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978-1-009-39147-4 — The Prompts You Need to Help You Write the Book

You Want to Write

Sarah Burton, Jem Poster

Frontmatter

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Praise for *The Prompts You Need to Help You Write the Book You Want to Write*

‘The prompts in this comprehensive and deeply considered collection are an invitation to explore every aspect of the fiction-writer’s craft. Reassuring and inspiring in equal measure, Burton’s and Poster’s long experience as teachers of creative writing rings out from every page. Used alone, or in combination with its sister volume, the book is a route to learning and embedding a rich palette of new writing skills.’

Helena Attlee, author of The Land Where Lemons Grow and Lev’s Violin; tutor for the Arvon Foundation

‘This engaging and lively handbook goes beyond setting exercises for writers, both aspiring and practising – it explains the how, the what and the why. It’s like being in the presence of two experienced and enthusiastic tutors who are right there with you, every step of the way.’

Amal Chatterjee, Lecturer in Creative Writing, University of Oxford

‘A perfect combination of techniques, examples, commentary and prompts – this book is like having two accomplished creative writing professors at your side as you hone your craft.’

Seth Clabough, Associate Professor of Creative Writing, Randolph-Macon College, USA

‘A deft resource including expansive coverage of core elements of craft, together with highly generative exercises suitable for emerging and established practitioners. This text also offers exemplary support for teachers of literary fiction.’

Julia Prendergast, President and Chair of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs

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‘In this carefully structured and generously detailed book, each chapter leads the apprentice writer through increasingly advanced exercises and techniques. Thought-provoking examples stimulate the imagination and also illustrate the essential craft skills all writers need to acquire. Highly recommended!’

*Jane Rogers, Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, Professor
Emerita of Writing, Sheffield Hallam University*

THE PROMPTS YOU NEED TO HELP YOU WRITE THE BOOK YOU WANT TO WRITE

How can you take your writing to the next level? In this follow-up to their acclaimed handbook *The Book You Need to Read to Write the Book You Want to Write*, Sarah Burton and Jem Poster offer exercises and practical advice designed to set aspiring authors of fiction on their way to creating compelling short stories and novels. Carefully explaining the purpose and value of each exercise and encouraging writers to reflect on what they have learned in tackling each task, this themed collection of writing prompts provides both encouragement and inspiration.

There are many books of prompts already available, but this one is different. Its structured, in-depth approach significantly increases the impact of the exercises, ensuring that storytellers use their time and talent to best effect – not only exploring their own creativity but also developing a wider and clearer understanding of the writer’s craft.

Co-founders of Cambridge University’s Master’s programme in creative writing, Sarah Burton and Jem Poster draw on a wealth of teaching experience in a variety of contexts, from informal community education to PhD supervision. Sarah is a novelist (*The Strange Adventures of H*, 2020), biographer (*A Double Life: A Biography of Charles and Mary Lamb*, 2004, shortlisted for the Mind Book of the Year award) and social historian (*Impostors: Six Kinds of Liar*, 2000). Jem is Emeritus Professor of Creative Writing, Aberystwyth University; he is also a novelist (*Courting Shadows*, 2002; *Rifling Paradise*, 2006), poet (*Brought to Light*, 2001) and literary critic/editor (*Edward Thomas, Prose Writings Vol. III*, 2018).

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Sarah and Jem are co-authors of a handbook for fiction writers, *The Book You Need to Read to Write the Book You Want to Write* (Cambridge University Press, 2022) and a historical detective novel, *Eliza Mace* (2024). Together they run Between the Lines, an online mentoring programme for writers.

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PRACTICAL EXERCISES FOR
FICTION WRITERS

SARAH BURTON
AND JEM POSTER



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For Sharon Williams,
a true friend

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PREFACE

Welcome to this book. Perhaps you've picked it out from among the many books of writing prompts available because you've noticed that, while its title suggests a relationship with those books, its scope is much wider and more ambitious.

Most books of prompts consist *solely* of prompts: you are given one writing task after another and you simply have to complete each one before moving on to the next. This book does far more than that: it's a detailed guide, explaining the purpose and value of the exercises we give you and helping you to reflect constructively, with an eye to your future development as a writer, on what you've achieved in tackling them.

This structured, in-depth approach significantly increases the value of the exercises, ensuring that you use your writing time to best effect – not only exercising your creativity, but developing a fuller understanding of the writer's difficult but rewarding craft.

USING THIS BOOK

In our handbook for fiction writers, *The Book You Need to Read to Write the Book You Want to Write* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), we discuss a range of ideas integral to an understanding of the writer's craft. Those ideas represent one of the two main pillars of our teaching, the other being the workshop sessions, in which writers are given prompts designed to encourage practical engagement with key aspects of the craft. It's this practice-based approach that is foregrounded in the present book.

The prompts you'll find here correspond largely to the topics and issues discussed in *The Book You Need* and you'll naturally find it helpful to work with both books. However, the books are designed in such a way that they can be used independently of one another: each of the prompts in the present book is fully explained and contextualised, giving readers a clear sense of the purpose and value of the work they are invited to undertake.

We've structured the book along lines that make it easily navigable, but it doesn't follow from this that we expect all our readers to navigate it in the same way. Only the most methodical will want to address each exercise in sequence; many will browse, homing in on whatever seems generally interesting or potentially useful at the time of reading; others again may be grappling with a particular problem in their writing and will turn directly to the section relevant to their immediate concerns.

In describing these exercises as prompts we're deliberately steering you away from the idea of a narrowly prescribed task. The prompts you'll find here offer suggestions for practical engagement with matters central to the writing of fiction; each has a particular focus and each gives you a framework to build on, but you'll

Using this book

find you have considerable leeway in terms of your approach, and plenty of scope for original thought. Where there is no explicit guidance on a particular matter – for example, on whether to write in the first person or the third – this isn’t an accidental omission but a reflection of our view that each prompt should allow ample space for exploration.

As in most matters related to writing, however, there’s a balance to be struck. While encouraging a certain freedom, this book is also, of course, intended to offer guidance and direction: in addressing its exercises you’ll find it helpful to keep the prompts in view and to follow their suggestions reasonably closely. It’s always possible that one of these prompts will prove to be the starting-point for a complete short story or novel, a development that would inevitably involve wider exploration, but for our immediate purposes there’s a value in focus and discipline. Apprentice practitioners in any art or craft will often concentrate on specific aspects of their work as a means of honing essential skills and deepening their understanding, one step at a time, of the enterprise as a whole – a young musician practising scales and arpeggios, for example, or an apprentice furniture-maker focusing on getting a dovetail joint right. Eventually the musician may step onto the stage to play a concerto, the furniture-maker may produce a fine cabinet, and in either case it’s likely that the work will be all the better for the focused practice that preceded it.

You might consider, too, the apparent paradox that to be provided with a framework for your writing can actually be liberating. Certainly many who attend our classes find themselves writing more freely when they are given something to build on, and many appreciate the focus given to their work by being set a specific task.

We don’t, in general, specify limits for the exercises, but you’ll probably find it helpful to give yourself an approximate timeframe and wordcount for each one. Take as a guiding principle the idea that each exercise is ideally carried out at a single sitting, and bear in mind the important truth that more isn’t necessarily better. In

Using this book

approaching the exercises you'll find it far more helpful to write a thoughtful and sharply focused passage of 300 words than to write 1,000 words of slack prose that fails to address, or addresses only tangentially, the matter in hand.

So before starting to write, take a little time to consider the prompt and its implications. Not too long – ten minutes should be plenty in most cases – but long enough to give you a general sense of purpose and direction. And when you've finished writing set the work aside, for a few minutes at least, before you read it through. This will give you a little distance from it, allowing a more reflective approach.

Reflecting on the piece you've written is an important part of the process. Which passages or elements seem to work well? What aspects of the piece might be improved? Are you able to pinpoint, or at least get a broad sense of, the reasons for any particular success? What might you do differently if you were to start the exercise again?

You don't actually need to start again, and indeed we wouldn't encourage you to spend time trying to polish the pieces you produce. Better to annotate them with any observations that seem helpful, file them away for future reference, and then move on. This book is designed to help you cover a lot of ground in a series of short bursts; getting bogged down in endless rewrites of the same piece will diminish the energy of your engagement with it. Good writers recognise the need to strike a balance between the desire to perfect their work and the knowledge that perfectionism can hinder progress; it's worth taking trouble over these exercises, but not to the point at which you lose momentum.

If you find you have a tendency to search out the exercises that seem easiest or that play to your particular strengths, bear in mind that although these may represent a good starting point, helping you to build confidence at an early stage, it's the tasks that initially seem the most challenging that will ultimately prove the most valuable as a means of progressing your writing; they may also prove to be a source of particular satisfaction.

Using this book

A note on gender: characters mentioned in these prompts are variously male or female. Our concern is emphatically not to direct your choice, but to offer plural possibilities: you should feel free to alter the names and gender of the characters as you see fit.

These introductory notes are here to serve as a guide, but in the end it's for you to find out, through direct engagement with the exercises, the ways of using the book that work most effectively for you – the ways that best help you to discover and enhance your skills as a writer.