The following is an excerpt from the book:

Insight Improvisation

Melding Meditation, Theater, and Therapy for Self-Exploration, Healing, and Empowerment

by Joel Gluck, MEd, RDT

To learn more, please visit http://www.insightimprov.org.

Working with Text

> *We need to learn to accept our minds. Believe me, for writing, it is all we have. It would be nice if I could have Mark Twain's mind, but l don't. Mark Twain is Mark Twain. Natalie Goldberg is Natalie Goldberg. What does Natalie Goldberg think? The truth is I'm boring some of the time. I even think about rulers, wood desks, algebra problems. I wonder why the hell my mother gave me tuna fish every day for lunch in high school. Then zoom, like a bright cardinal on a gray sky, something brilliant flashes through my mind, and for a moment I'm turned upside down…. We have to accept ourselves in order to write. Now none of us does that fully; few of us do it even halfway. Don't wait for one hundred percent acceptance of yourself before you write, or even eight percent acceptance. Just write. The process of writing is an activity that teaches us about acceptance.*
>
> — Natalie Goldberg (1990, p.53)

Imagine putting pen to paper and writing without stopping, being fully present, undistracted, uncensored, allowing your creativity to flow.

And then imagine taking that writing, standing up in front of an audience, and performing it full out, your body and voice expressing each sound, word, and thought with passion and meaning.

Years ago I led the progression of activities described in this chapter at Shantigar in Charlemont, Massachusetts, in Jean-Claude van Itallie's big white workshop tent. I was a little nervous, as respected friends and colleagues of mine were attending the

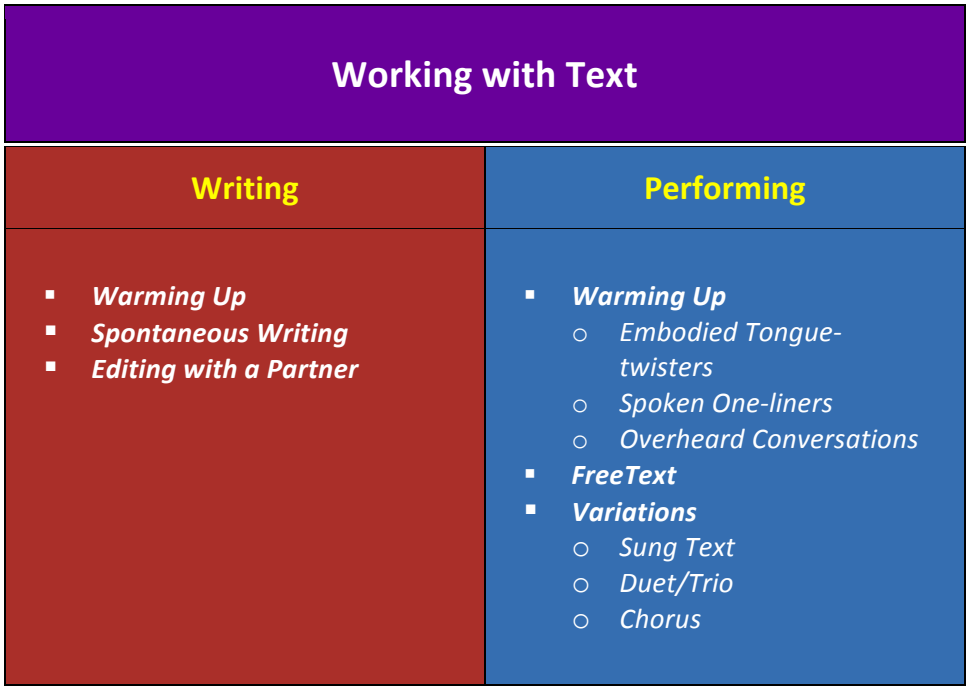
weekend program, among them professional actors, workshop leaders, and therapists. After a morning of Naked Improvisation (clothed!) and Amplification exercises, I suggested we have a silent, mindful lunch, and invited participants, after eating, to roam freely in the fields and woods, doing their own Nature Meditation (see prior chapters for all of the aforementioned exercises).

When we reconvened for the afternoon inside the tent, each participant sat with a piece of paper or journal and did spontaneous writing for 10 minutes, capturing their experience of their encounter with nature, or whatever else was coming up for them—a memory, fantasy, spontaneous poem, etc. Then, in pairs, participants read each other's writing, underlining words, phrases, and passages they especially liked. The pairs met in groups of four, and each person had a chance to stand up and share their writing, using the underlined text as a kind of script, but improvising with it: using their body and voice, expressing each syllable, each idea fully, repeating words and passages, bringing it to life. Group members rehearsed in this way, offering feedback and coaching to one another.

Then, since it was a beautiful day, we met outside the tent, and one at a time each person got up on a hill overlooking the audience. The performer, text in hand, paused, closed her eyes, took a mindful breath, and then opened her eyes and connected with the audience. What followed was something quite wonderful: a piece of personal writing, delivered in a unique, expressive, aware, and fully-embodied way. Each piece was different, each a moment of true theater. It was a memorable afternoon.

This chapter describes the process of spontaneous writing and performing that writing. Several of the activities were adapted from or inspired by the work of Natalie

Goldberg, Julia Cameron, Christie Svane, Jean-Claude van Itallie, Ivan Midderigh and his colleagues at the Roy Hart Theater, as well as Kristen Linklater, Tina Packer, and their colleagues at Shakespeare and Company. I would also like to acknowledge members of The Author's Group in Boston's South Bay House of Correction, where I taught spontaneous writing for several years in the 90's.



Writing

Warming Up

Any Insight Improv activity could serve as a warm-up for spontaneous writing. When working with a peer, it's helpful to begin with a check-in and clearing, meditation, and/or a physical warm-up such as authentic movement. Transitioning directly from

authentic movement to the writing works beautifully, as does a City or Nature Meditation as described above.

Alternatively, a peer session could start with spontaneous writing and sharing that writing as a creative form of check-in, and then proceed to other activities.

In a workshop setting, have participants locate pens and paper *before* starting their warm-up, so they can move directly into the writing uninterrupted.

Spontaneous Writing

The guidelines for spontaneous writing here are adapted from Natalie Goldberg (1990), whose work combines meditation and mindfulness with writing:

Decide on a length of time with your writing partner—10 minutes is a good standard amount—and set a timer.

During the writing, keep your pen moving, don't stop writing. It's OK to write anything, even "I don't know I don't know I don't know"—but keep that pen moving.

Write from the heart, from the gut. Do not censor yourself. Be open to anything: stream of consciousness, poem, memory, rant, story, etc.

Allow yourself to write the worst crap in human history. It's OK if it's bad. Tell your inner critic to take a hike for the next 10 minutes. It's not your role to assess the writing, just to be a conduit for what's coming through your moving hand.

Do not worry about punctuation, grammar, dotting i's and crossing t's, etc. You can fix everything later.

As you notice what's coming up in the writing, do not dance around it, circle it, or delay gratification—instead, dive right in and go for the heart of the matter.

Keep writing until the timer goes off. Once it does, go back and read over what you wrote, correcting any spelling/punctuation errors. In a workshop, the facilitator should give an extra few minutes after the writing stops for participants to read back over their work and correct errors. However, they are not to edit their own writing.

(Note: In addition to Natalie Goldberg's books and retreats, if you're interested in using spontaneous writing as a daily practice, I recommend Julia Cameron's The Artist's Way (2002) *and her practice of "Morning Pages")*

Rules for Spontaneous Writing *(adapted from Natalie Goldberg)*
Keep pen to paper. Don't stop writing for 10 minutes (even if you need to write "I don't know" 50 times).
Be open to anything: stream of consciousness, poem, memory, rant, story, etc.
Don't worry about spelling, punctuation, grammar, etc.—you can fix it later.
Allow yourself to write the worst nonsense in history. Don't judge what's coming out. Let it rip. No censoring.
Go for the heart of the matter—don't dance around, delay, or avoid it.

Editing with a Partner

Once you've written your piece, there are several options for what to do next, depending on the context.

When working one-to-one, and if using spontaneous writing as a form of check-in, or as a reflective technique after an exercise such as authentic movement, you may optionally wish to read your piece aloud to your partner, or read only portions of your writing. Or, you may stand up and "perform" the writing, using the FreeText technique described further below.

In a workshop context, it can be helpful to insert an "editing" step in the process, for a few reasons. Depending on the size of the group, there may not be enough time for everyone to perform their writing in its entirety; the editing process can shorten the material, sometimes significantly. Also, sometimes one can be a little attached to one's writing—by having someone else edit my writing, I can detach from the narrative flow, and feel more free to improvise with it. For example, if I am given fragments of my own writing, rather than the entire text, I am more likely to be able to improvise and play with particular words/phrases. Finally, it's nice to let participants in the workshop influence one another's writing, which helps foster a feeling of mutual ownership of the process.

The editing process is simple: participants find a partner and swap writing with them. Sitting side-by-side, they read one another's piece, underlining individual words, phrases, and sentences that particularly stand out or that they especially like. How much of the writing they underline is up to them; typically it is 25-50% of the writing. Less is also possible: there may be 3 words plus one sentence that truly stands out. If the editor cannot read the other's writing, they can ask the writer. But neither partner is to influence the other in the editing process.

When the editing is complete, the two swap the written material once again, and quietly read what their editor has underlined.

(One optional step: invite the writer at this point to underline some of his own writing—something he feels he cannot live without, or would badly like to have back in.)

This process produces the text. It is as if the actor has been handed a script for the first time. Now his challenge is to take that text and explore it, to bring it to life.

Performing Text

Warming Up

Prior to performing any text, a good warm-up is essential. Many Insight Improv activities can be part of a warm-up progression, including authentic movement, shared vipassana, and amplification—the latter is especially useful as a way to warm up and stretch both voice and body.

Additional activities can serve as a more specific warm-up to performing a text:

Embodied Tongue-twisters. Tongue twisters—such as "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers"—are used by actors before going on stage to limber up the equipment needed for articulation, coordinating and amplifying the use of lips, teeth, tongue, and soft palate to produce consonant and vowel sounds quickly and accurately. (For more examples, search for "tongue twisters" on the web.)

In embodied tongue-twisters, we add gesture and movement—ideally, involving the whole body—to accompany and express the meaning of each word of the tongue twister, acting each out as if it were a mini-play, but greatly exaggerated. For example,

try acting this out (it helps to declaim the text loudly and slowly, in a British accent—don't forget to take a deep belly breath before you start!): "*Lillie Langtry lay on the lawn and languidly, lasciviously laughed!"*

Spoken One-liners. These are called "spoken" to differentiate them from the "sung" variety we'll introduce later in the chapter on Singing. One-liners are a particularly good warm-up in a workshop setting. As the group stands together in a circle, one person whispers a phrase or short sentence into the ear of someone next to them. The phrase can be original, or a short quote from a poem or famous speech. The receiver of the whisper must then "perform" that line, using their full voice and body, for the whole group.

We're not interested in a naturalistic delivery—let go of logic and let the sounds and imagery of the text inspire your use of body and voice. It's helpful to employ amplification, repeating words while increasing (or decreasing) one or more vocal and/or physical dimensions. Movement is encouraged—e.g. stepping into the circle, using gestures, making eye contact.

Primarily, this exercise is about the voice: how to use changes in volume, pitch, speed, timbre, and enunciation to explore the sound and meaning of the text. The actor is encouraged to "taste" each syllable of each word—noticing how it wants to emerge in that moment of interplay of breath, vibration, tongue, teeth, and lips. Words and phrases can be repeated, in order to get the maximum value out of each sound and word.

There is no limit to what can be done with a single line. Given "I need to go buy some milk," the actor may begin by looking around the circle, making eye contact with each person, while saying "Iiiiiii" in a slowly rising pitch. Then, with "need", the actor

may fall to her knees, expelling the word with a sharp, low-pitched grunt of sound, and begin to crawl toward the center of the circle. Etc.

A variation on this is the **One-liner Duet.** In a workshop setting, the one-liner duet picks right up from spoken one-liners. Now, however, two participants whisper a line in an ear of two different people in the circle. The exercise is the same as before, but now with two performers, each with a different one-liner. For the exercise to work, the two speakers should make space for the other by pausing and listening. They should also invite interaction through eye contact and/or physical contact. Speaking simultaneously is possible, too, but ideally is a choice of the two actors (rather than the result of a lack of listening and making space for one another).

What emerges is a piece of improvisational theater, a short scene with two characters, speaking text which may or may not make sense. Much of the "meaning" of the interaction is conveyed through tone, facial expression, and how the characters relate physically. If the actors relax and do not worry about performing, all kinds of happy accidents can naturally emerge—e.g. the next word one actor speaks may be a perfect response to what the other just said.

When one person is done, she physically freezes until the other person is also finished and freezes. The two then wait a beat before breaking the freeze. The audience can then applaud—we often like to use silent applause in Insight Improv workshops, a gesture borrowed from American Sign Language (see http://bit.ly/asl-applause).

Overheard Conversations. Another warm-up, and a powerful exercise in itself, comes from Jean-Claude van Itallie. Over lunch (or in between two days of a weekend workshop), give participants the assignment to "overhear" a brief excerpt of someone's

conversation. This could be anywhere—in a restaurant, post office, dry cleaners, on the subway, etc. Remember not only the words, but everything about the moment: the precise inflection, emphasis, cadence, accent, timbre, and emotional quality of the voice—as well as the facial expression, gesture, stance, etc. Go for short excerpts, easy to capture.

One at a time, participants come before the group to share their overheard bits of dialogue. The performer takes a moment in silence, and then speaks, matching his body and voice to his memory of what he had heard. (For a less experienced group, it might be good to have participants practice in pairs before performing in front of the entire group.) The facilitator may encourage him to do it more than once, particularly if he is having trouble getting it exactly as he heard it (and saw it). For example, it can be helpful to slightly exaggerate the changes in pitch in the line, to bring out the musicality of it. Once he has done it to his (and the facilitator's) satisfaction, the facilitator can lead the group in echoing it back vocally and physically—doing a few "call and responses" with the line.

This exercise is so effective that I can still recall an overheard conversation that Lorraine Grosslight shared with a workshop group, some 20 years ago:

Hotdog? Hotdog? It does look like a hotdog. It's a flower though.

The tone was one of sincere interest and deliberation. Lorraine explained that she was in a restaurant, overhearing a caregiver's response to their child's query about the décor.

FreeText

FreeText is pure improvisation with a text. Any text will do: one's own spontaneous writing, a poem, material from a book or play, etc.

Script in hand, the actor is invited to let go of any preconception of how she might normally approach a piece of writing. Entering empty, she closes her eyes for a moment, connecting with herself, mindfully, in the present. She opens her eyes, connecting with the audience. Then she sees her text.

The words are there as a path, but not a path to drive down as quickly and efficiently and linearly as possible. Rather than get swept up in the horizontal flow of the narrative, the actor goes vertical, plunging into individual moments. As with the One-liners warm-up, she can double back, re-explore a section, a phrase, a word, discovering the richness in repeating a syllable, amplifying it, tasting it, each consonant and vowel alive in her mouth.

The body in FreeText is completely alive and available—a vehicle to convey all of the associations being sparked in the actor's psyche. She moves freely in the space, using the floor, levels, gestures, facial expressions, interaction with the audience—fully expressing each image, role, idea, action, and emotion with abandon.

The actor is not buried in her text. She looks down, gets the next line or phrase, and then looks up and delivers it. She does not need to make eye contact with the audience—in fact, she can close her eyes whenever she likes. But she can also deliver lines directly to audience members—sometimes only one word—making the moment of interaction land with meaning and emotional impact.

What's key here is the inner journey. The actor is connected with her own center and how the words on the page are affecting her. This is not a performance: the actor's process is to discover what is in this text, for her. The audience will get what they get.

She is a sensitive instrument, being played *by* the language while also playing it. She is also playing *with* the language, like a kid on a jungle gym, experimenting and exploring, trying something again that feels good, or trying it again in different ways *until* it feels good.

The voice is fluid, exploring opposites: heights and depths, rough and smooth, wild and controlled. Logic is abandoned—the actor is not worried about how a word or phrase "should" sound or would sound normally. Gut instinct takes over and the voice flies free, ricocheting off words into open syllables, song, animal shrieks, laughter. Each word, sentence, image, or idea is at the same time information to express and in itself inspiration for the actor, egging her on in the unfolding creation. She is dancing with her text, at times holding it gently, whispering words, at other times being held by it, rocked by it, swirled by it, swept up in its storm and tossed around the room.

FreeText is an act of creativity, an open canvas to create and discover. In one passage the actor may be center stage, loudly enunciating each syllable as if reading a proclamation to the world. Moments later, she may be huddled in a corner, her back to us, whispering and mumbling to herself like a madwoman. She may then emerge from the corner as a serpent, slithering across the floor toward us, elongating all the TH's and S's in her passage, seducing us with sensual imagery. The actor is not doing these things at random: she is letting the text affect her, and letting her voice and body follow what the text seems to need.

When trying FreeText with a partner or in a workshop setting, a few details help create a supportive container:

Coaching. When leading the FreeText exercise in a workshop context, after demonstrating the exercise, give participants a chance to try it in small teams of two to four individuals before performing for the whole group. This provides an opportunity to offer and receive coaching. For those new to the form, it can be helpful to have someone encouraging them to "go vertical," to slow down and play with one word, phrase, or sentence, letting go of the horizontal flow of the storyline and living each moment fully, mining its infinite possibilities before moving on.

Timing. It can be helpful to set a time boundary up front, with either an automated alarm or the ring of a bell from the facilitator or partner when time is up. It's important the actor not stop abruptly, so agree beforehand that when the alarm or bell sounds, that is a signal for the actor to begin to find an ending. Five minutes is good amount of time to allot when first experimenting—this can be decreased for large workshops, increased for one-to-one work.

Vertical and horizontal moments. When the actor stands before the audience, she begins with a vertical and a horizontal moment. This practice, from Jean-Claude van Itallie, is a way of beginning that starts with closing one's eyes and connecting with oneself—sending one's awareness down into the body—and then opening the eyes and connecting outward with members of the audience, one at a time. *(More on vertical and horizontal moments in the next chapter, on Storytelling.)*

Ending. When done, the actor takes a moment in silence and stillness to breathe and notice how she is feeling. For the audience, this is an extra moment to take in what has just occurred. They can then respond with silent applause.

Rules for Performing One's Writing
Start with a vertical and a horizontal moment: connect with yourself, and with the audience. Then step forward and begin.
Get a line off the page and then speak it—don't be buried in the text.
Use the full range of body and voice to express each sentence, word, syllable, sound. Taste the words.
It's fine to repeat sentences, words, syllables—don't proceed until you are satisfied.
Let the text play you: what effect is it having on you?
Focus on the present moment; do not worry about getting through the entire text.
When time is up, find an ending that feels right to you. Then take a vertical moment in silence, noticing how you feel.

Variations

Sung Text. As fun as FreeText is, it's even more fun to sing the text. One does not need to be a great singer. If one *aims* for singing, all kinds of interesting things can happen—rapping, chanting, country/folk ballads, opera, post-modern atonality. Singing opens the heart as well as the voice, inviting the flow of emotion; the body joins in with rhythmic movement and a greater range of expression. (*More on this in the subsequent chapter on Singing.)*

Duet/Trio. Two people—or even three—can each work with their own texts simultaneously. A brand new text arises spontaneously from individuals each working with their own text.

One helpful guideline is to **listen and make space for the other**(s)—if a new speaker interrupts, the first speaker should usually stop. However, this rule can be intentionally broken; there may be times when the actors choose to speak (or sing) simultaneously—but it should be a choice. The other guideline is to **invite interaction**, physically and through eye contact with the other(s), as well as vocally.

Working with more than one text also invites the possibility of accidental dialogue. One form of this is a rhythmic call and response: e.g., one speaker may be repeating the phrase "she said," or "my favorite thing is…." from his text, while the other cycles through a series of words and phrases from her own.

Chorus. A different performance structure involving two or more people is to have one text, performed by its author, and a chorus, comprised of one or more actors. The job of the chorus is to listen to, echo, and amplify what the performer of the text is doing—both vocally and physically (see the previous chapter on Amplification).

For example, if the speaker says "You will have lights out by 11!," pointing his finger at the audience, the chorus may repeat the entire line, or just the number "11," matching the delivery of the speaker but putting some spin on it—it may be repeated several times, with a rising pitch, or whispered. The pointed finger may be pointed straight out, or in different directions, or back at the chorus's own chest, as if they were the recipient of the speaker's command.

The chorus must be sensitive not to steal the show—they are there to support the speaker, not overwhelm them. So sensitivity and listening on the part of the chorus are key. If the chorus is comprised of more than one actor, ideally they will not only echo/amplify the speaker's vocal and physical choices, but also do their best to interact with one another, as well as mirror each other's body and voice. The chorus can play roles, sometimes acting like another character in a scene, sometimes being the voice of God or the Universe, sometimes being a little echo in the writer's mind. The chorus can also sing words that the speaker is speaking.

Writing and Improvising—Mindfully

There is something surprising and somewhat miraculous in the way one can take words off the page and bring them to life in a space, for an audience. What has been interior becomes real, fleeting thought made concrete, ideas and emotions made evident on the face, in the voice, through the body, for all to see and hear. The performer reads little squiggles on paper and through skillfully interpreting them can transport us to another reality.

In Insight Improvisation, the act of spontaneous writing, and the performing of that writing, are both forms of meditation. From the point of view of the meditator, *who* I am being—as the writer, the performer, or the audience—is fundamentally a listener. I listen to—witness—my own process, the stream of thoughts and feelings I capture in words on the page. Then, reading back, I listen again: how do those words affect me? When I speak them aloud, what do I feel, moment by moment? And as the audience, what engages or moves me in this performance?

Improvisation isn't always pretty. There will be moments as a writer when the right words don't come, or as a performer when the body or voice do not serve and the audience tunes out. But as meditators we can find added value in those moments. As a meditator I can take the perspective of the witness-self and ask, is this pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral? And if unpleasant, am I reacting with aversion, pushing this moment away? Can I reengage in the next moment, bringing acceptance to what is unpleasant, bringing curiosity, even bringing compassion? Can I express my feelings through the writing, or through how I perform the writing—letting my honest, authentic self come through?

In the next chapter, on Storytelling, we'll further develop our spontaneity with language, tapping into memories and telling stories without prior writing or planning. We will draw on all we've developed so far, including our ability to use the actor's instrument both mindfully and expressively.

References

Cameron, J. (2002) *The artist's way.* New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam

Goldberg, N. (1990). *Wild mind: living the writer's life.* NY: Bantam.