

# EVERYDAY Creative Writing

PANNING FOR GOLD IN THE KITCHEN SINK

Second Edition

Michael C. Smith  
Suzanne Greenberg

# EVERYDAY Creative Writing

PANNING FOR GOLD IN THE KITCHEN SINK

Second Edition

**Michael C. Smith**

University of California, Los Angeles

**Suzanne Greenberg**

California State University, Long Beach



*NTC Publishing Group*

a division of NTC/CONTEMPORARY PUBLISHING GROUP  
Lincolnwood, Illinois USA

Acknowledgments for literary selections begin on page 209, which is to be considered an extension of this copyright page.

ISBN: 0-8442-0338-6 (softbound)

ISBN: 0-8442-8318-5 (hardbound)

ISBN: 0-8442-0339-4 (softbound instructor's edition)

ISBN: 0-658-00004-7 (hardbound instructor's edition)

Published by NTC/Contemporary Publishing Group, Inc.

4255 West Touhy Avenue, Lincolnwood (Chicago), Illinois 60646-1975 U.S.A.

© 2000 NTC/Contemporary Publishing Group, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior permission of the publisher.

Manufactured in the United States of America.

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Smith, Michael C. (Michael Cecil)

Everyday creative writing: panning for gold in the kitchen sink /  
Michael C. Smith, Suzanne Greenberg.—2nd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8442-0338-6 (softbound). -- ISBN 0-8442-8318-5 (hardbound).  
-- ISBN 0-8442-0339-4 (softbound: instructor's ed.). -- ISBN  
0-658-00004-7 (hardbound: instructor's ed.)

1. Authorship. 2. Creative writing. I. Greenberg, Suzanne.  
II. Title.

PN153.S65 1999

808'.02—dc21

99-23071

CIP

# Preface

**H**ave you ever seen a movie or read a biography about a writer's wildly adventurous and unconventional life and sighed in weary envy as the credits rolled or you turned the last page? Maybe you went away hopeful and even inspired about writing yourself, and it wasn't until the next day that the predictability of your own life hit you. Perhaps it happened while you were taking the same route to work that you take every morning or doing the coupon math in the supermarket after work or washing dishes while your kids fought over who guessed the phrase first on "Wheel of Fortune."

The truth is that this is the kind of life that most of us live, writers included. Sure, there are exceptions. A few writers have grants that fund their writing and allow them to pursue their craft in a leisurely fashion while looking out a window in an Italian villa. But only a small number of writers make enough money by writing to work full-time at it. Most are forced by the necessities of economics to have a "real" job, too, or, by the necessity of their circumstances, to raise children or care for older relatives. The book you are holding presumes that the life you are living now is already the writer's life. We believe that inspiring ideas can be found in the everyday, even in the murky soap bubbles in the kitchen sink, and the exercises in this book are designed to lead you to those ideas.

The book gets the "panning for gold" part of its title from one of possibly an infinite number of metaphors for the writer: that of being a prospector, a forty-niner, who continues the search for gold long after the main veins have been tapped and after everyone has given up. What this prospector discovers is that the plain rocks and jackrabbit bones usually discarded have their own luster and that virtually anything that we encounter can be valuable once touched with our efforts and marked with our individual signature.

Creative writing is too often seen as the exclusive preserve of university writing programs, and there's no denying that extensive reading and institutions of higher learning can provide the material and context in which creative writing can be understood in a fuller historical and critical way. But whether or not they are affiliated with writing programs, many people still play with words, spin yarns, write amusing anecdotes. People who write creatively do so for the same reasons that others sing or dance or play instruments or paint: to express something of their true selves; to reflect on what they did, thought, or felt; to capture evanescent truths or produce moments of beauty—and sometimes just to let others know that they were here.

Modern psychology and self-help movements perhaps exaggerate the importance of our knowing ourselves, but we believe that in the world of creative writing, it is not an exaggeration to say that the genuine is the individual. Provide others with your unique take on the world, your own angle, your imaginative fingerprint or DNA code, and you have provided a gift more valuable than gold. The exercises in this book are designed to help you extract that gift. They give you hundreds of sites in which to dig for your life and recover previous ore.

This is a book of writing exercises for students, teachers, and writers, whether they are professional or amateur, beginning or advanced, committed or dabbling; anyone who wants to write something creative but can't quite get started, has temporary writer's block, or simply enjoys a new challenge will enjoy this book. It is a book for those who sometimes prefer to do rather than to think and read about doing. We believe that what distinguishes writers from other sorts of people is that, first and foremost, writers write. If you complete these exercises, regardless of how you complete them and regardless of the quality or merits of the results, you will be doing what creative writers do.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

We received much support from colleagues and friends as we worked on the first and second editions of this book. We wish, first, to thank our reviewers of the original text—Allen Woodman, Northern Arizona University; Art Homer, the Writer's Workshop, University of Nebraska at Omaha; and Patricia Bridges, Norfolk State University—who offered us excellent advice as we worked toward our final draft, and, second, the reviewers whose valuable suggestions guided us as we grappled with what to change and what to leave alone in this second edition: Anne Calcagno, DePaul University; Scott M. Fisher, Rock Valley College; and Bonnie Flaig, Kalamazoo Valley Community College.

Special thanks to all our friends and family who put up with us as we wrote—and then rewrote—this book. In particular, we would like to thank Gina Sawin, who patiently listened to us talk our way through the book before it was a book; Joyce and Gary Lott, who offered us their support and expertise on the first edition; and Larry Greenberg, Gina Caruso, and Sarah Michaelson, who have for as long as we can remember unfailingly believed in the strength of our ideas and words.

The second edition of this book finds us living in a new location with new teaching positions and friends and, therefore, a whole host of new folks to thank. The faculty of the English Department at California State University, Long Beach, where Suzanne teaches creative writing, have been especially notable in their support of this project. Department Chair Eileen Klink

deserves special acknowledgment for her constant encouragement, as does College of Liberal Arts dean Dorothy Abrahamse. In addition, Suzanne would like to thank the creative writing faculty at CSULB for their support. And at UCLA, where Michael teaches in the Writing Programs, we would like to thank Cheryl Giuliano and Bruce Beiderwell for their support and encouragement.

Friends and family members who endured far too many updates about how the second edition was going have earned our complete gratitude for their patience with us. In particular, we'd like to thank Cornel Bonca and Teddi Chichester Bonca, role models for us in their ability to finish serious work with young children underfoot. In addition, we'd like to thank Jan Kraft, Ana Kothe, Jennifer Woods, Ginger Mazzapica, Beth Lau, Elizabeth Young, Mimi Hotchkiss, Tamarah Hardesty, Anne and Jim Poppaw, Angelin and Dave Tubman, Madelyn and Michael Callahan, Emily and Steve Piro, all great friends and experts at life balancing acts themselves. Family members who helped us become who we are and who we still might be all deserve thanks for their influence: Sean Carter, Morton and Barbara Ann Greenberg, Kim Greenberg, Elizabeth Greenberg and Robert Blecker and Florence and David Feinstein.

A very special thanks to Ada Ramirez, who consistently provided our children with loving attention when our attention was turned, by necessity, elsewhere.

We are supremely indebted to our original editor, Marisa L. L'Heureux, who promised she would work with us from start to finish and kept her word. We quickly came to count on her gentle, reasonable counsel and astute observations at important stages in our writing and editing processes, as well as her sense of perspective and humor.

In addition, we wish to thank the editor of this second edition, Andy Winston, whose expertise on an infinite number of areas was, perhaps, overshadowed only by his ability to put up with us as we struggled mightily to meet his very reasonable deadlines. It was a great pleasure working with Andy on this second edition.

Finally, we wish to thank our students at California State University, Long Beach; UCLA Writing Programs; Howard University; the University of Maryland; Bowie State University; and the Maryland-National Park and Planning Commission, whose creative energies demanded so much new material from us each week that they left us no choice but to finally write a book.

# introduction

**T**his collection of creative writing invention exercises is organized into seven sections—**Provisions and Prospecting Tools**, **Around the House**, **Down the Street**, **In the Gold Mine**, **Assaying: How Do You Know It's Gold?**, **From Nuggets to Artifacts: Finishing What You Started**, and **Gold Futures: Prospects for Publication**.

The first section, **Provisions and Prospecting Tools**, outfits you with both basic and less common writing equipment: freewriting, brainstorming, free association, listing, and computer gaming, among others. We also include in this section a discussion of how to determine what form—for example, poetry, fiction, or creative nonfiction—your exercise might best be cast in. You may choose to read **Provisions and Prospecting Tools** first, or you may want to dig right into the three middle sections that are the core of the book.

The **Around the House** section includes exercises that use as creative writing resources things, processes, and behaviors with which you are intimately familiar, including your family, chores, and routines. The **Down the Street** section exploits your experiences with the outside world, including work, travel, and romance. **In the Gold Mine** gathers creative writing exercises that make use of abstract ideas, fantasies, dreams, emotions, lies, promises, play, and pure speculation. All of these exercises work equally well with poetry, fiction, or creative nonfiction (we use the terms *creative nonfiction* and *essay* interchangeably to mean prose writing that is significantly fact-based).

The fifth section of the book, **Assaying: How Do You Know It's Gold?** provides suggestions for how to evaluate what you've found in your digging in order to help you identify the work that might merit further development and refinement.

The sixth section, **From Nuggets to Artifacts: Finishing What You Started**, offers tips on how to continue if you find yourself stuck, as, inevitably, we all do from time to time in writing a story, poem, or essay.

The final section, **Gold Futures: Prospects for Publication**, provides guidelines for submitting your finished work for possible publication.

Each exercise in the middle three sections contains background and instructions for getting started on two different levels: what we call "Panning Instructions" and "Excavating Instructions." In many cases, but not in all, the "Excavating Instructions" ask you to go "deeper" into your material. For

example, in the exercise entitled “Getting Lost and Finding the Way,” the “Panning Instructions” relate to getting actually and geographically lost, while the “Excavating Instructions” ask you to explore situations in which you couldn’t find your way emotionally, logically, or spiritually. In some cases, the two sets of instructions simply address different angles of the same subject. Read over both sets of instructions before you begin, and choose the set that inspires you the most at the moment.

We give examples of actual outcomes—what we call “Nuggets”—for each exercise and examples of published work—what we call “Artifacts”—that relate in some way to the exercises. Some of our exercises grew out of these published pieces; sometimes the published works were incorporated because they illustrate some aspect of the exercise or relate generally to the exercise’s subject.

The exercises ask you to explore a variety of topics drawn largely from everyday life, and in most cases the exercises suggest specific approaches to the topics. However, you will undoubtedly veer away from the topics and approaches suggested to pursue your own ideas and inclinations. Ultimately, there may be very little similarity between what the exercise instructions ask for and what you write, and that’s fine. To derive the greatest benefit from this book, remain open to all the possibilities generated and suggested by your own imagination as you do the exercises, even if this takes you away from the approach suggested for the exercise. It will help to maintain a sense of serious playfulness throughout your writing. In other words, adopt an attitude not so oppressively serious that your responses get predictable, nor so wildly fun-loving that only silliness is possible. While we have tried to provide detailed instructions for the completion of each exercise, as long as you are writing something, there is no “correct” or “incorrect.” The book’s primary objective, and our greatest hope, is that in doing the exercises you will get caught up in the interplay between your imagination and the act of writing.

Regardless of your ultimate writing goals—publication, self-expression, and so forth—we recommend that you use this book as a way of jumping directly into writing when you don’t have any particular form (story, poem, essay) or subject in mind. All you need to know is that you want to write something of a creative nature. If you’re not familiar with the prewriting tools we describe in the **Provisions and Prospecting Tools** section, such as freewriting, brainstorming, listing, and clustering, you might want to familiarize yourself with these before you try a writing exercise. Alternatively, you can simply choose any exercise in any of the three exercise sections and get started on it. Then, if a writing tool with which you are not familiar is mentioned (the terms for these are printed in bold), turn back to **Provisions and Prospecting Tools** and learn about the tool and how to use it.

We believe that the act of writing itself ultimately will suggest the form to which your beginning efforts should lead. If you are not particularly



familiar with poetry, fiction, or creative nonfiction, however, the last part of the **Provisions and Prospecting Tools** section—"What Form Should You Choose?"—can help you in deciding whether you should work on a story, a poem, or a piece of creative nonfiction.

We would love you to read this book from cover to cover and complete each exercise in the order presented, though we recognize that doing so would result in your writing an incredible amount of material. You may be using the book in a creative writing class in which specific exercises are assigned and discussed on a schedule, or you might use it as a source of group challenges in one of the thousands of writing groups that have sprung up over the last few years. You may be a lone writer using it in search of just a few notions to get you started; you might, from time to time, skim the text and light on an exercise or an aspect of an exercise that inspires you. Indeed, there is no right or wrong way of using this book, so long as the result is writing.

What this book does not do, however, is offer specific instruction in the techniques of writing poetry, fiction, or creative nonfiction. There are a lot of books already that do this very well, and for those who are interested in this kind of guidance, we recommend some specific texts in the **For Further Reading** section at the end of the book. In addition, many writers learn technique through reading, and we hope that some of these exercises inspire you not only to write, but to search out more work by the published writers to whom we introduce you in each section.

Where you go from here is up to you. Gold can be cast into many forms: delicate chains, durable wedding bands, and even magical chalices. Some of these exercises may yield nuggets beautiful in their own right, while others may benefit from further shaping and forming. Wherever these exercises lead you, we hope you enjoy the prospecting.

# Contents

**PREFACE   xiii**

**INTRODUCTION   xvii**



## **Provisions and Prospecting Tools   1**

### **PROVISIONS   2**

Optional Provisions   7

### **PROSPECTING TOOLS   7**

Freewriting   8

Brainstorming   9

Listing   10

Clustering   11

Free Association   11

Puzzles, Games, and Computers   13

Using Your Computer   15

Resistance as a Tool   17

Using a Combination of Tools   18

### **WHAT FORM SHOULD YOU CHOOSE?   20**

Consider Writing a Poem from an Exercise if   20

Consider Writing a Story from an Exercise if   21

Consider Writing an Essay from an Exercise if   22



## **AROUND THE HOUSE   25**

**WHY I WILL NOT GET OUT OF BED   26**

**HOLDING ON AND LETTING GO   30**

**FURNITURE MOVERS   34**

<b>BAGGAGE</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>AT THE DINNER TABLE</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>PAPER TRAILS</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>I HAVE BEEN EATING BOREDOM</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>HOME CONTRACTORS</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>HONEY, I'M HOME</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>THE EVOLUTION OF MINI-SKILLS</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>THE NOTE READ, "THERE ARE MORE WHERE THESE CAME FROM"</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>QUILTING</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>THE FAMILY NORMAL</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>PHOTO ALBUM</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>PRODUCT WARNINGS</b>	<b>74</b>



## **Down the Street 77**

<b>GETTING LOST, FINDING THE WAY</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>EXCUSES, EXCUSES, EXCUSES</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>CAUGHT UP IN THE NEWS</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>NEIGHBORLY AND UNNEIGHBORLY NEIGHBORS</b>	<b>86</b>
<b>CUSTOMS AND THE CUSTOMARY</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>BUILDING CODES AND ZONES</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>"I WOULD HAVE BURNED MY HAIR FOR THAT WAITRESS"</b>	<b>96</b>
<b>COMMUNITY SERVICE</b>	<b>99</b>
<b>THE ROAD NOT TAKEN</b>	<b>102</b>
<b>THE BACKPACK</b>	<b>105</b>
<b>AROUND THE WATER COOLER</b>	<b>108</b>
<b>CHECKING OUT THE CHECKOUT LINE</b>	<b>112</b>

<b>EXIT INTERVIEW</b>	<b>114</b>
<b>MODERN ROMANCE</b>	<b>118</b>
<b>HALF ACCOUNTANT, HALF BARTENDER</b>	<b>121</b>



<b>In the Gold Mine</b>	<b>125</b>
<b>THE ELEMENTS</b>	<b>126</b>
<b>FOLK REMEDIES</b>	<b>129</b>
<b>THE CLICHÉ'S THE THING</b>	<b>132</b>
<b>CROSSING RELATIONSHIP BOUNDARIES</b>	<b>136</b>
<b>WHAT THINGS SAY</b>	<b>138</b>
<b>CHANGES IN PREFERENCE</b>	<b>141</b>
<b>SUBTITLES AND DOUBLETALK</b>	<b>143</b>
<b>SETTING AS CHARACTER</b>	<b>146</b>
<b>COMPARING APPLES AND ORANGUTANS</b>	<b>149</b>
<b>CITIZEN OZ</b>	<b>152</b>
<b>HE SAID, WINKINGLY</b>	<b>156</b>
<b>CHARACTER BY ASSOCIATION</b>	<b>160</b>
<b>"MY MOTHER WAS LIKE AN ORNATE CASTLE"</b>	<b>164</b>
<b>AS RESTLESS AS PANTYHOSE</b>	<b>167</b>
<b>IMPLAUSIBLE CAUSES AND UNLIKELY EFFECTS</b>	<b>170</b>



<b>Assaying: How Do You Know It's Gold?</b>	<b>175</b>
<b>DOES IT GLITTER: FRESHNESS AND ORIGINALITY</b>	<b>177</b>
<b>The Topic or Piece of Writing Keeps Coming Back to You</b>	<b>177</b>
<b>You Find Yourself "Working" on the Piece Without Deliberately Trying To</b>	<b>178</b>

The Beginning of the Piece Helped You Discover Something You Didn't Know About Yourself or Someone Else or the Human Condition	178
You Are Intrigued by an Odd or Original Connection You Have Made Between Two Seemingly Very Different Things	178
You Introduced a Character You Like a Great Deal and Are Concerned About What Might Happen to Her or Him	179
You Introduced a Character You Dislike and Are Concerned About the Damage He or She May Do	179
You Love the Sound of the Words You Have Strung Together	180
You Feel Like You Could Write a Lot More About This	180
You're Dying to Send/Show the Piece to Others	180
You Feel That What You Have Written Is Fresh or Original	180
You Believe That What You Have Written Honestly Expresses Some of Your Feelings	182
You Have Created Tension or Conflict	182
<b>HOW TO SORT REAL GOLD FROM FOOL'S GOLD</b>	<b>183</b>
Be Sure That What You Have Written Doesn't Descend into Cliché	183
Beware of What Too Easily Amuses or Impresses You	185
<b>SOME FINAL THOUGHTS</b>	<b>185</b>



## From Nuggets to Artifacts:

### Finishing What You Started 187

#### WHEN YOU GET STUCK WRITING A POEM 189

Play Out the Language	189
Choose Random Words from Another Source	191
Start Saying the Opposite	191
Repeat the Last Word, Phrase, Line, or Stanza	192
Rhyme the Last Line and Move in the Direction of the Rhymed Word	192
Transpose the First Stanza and the Last Stanza	192
Inject a Memory or a Dream	192

#### WHEN YOU GET STUCK WRITING A STORY 193

Add a Character	193
-----------------	-----

Let Your Characters Lead 193

Create a Scene 193

Add Weather 194

Add Trouble 194

Raise the Stakes 194

Add a Second Story 194

**WHEN YOU GET STUCK WRITING A CREATIVE ESSAY 195**

Interview Someone 195

Interview Yourself 195

Look Up Unusual Facts Surrounding Your Subject 195

Employ Fictional Techniques 195

Begin Your Next Paragraph with a Particular Moment 195

Create a Bold, New Organizing Strategy 195

Take a Trip 196

**WHEN YOU GET STUCK IN GENERAL 196**

Don't Insist on Knowing Where You're Going 196

Use Exercises in this Book as Prompts for Scenes, Stanzas, or New Ideas 197

Start a List 197

Start in the Middle of the Story, Poem, or Essay 197

Shift Something: Point of View, Time Period, Voice, or Tone 197

Write About What Is Going On in or Around You at the Moment You Get Stuck 198

Stop Writing in the Middle of a Scene, Stanza, or Line 198



**Gold Futures: Prospects for Publication 199**

**FINDING A HOME FOR YOUR WORK 200**

Contests and Vanity Presses 201

Publishing on the Internet 202

**HOW TO SUBMIT WORK 202**

**INCLUDE A VERY BRIEF COVER LETTER 203**

**INCLUDE A SELF-ADDRESSED, STAMPED ENVELOPE 203**

**MANUSCRIPT MECHANICS 203**

**FOR FURTHER READING 205**

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 209**

**SUBJECT INDEX 213**

**AUTHOR/TITLE INDEX 217**



# Provisions and Prospecting Tools





**Y**ou might think that all a writer really needs to get started are a few blank sheets of paper and a couple of durable pens. Technically, you would be right. While a scuba diver, skier, or bungee jumper has to buy or rent elaborate, expensive equipment, many excellent poems, stories, novels, and essays have been written longhand by people with meager incomes and serious misgivings about technology. Writers need rich imaginations more than they need padded bank accounts or elaborate machines. Of course, having use of a computer or word processor is a bonus (more on that later), but many of the provisions and tools you will need most as you begin on your journey are far less tangible than a color monitor or a hard drive.

Some of the most successful early Argonauts—gold seekers—took little more on their quests than a tin wash pan in which to separate gold from earth, while others felt more comfortable outfitting themselves like L. L. Bean models. Ultimately, what you take with you, what you absolutely need, depends on you and, to a certain degree, on your experience as a writer. The following are suggestions.

## **PROVISIONS**

We recommend that in addition to writing implements you include a loose-leaf notebook for doing the exercises and a bound notebook to serve as a logbook for recording your reactions and experiences as you do the exercises. These are by no means essential, and if acquiring them or using them deters you in any way, leave them behind. You may find later, however, that you would like a more organized and systematic way of dealing with the exercises. The notebook and logbook can serve well.

Use the logbook to record your efforts to complete the exercises, as well as your impressions and responses, in the way that some of the early prospectors recorded their prospecting adventures and findings, and the way that scientists record the conditions and outcomes of their experiments and doctors chart their patients' progress and setbacks. By doing this, you force yourself to stand back a little and think about what you've written and how you wrote it. In the long run, this logbook may be even more valuable to you than the exercises themselves.