waves, the smell of exhaust fumes, the pebbly or soft texture of the sand.... You can make a list of words, phrases, or sentences, or string them together to write a poem or a fictional story. After the trip, make another list of sensory impressions, this time of the things you actually experienced on your visit. Then, use your strongest, or most interesting or surprising impressions to write another poem or story.

MERNA ANN HECHT

Find at least one or two writing partners and create your own summer writing group. Make a commitment to meet once a week at a different spot that defines summer for you. Each week, take ten to fifteen minutes to record the sensory details of what and who you observe in your surroundings. From this, create a series of place poems about your neighborhood, your town, or your city. Think of yourself as a street poet or city poet, with your artistic eye and "see-all" camera lens focused on your surroundings.

You can pattern your poems after writers who have written about their surroundings, such as "I Am New York City" by Jayne Cortez. Also check out the "Nature & Place" section in *From Totems to Hip-Hop* edited by Ishmael Reed, Gary Soto's poem "Saturday at the Canal," Francisco Alarcon's poem "Boricua—at the Annual Puerto Rican Parade in New York," and "An Excerpt from *con flama*," by Sharon Bridgeforth, from Naomi Shihab Nye's collection *Is This Forever or What: Poems & Paintings from Texas*. Soto's book *Neighborhood Odes* might inspire younger writers.

You might want to read or display your place poems in a community center or library for your summer writing finale.

*Pick any book in your
house or at the library.*

*The only deal is that it has
to be a book you haven't
read. Copy down the first
line of that book. Then use
that line as the first line of
a story or a poem.*

HARRIET RILEY

Contributing Writers

Liz Arnold's essays have been recognized in prose contests held by Georgetown Review and The Atlantic. She writes about design for The Guardian, The New York Times, Interior Design, and others, and has a blog called Homebodies about the people she visits. She taught her first residency through T&W this spring. www.liz-arnold.com

Karen Benke is the author of Rip The Page! Adventures in Creative Writing (Shambhala, 2013) and a forthcoming book for tweens, Leap Write In! Adventures in Creative Writing to Stretch & Surprise Your One-of-a-Kind Mind (Shambhala, 2013), from which this writing experiment is excerpted. A California Poet in the Schools, visit her at www.karenbenke.com.

Susan Buttenwieser is a teaching artist with Teachers & Writers Collaborative and with Community-Word Project; She also teaches creative writing workshops with incarcerated women. Her fiction has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has appeared in Failbetter, Epiphany, Bound Off, and other publications.

Anthony Calypso, a T&W teaching artist, is a writer, filmmaker, and actor from Nyack, New York. He has published short fiction and nonfiction essays in several publications including The Caribbean Writer and the anthology The Butterfly's Way, edited by Edwidge Danticat, and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Calypso also teaches creative nonfiction at The New School.

Merna Ann Hecht, storyteller, poet, and essayist, teaches creative writing and humanities at the University of Washington Tacoma. For the past nine years, she was a teaching artist for the Seattle Writers in the Schools program. Hecht directs a poetry project with immigrant and refugee youth. Her poems and essays appear in Kaleidoscope, The Storytelling Classroom, Drash: Northwest Mosaic, and other books and journals.

Sarah LaBrie is a Writers in the Public Schools Fellow at New York University. She taught creative writing and fantasy fiction as a T&W writer-in-residence to students at PS 110 Florence Nightingale School for the 2011–2012 school year.

Jason Leabey's fiction, nonfiction, and music journalism have appeared in literary journals, national and international magazines, and local and international newspapers. He has taught creative writing at New York University, where he earned an MFA, and through which he became a two-time Starworks Foundation Fellow, providing creative-writing therapy services at children's hospitals across New York City and Long Island. After his MFA, Jason moved to Cambodia, where he wrote for the country's English-language newspaper and taught English at a Buddhist monastery.

Peter Markus, known in local classrooms as "Mr. Pete," is a senior writer-in-residence with InsideOut Literary Arts Project in Detroit. He's a poet and the author of the novel Bob, or Man on Boat (2008), as well as three books of short fiction, Good, Brother (2001), The Moon Is a Lighthouse (2003), and The Singing Fish (2006). A new book of stories, We Make Mud, was released in July 2011.

Maya Pindyck, a T&W teaching artist, teaches critical writing and reading skills with Sponsors for Educational Opportunity, and is a former New York City Teaching Fellow. She is the author of Friend Among Stones, a collection of poems published by New Rivers Press, and the chapbook Locket, Master, which received a Poetry Society of America Chapbook Fellowship. Her poems have been widely published in such places as Poets and Artists, Sycamore Review, Bellingham Review, Mississippi Review, and Tusculum Review.

Harriet Riley is a freelance writer and a writer-in-residence with WITS Houston, working in inner-city elementary schools in Houston, Texas. She has taught undergraduate writing classes at the University of West Florida in Pensacola, and has also worked as a non-profit director, hospital marketing director, and newspaper reporter.

Gary Earl Ross is a novelist, playwright, public radio essayist, and University at Buffalo professor. His books and plays include The Wheel of Desire, Shimmerville, Sleepwalker, Picture Perfect, Blackbird Rising, Murder Squared, and Matter of Intent, winner of the Edgar Award from Mystery Writers of America. He is a past board member of the Just Buffalo Literary Center, which sponsors adult workshops and readings, places writers in classrooms through Writing with Light, and brings international writers to western New York through its Babel program.

Rachel M. Simon is the author of the poetry collections Theory of Orange and Marginal Road. She teaches writing, gender studies, and film courses at SUNY Purchase College, Pace University, Bedford Hills Prison, and Poets House.

Norene Casben Smith, a writer-in-residence with InsideOut Literary Arts in Detroit, is the contributing editor for the journal Dispatch Detroit and writes about literature and the arts for Detroit's Metro Times. Her first collection of poems, The Reverse Is also True, was published by Doorjamb Press in 2007.

Kanishk Tharoor is the Writers in the Public Schools Fellow at New York University. His fiction, which includes publications in the Virginia Quarterly Review and a Penguin India anthology, has won several prizes and been nominated for the National Magazine Award. With Teachers & Writers, he recently taught elementary school students in PS 110 on Manhattan's Lower East Side.