

WRITING PROMPTS

Hive Young Writers' Competition 2026/27

Photo Prompts & Writing Ideas

If you're after inspiration, have a browse through our [gallery of inspiring images](#) and use the prompts and ideas below to see what they spark.

The creative process often begins in one place and ends up somewhere completely different. There's no way to know where an image might take your writing. You might want to explore the story in or around it, or it might spark an idea for a setting, character, atmosphere, poem, conversation or moment.

An image might only make a tiny cameo in what you write, or disappear from the final piece altogether. That's fine. Follow whatever interests you.

Prompts & questions to spark your imagination...

- Browse [the photos](#) and let images drawn you in. Then ask yourself why. What caught your attention - a detail, a person, a mood, a colour, a question, or simply a feeling it gives you?
- How does the photo make you feel? What memories or associations does it trigger? What does it remind you of personally? You could take something from your own life, experience or memory and fictionalise it.
- What happened just before or after the photo was taken? Who took it - and why?
- Go back to the [gallery of inspiring images](#). Choose an image and impulsively write an opening line. Then click through to another image and do it again. Keep going until you run out of steam. Don't overthink them. Good first lines make us curious. They might drop us straight into a moment, give us a distinctive voice, create mystery or make us want to know more. They don't have to explain everything.

Example first lines that make you want to keep reading: *The photograph arrived three days after we buried her. / "Whatever you do, don't let him see the blue one." / By Tuesday, there were seven chairs on the roof. / My sister has always lied about what happened at the reservoir. / At 6.14 every morning, the dog waits for a train that no longer stops here.*

- Think about what you can't see. What might be outside the frame, or hidden?
- Step inside the image. What can you see, hear, smell, taste or touch? What changes when you experience the picture from the inside?
- Move around the image and try different points of view. Step inside someone's head, become the photographer, or look in from outside as an all-seeing narrator. Which point of view gives you the most interesting way in?
- Try an unexpected voice. What might the room, piano, cat, poster, or something else in the image - have to say? Or let two people in a picture start talking and see where it takes you.
- Pretend it's a personal photo. Imagine showing it to someone and telling them the story behind it as if it were your own. Borrow details from the image to make your invented memory feel real. Billy Collins' poem [Class Photo](#) might spark some ideas.

- Forget about the story altogether. Choose a colour, shape, object, expression or tiny detail from an image and follow the associations it gives you. Where else does it take you?

"Poetry is an experience, not a recording of an experience." Marie Howe

- An image might suggest a theme or feeling - loneliness, freedom, jealousy, belonging, for example. Rather than writing about the idea in the abstract, find something concrete in the image - a moment, object, action, character or detail - through which to explore it.
- Question what you see. Why is someone or something there? What has just happened? What's about to happen? What matters in the picture? What's not quite as it seems?
- Imagine a photo has been found somewhere - in someone's belongings, an old file, an abandoned house or somewhere it shouldn't be. Who finds it? Why might it matter? Perhaps someone's trying to piece together a life, a mystery or what happened...
- Change the time. What if this photograph was taken fifty years ago - or fifty years from now? Who might be looking at it, and what might it mean to them?
- Choose two images that seem completely unrelated. What connections can you make between them? What happens when you put them together?
- Start at a key moment. You don't have to explain everything. Focus on what feels interesting or important and give the reader just enough to glimpse the wider picture.

William Trevor said the short story is “the art of the glimpse. If the novel is like an intricate Renaissance painting, the short story is an impressionist painting. It should be an explosion of truth. Its strength lies in what it leaves out just as much as what it puts in, if not more.”

- Instead of sitting down to write a story or poem straight away, try making a mind map of words, images, questions and associations that occur to you when you look at a photograph. See what unexpected connections appear and which ideas you want to follow.
- Try brainstorming all the words you immediately associate with an image - and then write without using any of them. This can be particularly useful for poetry because it forces you past the first or most obvious descriptions or clichés.
- Pay attention to writing that excites or moves you. What is the writer doing that makes the piece work for you? It might be its structure, voice, point of view, use of images, movement or something else. Try experimenting with that technique in your own way. Read great poems and short stories and ask yourself not only *what* you like, but *why* it works.

Freewriting exercise

Set a timer for 5 or 10 minutes and write about one of the images without stopping, correcting yourself or overthinking. The aim is simply to get as much down as you can before the editing part of your brain gets involved.

If it helps, give yourself a starting phrase such as *I remember when this was taken...* (or use one of your opening lines from the above exercise!) Keep your hand moving and see where

the connections lead. Don't worry about silly, strange or unexpected ideas – often they turn out to be the most interesting and original ones. There's no 'right' way to do it.

Try this with a few different images if you like. When you've run out of steam, go back and highlight the words, phrases, images and ideas with energy. Use them as a springboard.

You might discover that something you thought was a short story wants to become a poem made up of beautifully selected images of what the moon saw. Something you thought would be a poem might turn into a story built around a conversation between two people, or a dramatic monologue from a robot. *Let the writing tell you what it wants to be.*

A few general writing tips

- **Don't worry about what you're writing!** All our best weird and wonderful ideas live in first thoughts, in our subconscious. Get something down first. You can shape, edit and polish it afterwards. Give yourself permission to write badly, take risks and surprise yourself.
- **A story or poem doesn't have to look the way you expect.** It might take the form of a text-message conversation, a letter, a list, a monologue or something else entirely.
- **Bring things to life through specific details & the senses.** Look beyond the first or most obvious description. A particular object, sound, smell or tiny detail can lock the reader in.
- **Don't try to sound like a 'writer'! Sound like YOU.** Your way of noticing, thinking and experiencing the world is where interesting writing comes from. If you're writing in character, think about how that person would genuinely think and speak.

Helpful links

POETRY & SPOKEN WORD

The Poetry Society's Young Poets Network is a wonderful resource! Explore:

[Resources for young writers](#) - winning poems, inspiration, prompts and advice.

[Writing, editing & performing tips](#) - loads of useful practical advice.

[Young Poets Network](#) - poems, features, writing challenges, opportunities and more.

[Button Poetry on YouTube](#) - loads of great spoken-word poetry to watch.

FLASH & STORIES

[SmokeLong Quarterly](#) - brilliant for reading contemporary flash fiction.

[David Gaffney's flash fiction tips](#) - excellent, practical advice on writing very short fiction.

[Seven Tips for Writing Short Stories](#) - useful advice on reading, form, character, inspiration and point of view.