

My Story, My Words



**A Practical Guide to Creative Writing for
Survivors of Sexual Abuse and Violence**

developed by
Clare Shaw



The Royal Society
of Literature

*Literature
Matters*

CLEAR ———
——— LINES
FESTIVAL ———

Creative Writing for Survivors of Sexual Abuse and Violence

**developed by Clare Shaw
with assistance from Winnie M Li**

A Clear Lines Resource

**We are thankful to the Royal Society of Literature for
supporting this project through the Literature Matters
award.**

**the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own**

(from "The Journey" by Mary Oliver)



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What is this guide?

This guide aims to help people who have experienced sexual violence - including sexual exploitation, abuse, rape and other forms of sexual harm - to write their lives and their stories. Over the next twenty-five pages, you'll find writing exercises and resources.

You'll also find the story of our project, along with some wonderful writing from people who have attended our workshops, along with other poets and novelists.

Perhaps, like us, you're a survivor of sexual violence, or perhaps you're a friend or a family member. Perhaps you're a writer or a support worker; perhaps you're a colleague or a helpline volunteer.

Maybe you'll read this book on your own, or maybe you'd rather read it in sections with a friend. Maybe you'll race through it with a coffee, or perhaps you'll work through it slowly with plenty of breaks.

Whoever you are, and whenever you're reading this, we hope you like it. We hope it helps.

Who wrote this guide?

This guide was written by Clare Shaw, with the assistance of Winnie Li. We're both writers – I'm a poet and Winnie is a novelist. And we're both survivors of sexual violence. Both of us are committed to improving understanding of sexual violence, and we're both part of Clear Lines Festival which Winnie founded in 2015: the UK's first-ever festival dedicated to addressing sexual assault and consent through the arts. We want people to be able to talk openly and without shame about sexual assault and consent, and we believe that art and writing can help this to happen.

Clear Lines: <http://clearlines.org.uk/>

Clare Shaw: <https://www.clareshaw.co.uk/>

Winnie M Li: <http://www.winniemi.com/>

The story of this project

You could say that this project started in 2019, when the Royal Society of Literature awarded Clear Lines a “Literature Matters” grant so that we could run Clear Lines events across the UK. Or you could say that this story started when Winnie and I first came to words as a way of expressing and making sense of the sexual violence that we’d experienced – Winnie in adulthood, me as a child.

Either way, we wanted people everywhere to be able to listen to published authors reading their stories and poetry, and to take part in writing workshops. We wanted people everywhere to experience how we can use poetry, novels and other kinds of literature to help us understand and talk about sexual abuse and violence.

Then Covid struck. And all the projects we’d planned had to move online.

We were scared that our workshops and readings wouldn’t work online. We were scared that people wouldn’t want to come, that they wouldn’t feel safe enough online, that they would feel too distant from each other taking part in a workshop on a screen. But we were wrong.

When we worked with partner organisations – St Mary’s Sexual Assault Referral Centre and the Writing on the Wall Literary Festival - to offer writing workshops online, we booked up rapidly, and the feedback from participants was amazing.

And that’s why we’re here. We want to share what we did, so that you can try it too.



Getting started

“Breathe in and begin.”

(from “Ordinary Genius” by Kim Addonizio)

You might have your own way of getting words down on the page. We find that free writing is a great place to start.

In free writing, we don’t care about spelling, grammar or punctuation. We don’t care about whether what we’re writing is good, or silly, or clever, or stylish. We don’t plan, we don’t cross out, we don’t correct ourselves. We just keep on writing.

Free writing works best when you have time limits. Set your alarm, and reassure yourself that you’re only going to write for 2 minutes. Free writing also works well if you have a prompt – a word or sentence to start you off.

Writing Exercise 1: I hear

In our first simple exercise, the prompt is I hear

Write it at the top of your page. Set your stopwatch going and then just write down what you can hear. It might be the sounds in your room, in your neighbourhood, in your head, in your imagination. Try starting every line with “I hear”. When your two minutes is up, read back over what you’ve written. Consider how it felt to write.

If you’re writing in a group, perhaps you could invite people to read out to each other. Try reading out your pieces out one after another without any responses or commentary - in an unbroken wave of voices as one person after another reads. Talk about how it felt to write; to read; and to listen to each other. These are some of the things our participants said:

- I feel calmer
- It felt good just to stop and notice for a while
- The more I listened, the more I could hear
- It was scary to read out
- I loved hearing all the different voices and accents
- It made me feel more connected and less alone

Writing Exercise 2

You can repeat the “I hear” exercise as many times as you like: there’s always something new to notice! And if you live with anxiety, and other consequences of abuse and violence, it can be wonderful to switch your head off by just noticing the simple physical facts of the world.

Try writing in the same way from other physical senses. Start with writing “I Feel” at the top of the page - and writing for another two minutes.

Remember not to judge, not to stress, not to edit. Just write. You don’t have to show this to anyone. Once you’re in the swing of it, you could try something a little more abstract, like “I know”, “I believe”, or “I need”.

**I believe that, the older we get,
the weaker the body,
but the stronger the soul.**

**I believe that if you roll over at night
in an empty bed,
the air consoles you.**

**I believe that no one is spared
the darkness,
and no one gets all of it”.**

From “What I Believe” by Michael Blumenthal, 2005

As you write, you might begin to notice that the writing is taking you where you need to go. That’s one of the powers of writing: when you trust your own voice, you can find the story you need to tell.

“

Writing about sexual violence and abuse: why?

“A light song of light is not sung
in the light; what would be the point?”
(from “A Light Song of Light” by Kei Miller)

Writing about your feelings and experiences can have a positive effect on your physical and mental health. Research suggests that expressive and creative writing come with a whole range of documented benefits: in studies, blood pressure (Davidson et al, 2002), lung function (Smyth et al, 1999), liver function (Francis & Pennebaker, 1992), academic grades (Cameron & Nicholls, 1998), working memory (Klein & Boals, 2001), sporting performance (Scott et al, 2003) and mood (Páez et al, 1999) have all showed significant improvements.

Research also suggests that expressive writing can help you to cope with traumatic experiences (Klein & Boals, 2001, Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005, Koopman et al, 2005) - by reducing post-traumatic symptoms, and by reducing the anxiety and depression which can result from traumatic experiences.

But writing about painful experiences like sexual abuse and violence can be really difficult. It can leave you feeling shaken and upset. It can bring up painful thoughts and memories. If you want to write directly about an experience of sexual violence or abuse, check in with yourself first. Are you able to manage difficult feelings? Can you keep yourself safe? Are you able to get comfort and support if you need it?

Remember, there are lots of ways of telling your story. Choose a way that feels right – and safe - for you. Do it when you're ready. Be gentle with yourself. Take care.





Things our participants said

Here's some feedback from the people who took part in our "My Story, My Words" workshops - how they enjoyed writing alongside other survivors, how writing can make us feel happy and strong. How good it can feel to be able to tell your own story, in your own way.

"I learned how healing writing is, how easy it is, and I feel so much encouragement to write more".

"I learnt that I can surprise myself by my own ability".

"Finding emotional support and loving energy from a group of total strangers was profoundly moving".

"I learned the joy of language and that the survivor community is powerful".

"It was a remarkable experience and I discovered things about myself that I had not been able to formulate in words before".

"It makes me reflect on how far I have come".

"I am incredibly grateful for the loving support that came my way".

"I really feel as if I have a voice and tell my story".

Writing Exercise 3

Part 1

If you can, sit near a window. Set your alarm for three minutes, and now write down everything you can see.

Begin each line with “I see”. Don’t worry about spelling, grammar or punctuation, or whether your writing is any good. Just keep on writing.

When your three minutes are up, choose three examples from your list which you like best.

If you’re writing in a group, check whether anyone wants to read theirs out – or try reading as a “wave”.

I see a cloudy sky
I see an empty road
I see a tree bright with leaves

Part 2

Working with your three examples “I see” and write “I am” at the start of each line.

I am a cloudy sky
I am an empty road
I am a tree bright with leaves

Return to the view in the window and keep on writing for another three minutes, beginning each line with “I am”.

When you’ve finished, read back over what you’ve written. Notice how it felt to write. If you’re writing in a group, you might want to share your writing with each other.

Extract from “I am”,

written by participants in “My Story My Life” 2021
Reproduced with permission

I am the road.

I am the sun pushing through the clouds.

I am the wisteria creeping through the holly tree,

I am the rustling leaves.

I am the first blossoms on the apple tree,

I am the wind.

I am the pavement. Trodden. Smeared. Rubbish.

I am chipped paint peeling with age,

I am discarded furniture.

I am the crumbling wall, worn down after the decades.

I am a blue blind, always ready to pull my shutters down.

I am the will of the weed that struggles through concrete.

I am the blackbird that fills the evening with song.

I am the sparrows that fly in and out of the crack in the roof.

I am the sun beam on my keyboard.

I am a bird that never loses its voice.



Using metaphor to write about sexual abuse and violence.

The writing exercises we have used so far show that when we draw on our five senses, we bring our writing alive - for ourselves as well as the reader. That's why writing can be so powerful.

But we don't always have to describe experiences directly. In fact, sometimes our writing is more powerful when we approach it indirectly - as the poet Emily Dickinson said, "Tell the Truth but tell it Slant". For example, if our feelings or experiences are difficult to describe, perhaps because they are painful, or confusing, it can help us to use comparisons like metaphors or similes.

Metaphor involves using one thing to stand in for another in order to describe it and make a point. As a writer, I like metaphor; it helps me to express and explore my feelings. If I am feeling hopeful and bright, I might describe myself as a spring tree. But some days, I am a stone wall: I feel closed-off, cold and grey. Metaphor also allows me to talk about my experiences ... I might describe my childhood as a hard path to walk, I might say I lived through storms and thunder. Because I'm naming my experiences indirectly, it can feel like a powerful but safe

way for me to engage with my experiences of sexual abuse and violence.

Using metaphor doesn't make our writing less truthful, or less powerful. Consider this extract from Kim Moore's astonishing poem,

"When I Open":

"will my wild things come back, will the horse of my legs and the dragon of my ribs, and the gentle sheep which lived in my throat

like a breath of mist and the silverfish of my eyes and the skylarks of my hands and the wolf of my heart, will they all come back and live here again, now that he's left"
(from "When I Open" by Kim Moore).

Sometimes though, it can feel appropriate to talk plainly and directly about our experiences. It's your story. You can tell it whenever, and however, you prefer.

Writing Exercise 4

Instructions for Surviving a Pandemic

Whether or not you identify as a survivor of sexual violence and abuse, we are all survivors of a global pandemic. In this next exercise you'll be invited to write about that experience. If it works for you, you then apply the same techniques to writing about how you've coped with other difficult experiences, including sexual abuse and trauma.

Step 1

Using the freewriting technique, write down three things you've did that helped you to get through the experience of Covid. It might be something very healthy, like exercising and meditation. Or, like me, you've might have eaten the contents of your fridge whilst watching Netflix. Either way, you survived, and this exercise is about honouring your survival.

I drank plenty of beer
I watched Netflix into the small hours
I went for a walk every day

If you're writing in a group, you might want to share your examples.

Step 2

Now write down those three examples as instructions:

Drink plenty of beer
Watch Netflix into the small hours
Walk every day

Step 3

Now keep on writing. If you find it easier to work with prompts, try writing for just sixty seconds on the things you did in each of these settings:

- at home
- in work
- in your neighbourhood
- with friends and family
- last thing at night.

Step 4

You should end up with a list of instructions for surviving a pandemic. Read back over it. If you are in a group, you might like to read them with each other. Notice how you feel. Over the page, you'll find an example written by participants in a 2020 workshop.

How to Survive a Pandemic.

by Unionlearn participants, 2020

Step 5

You can repeat this exercise, using the same steps and prompts, to write about the strategies you've used to help you live with your experiences of sexual violence or abuse. You'll find an example written by participants in 2021 at the end of this resource.

Plan your time. Dance daily to Stevie Wonder;
take more bubble baths. Drink lots of red wine.
Live everyday as if it's your last.
Speak to friends when you need their support.
Go for a run in the hills.

Stop the crazy thinking. Go running four times
per week,

Make sure your family are safe

Watch Walthamstow FC in the Essex League

Play scrabble, spend time with your husband,
spend time outside

Take yourself away from it all,

draw more pictures. Go for walks in the woods,
in the park, watch Netflix. Pray.

Embrace the workouts.

Stay alive until you see your family again.

Eat plenty of cheese.

Writing about sexual abuse or violence: how?

In her article “Responding to Violence”, poet Katrina Naomi sets out three poems about her experience of attempted rape. She wrote her poems over a period of years, and though they all describe the same attack, they are very different in tone, style and content.

One of the poems is written in the voice of a young man; another directly and openly about her experience in very plain language, with little punctuation and no breaks. Another poem describes her attacker as a crocodile. Writing in different ways at different times allows Katrina to explore different aspects of her story, and to tell that story in the way that feels right for her - she states that writing in someone else’s character allowed her to write about trauma.

Similarly, in “The Lovely Bones”, novelist Alice Sebold creates a supernatural drama which is informed by her own experience of rape. She writes directly about this experience in her autobiographical memoir “Lucky”. And in her novel “Dark Chapter”, Winnie Li recreates her own experience of rape through the character of Vivian.

“At the bus stop, there is another group of teens. There are three of them, white, and they are looking at two girls on the sidewalk. Snickering, and making some comments she can't hear.

She brushes shoulders with one of them as she steps onto the bus. He turns and looks at her for a moment. She can't quite gauge what is in his look - adolescent lust or rage or maybe just annoyance. But his ice-blue eyes lance through her, almost recognisable, and her stomach turns. Sweat stands out on her forehead. Stumbling her way up the stairs, she sits down, tries to quell the rising nausea in her gut. She watches as the teenage boys continue down the street, knowing he is not the one, he is just some other teenage kid with a slight resemblance”.

(From “Dark Chapter” by Winnie M Li)

It’s your story. Tell it however you want. In the next three pages, you’ll find three exercises which offer you different ways of telling your story.



Writing exercise 5

In Winnie's novel "Dark Chapter", she tells the story of Vivian. In "Poem from Bus Shelter", I imagine what a bus shelter would say if it could write. I found that in doing this, I was free to write about my own experiences of violence and abuse, and how I'd coped with them through writing.

"If I ever had a life
half worth the privilege of the name –
If I had not been rooted to this spot
and treated to the things that other lives spit out
I would be proud
and I would write it".

(From "Poem from a Bus Shelter" by Clare Shaw)

1. Choose an object - something in front of you right now. Or you could choose from this list:
football, pen, coin, spade, brick.
2. Set your timer for five minutes, and write in the voice of that object. Imagine how that object was created, what it is used for. What it is likely to have seen, heard, experienced.
3. This might feel strange, but just go for it!
4. When your five minutes are up, read back over what you've written. Some of you will find that writing about the object has helped you to express aspects of your own story.

Writing Exercise 6

Sometimes, in writing our stories, we need a structure. Like scaffolding, structure can hold our stories together, and help us to say difficult things.

Structures can be very complicated – like a sonnet, for example – and they can be straightforward. In our writing exercises, for example, we’ve used the simple structure of a repeated phrase at the start of each line.

In this exercise, you’re invited to write about an experience of violence or abuse. Perhaps it’s a story that you’ve struggled to write about. If it’s your story, you could write about yourself as “I”. Or you could keep some emotional distance for writing by writing about yourself as “He” or “She”.

When you are writing a story, perhaps the simplest structure of all is:

- beginning
- middle
- end.

Step 1.

Set the timer on your phone.

Step 2

Write for two minutes about the beginning of your story. It’s up to you to decide when. You

might want to start by describing the place where your story began.

Step 3

Write for two minutes about the middle of your story. Again, it might help to focus on the location. If you need a prompt, try focusing on a particular sense, like sight or sound.

Step 4

Write for two minutes about the end of your story. It might help to return to a description of the location where this event took place.

Step 5

Don’t expect to write the full story – just write a few short lines. Don’t force yourself to write this story if it doesn’t feel okay. This exercise is about finding your way into the story you are ready to tell.

Step 5

Reading back over what you’ve written, experiment with different ways structures and points of view. If you want to, you could try changing the order of the sections, so that you start your story at the end, or finish it at the beginning. You could try changing the name of the main character, or referring to them as I, She, He. Notice how it makes you feel.

Writing exercise 7

Writing about sexual abuse and violence can be really difficult. It's important to feel grounded, safe and well-supported. If engaging with your experience of sexual abuse and violence has left you feeling wobbly or vulnerable, here is a writing exercise to help you to lift your mood.

In "Glad of These Times", Helen Dunmore creates a list of all the things she's glad of. Some of those things are very unexpected!

"I am not hungry, I do not curtsy,
I lock my door with my own key
and I am glad of these times,

glad of central heating and cable TV
glad of email and keyhole surgery
glad of power showers and washing
machines".

(From "Glad of These Times" by Helen
Dunmore)

You are going to create your own list.

1. At the top of your page, write "I am Glad of"
2. Set your timer
3. Write for one minute about all the things in your house that you are glad of. You might want to write about objects, wallpaper, people, furniture, animals. It's up to you!
4. Write for one minute about all the things outside your house that you are glad of – in your garden, your community or neighbourhood
5. Write for one minute about things that you are glad of about your body.
6. Write for one minute about sounds – songs, voices, telly theme music - that you are glad of.
7. Write for one minute about things that you are glad of about today.
8. For one minute, write about everything you are glad of about the experiencing of writing.

Now read back over what you've written. If you're writing in a group, it's lovely to share these lists with each other, even if you only want to read out one or two lines.

I am Glad of

by Lucy Anderson

**I am glad of the radio that brings the world in
but not of Tories on telly,
glad of Nadiya Husain's face on screen,
plain soya yogurt in my fridge.
I loathe joint pain at work,
adore self-driven projects -
and how, each night, a different sky
orbits the lantern tower.**



Final Word from Clare

Maya Angelou says “There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you”.

Writing my story wasn't a quick fix. But it was an important part of my journey. Finding my voice helped me to find myself. It didn't stop all the bad feelings, but it gave me a way to understand and express them. It gave me control over my narrative - I could tell the story of what happened to me, rather than someone else telling that story, rather than being told what was wrong with me. Telling my story of abuse and violence helped me to tell all of my stories, including my happy stories of change and love. My story hasn't changed the world, but it has played a role in helping other people to understand the impact of sexual abuse and violence.

Through writing my own story with the friendship of amazing people like Winnie M Li and Kim Moore, learning from the guidance and writing of people like Katrina Naomi and Natalie Goldberg and Kim Addonizio, walking the path trodden by Mary Oliver and Maya Angelou, I know myself to be part of a community of survivors. If you're part of that community too, I'm sending you my love, and thank you for letting me walk alongside you for a short while.

Now, in the words of the participants in My Story, My Words 2021, it's time to treat yourself gently. Eat chocolate freely. Keep breathing. Buy yourself flowers.

Final word from Winnie:

We are all on separate journeys as survivors, but sometimes it helps to know there are others on similar journeys, who can make your own a little less lonely. Literature is one vital way I've learned from other survivors and I continue to be grateful for the words which were written before mine.

May you find your own words. They can stay private, written in a notebook to be seen only by you, or they be shared with close friends, or even the wider world. What happens to them is entirely up to you.

Now go out there, peer inside, write your words, and honour your truth. You won't be alone.

From **"How to Survive"**

by the participants of My Story, My Words 2021

Wander the woods,
listen to the robins.
Remember that everything is cyclical.
Treat yourself gently. Keep breathing.
Don't ever be told you're too loud.

Keep photographs of those you love
close to your heart.
Talk to your friends with truth.
Be unapologetic. Take up space.
Eat Weetabix when you are sad.

Read and read and read and
read. Eat chocolate freely.
Remember that people's outsides are one thing,
and their insides are another
Go to the beach, watch the waves.

Say Fuck off more..
Order a Maccies when you need it ,
don't judge yourself.
Say no to things that will harm you,
Don't be so busy.

Touch the earth in your garden,
watch out for glass and worms.
Be yourself.
Don't save kindness for other people.
Remember this too will pass.



Recommended Reading from Clare and Winnie

Poetry

Everyone Knows I am a Haunting by Shivane Ramlochan (Peepal Tree Press, 2017)

The 'Red Thread Cycle' in the centre of this collection is an evocative and vital set of poems addressing sexual violence. A sensory immersion in Trinidadian culture, but also a universal portrait of a victim-survivor's range of emotions: anger, spirit, and even triumph.

Vertigo and Ghost by Fiona Benson (Jonathan Cape, 2019)

Head On by Clare Shaw (Bloodaxe, 2012)

The Zoo Father by Pascale Petite (Seren, 2001)

Bunny by Selima Hill (Bloodaxe, 2001)

Memoir

Becoming Unbecoming by Una (Myriad Editions, 2015)

This graphic memoir uses drawing and words to tell the author's own experiences as a child, against the backdrop of a wider media storm around gendered violence.

After Silence: Rape and My Journey Back by Nancy Venable Raine (Virago, 2000)

Lucky by Alice Sebold (Picador, 1999)

The Missing List by Clare Best (Linen Hall Press, 2018)

Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self by Susan Brison (Princeton University Press, 2003)

Fiction

Dark Chapter by Winnie M Li (Legend Press, 2017)
Winnie reimagines her own stranger rape and its aftermath from the perspectives of both victim and perpetrator.

The Panopticon by Jenni Fagan (Windmill Books, 2013)

Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson (Hodder, 1999)

Guides to Writing

Poetry as Survival by Gregory Orr (University of Georgia Press, 2002)

How poetry enables us to live with suffering – including the suffering of living through violence and trauma.

A Pocket Guide to Writing Through Trauma by Winnie M Li (Spread the Word)

<https://www.spreadtheword.org.uk/a-pocket-guide-to-writing-through-trauma/>



**“Three words to describe the workshop”: feedback from
“My Story, My Words”
workshop participants 2021**

safe nurturing inspiring - supportive original inspiration -
exciting inspiring challenging - compassionate uplifting inspiring - motivating
comforting empowering - inspiring powerful supportive - inspiring creative
uplifting - inspiring supportive revelatory - empowering community emotional