

teachers,  
mentors,  
guiding lights



*"Now all my teachers are dead except silence."*

*- W.S. Merwin*

# ☆ Hello and welcome to your sample ☆ inspiration pack!

*How do we learn how to live?* This is the question at the heart of this pack.

I think that most often, we learn to live by watching others. This pack is a chance to identify and pay tribute to someone who has helped you to become the person you are.

Allow me a tangent: I think that “tribute” is one of the greatest purposes of writing. It is *important* to pay tribute to those who came before us, those who turned lights on in dark rooms, those who bushwhacked into the forest so that we would have a path to follow, whether these are our ancestors or our babysitters, suffragettes or pop stars, school librarians or the characters in the books they introduced us to.

Let’s start with some lists. Empty your brain out here. If you’re stuck, move on. Feel free to add your own categories. Take this chance to open one of those long drawers in your mental card-catalogue and spill out everything you find.

School teachers you loved

---

---

---

---

---

---

Animals you have learned from

---

---

---

---

---

---

School teachers you hated

---

---

---

---

---

---

Extended or immediate family members

---

---

---

---

---

---

Adults you knew as a child (friends of parents, parents of friends...)

---

---

---

---

---

---

People who have taught you particular skills (driving a car, tying a shoelace...)

---

---

---

---

---

---

Children who have influenced you as an adult

---

---

---

---

---

---

People you've met while traveling

---

---

---

---

---

---

People you've met in jobs (bosses, clients, co-workers)

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Politicians, community leaders

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

People in religious, spiritual or therapeutic institutions

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

People in your neighborhood

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Artists, musicians, actors, writers

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Who taught you about sadness?

---

Who taught you about joy?

---

Who taught you about bravery?

---

Characters in books, movies, TV shows

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Who taught you about anger?

---

Who taught you about generosity?

---

OK, now look over your list and circle 3 – 4 that have a that gut-twist of *Oh-yeah-there's-something-to-write-about-there*.

**For each, write out this sentence.**

From \_\_\_\_\_ I leaned \_\_\_\_\_.

From \_\_\_\_\_ I leaned \_\_\_\_\_.

From \_\_\_\_\_ I leaned \_\_\_\_\_.

From \_\_\_\_\_ I leaned \_\_\_\_\_.

Try to keep it to one sentence. This will help you start your writing from a very clear place.

Now, copy one of these at the top of a fresh page, follow your hand and see what happens. Really! Just write. Write for at least 10 minutes. Write without analyzing, editing or stopping. Trust your hand. The more you do this, the easier it will become. If you're stuck... turn this page and read the "Writing Tip."



## Writing Tip

Here's something to think about -- consider trying this as a letter.

Here's something the great Brenda Ueland wrote in her famous book *If You Want to Write*:

*Once I was playing the piano and a musician, overhearing me, said to me: "It isn't going anywhere. You must play to someone – it may be the river, or God, or to someone who is dead, or to someone in the room, but it must go somewhere."*

*That is why it helps often to have an imaginary listener when you are writing, telling a story.*

*This recognition, that art, music, literature is a sharing, that a live alternating current is passing swiftly between the listener and the teller (even though imaginary or transcendent) is absolutely essential in the process.*

(Side Note: Brenda Ueland was an amazing writer, feminist, long-distance swimmer and teacher of writing, who lived 1891-1985. She is best known for her book about writing, *If You Want to Write: A Book About Art, Independence and Spirit*. It was one of the first books about writing, and perhaps *the* first intended specifically for a female readership. It's both totally dated and utterly relevant. She said that she lived her life by one motto, "Never do anything you don't want to do, and always tell the truth." It seems to have served her well.)



What would it mean to have an audience in mind for your piece, and what would it mean for that audience to be the subject?

Letters are useful to us writers because they have a familiar, predictable form, they are casual, and they are fun for a reader to dive into – it can even give the reader that delicious feeling of listening in on something they aren't supposed to.

So, try writing your subject at the top of the page and then continuing on with one of these lines:

"I need to tell you..."

"I've always wanted to say..."

"You don't know this, but..."

"Do you remember the day when you...."

"I'll never forget the time when I..."



## Reading

**Ronna Bloom** has published four books of poetry. Her third, *Public Works* was short-listed for the Pat Lowther Award, and her second, *Personal Effects*, was translated by the Canadian National Institute for the Blind. How cool is that?? Ronna has taught poetry in schools, at the AGO and most recently was appointed the "Writer in Community" at U of T. See: [www.ronnabloom.com](http://www.ronnabloom.com).

*I chose this essay because I like how she weaves between stories, making unlikely connections between memories and people. If you like this too, think about trying it out! Who are two mentors in your life who may have nothing in common on the surface, but who actually touched you in a uniquely similar way?*

Her essay is below.

*Harriet the Spy*

~ Ronna Bloom

It was Mrs. Boloten at the Cote St. Luc Public Library who told me everything. I have a sense of being plunked sheepishly before her in my pink, horn-rimmed glasses and asking. No, not asking. For as in the old testament story of Passover, I think I was the daughter (son in the story) who didn't know how to ask. At any rate, plunked there, I hoped someone would direct me. Tell me where I would find what I needed. And Mrs. Boloten did.

Somehow she knew. She steered me toward books and stacks and card catalogues. Showed me how to work this thing called a brain and what I might put it to. Connected me to the world. For years, I went to Mrs. Boloten and, like a pastry chef bringing out one gorgeous dessert after another, she made my eyes widen. She said, 'Read this,' and I did. There was *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle and *Are You There God, It's Me Margaret* by Judy Blume. But at the peak of that fictional croquembouche was *Harriet the Spy*, by Louise Fitzhugh. I had no idea what I was getting.

I took *Harriet* home and began what I now consider my strange relationship with novels. I seldom read them, but when I do, I carry them for months and months reading them bits at a time. I read for five minutes in bed, for ten minutes walking home, for a few on the bus (because that makes me motion-sick). I carried that book around making it last.

I was twelve when I got *Harriet the Spy* out of the library. I had friends. But they changed or I did. Grade six is a treacherous time for girls. My best friend was hated, by me, on alternate days and vice versa. Not much was safe. In my family, my Dad was powerful. He blazed like a ferocious star with us, these small planets, revolving around him. I was bad at sports and did not join teams. My eyes were crossed so baseball was out of the question. On weekends, my friends went to the Cavendish Mall. I went with my family to the Eastern Townships where there were forests and no guides.

There was some relief out in the country. For though I didn't trust myself to navigate the strange pathless place, it was a reprieve from the agony of grade six, the shifting alliances and betrayals. The trees stood there and I visited them. One day, I took the book for a walk.

It was fall, a cool orange-leafed day, and I didn't go far. I remember sitting at the edge of the road on a tree stump. The peace of no one meant I could come forward a bit within myself. Surface. It is one of those carved-out moments. Sitting there reading about *Harriet*, how she carried her notebook around, and wrote in it secretly about her friends and family. This is what she did with her aloneness. She wrote everything down! When they discovered what she had written, it was gasp-worthy. The anger. Shocking. Sitting there, I saw I was already that. I had not yet started writing, but I recognized myself.

Thirteen years later, I sat in a full auditorium and Audre Lorde came out onto the stage. I'd never heard of her. A friend had insisted I come. So I went. Audre Lorde looked small in what I think was the elegant Wigmore Hall in London, England, in

1986. She stood alone on an empty stage. All I knew was that she was a feminist, which meant I was supposed to like her, and a poet. I was worried I wouldn't get it. And that it would have nothing to do with me. In the same way I stood in front of Mrs. Boloten not knowing how to ask, I sat there, dumb.

It was the year her collection, *Our Dead Behind Us*, came out and she was reading from it. I don't remember any of the poems. Only her looking out at the audience with a stark clarity and saying, "Know where your power is." I wasn't sure what she meant, yet I felt it ringing in me. All the doubt that came with bad eyes, fear of asking, a bad sense of direction, led to a feeling of no power at all, all the belief that other people had power -- those who were "political," which I wasn't or "wealthy," which I wasn't or male, which I wasn't. Only the quiet absorption of every book and friendship and family tension was mine. Silently, internally mine. And perhaps there was a power in it, in me to do something with it. It was all I had. Was it anything?

I was at least thirty before I started to write. I wrote about what I had begun writing about in the diaries I kept in the days of the Cote St. Luc library, diaries any girl keeps about the unfair and the fickle. I was always writing about David Shapiro and Francine Taras, about the Strawberry Girls, the ones who wore strawberry lip gloss and "Love's Fresh Lemon Cologne". Who dotted their i's with hearts. And while the writing changed, Harriet the Spy and that quote by Audre Lorde stayed.

I have taken this writing out of my notebooks and typed it into poems and put it in the world. And yes, people got mad at me. I nearly lost some of them for writing things that seemed urgent and needed telling. The telling is not the hornet's nest, it is the poking of the hornet's nest. And everyone got stung, me included.

There was a time the telling was more important than any relationship, the need to speak more urgent. Each time, the decision taken meant asking, "Am I willing to risk this? Am I willing to lose this person in order to write this poem?" If the answer was yes, I went on. That process still goes on. It doesn't feel as terrifying or as risky. But that's just this week. Who knows what I'll write tomorrow. And where it might get me or what it might cost me. I only know that with writing there is always a risk that someone will turn away. But in not writing, or not speaking when I need to speak, there is a turning away from myself. And that's where I started. That's where Mrs. Boloten came in.