

Brainstorming : THE OBJECTS EXERCISE

I've learned many brainstorming exercises over the years, but the following two are the very best. They generate lots of ideas and they get my heart pounding while I write. So here they are:

For this first exercise, you're going to need someplace quiet (or headphones) and about 15 minutes.

And if you'd like to hear me lead you through this, just click [here](#).

Ready? Here we go:

I want you to imagine a box.

In this box is a set of objects.

Imagine that each one of these is an essence object for you.

What do I mean?

Each object represents one of your fundamental qualities.

So each object is more than just an object.

Example 1: **my green pen.** Why a green pen? I always carry a green pen because I grade all my students' essays in green. Why green? Because when a student gets an essay back and it's covered in red marks it can tend to look bloody, like a battlefield. But if a student gets an essay back that's covered in green it looks verdant. Also, red means "stop" (like a stoplight), but green says "keep going." And that's the essence I want to communicate to my students: keep going. So my green pen is more than a green pen.

Example 2: **a well-worn North Carolina Tar Heel basketball.** Why? I came home from the hospital wearing Carolina Blue, so I've been a Carolina fan, literally, since birth. I've spent more time on a basketball court than almost anywhere else (which is why the ball is well-worn), and basketball represents my connection with my dad: when I was a kid we'd watch Carolina games and play basketball for hours. This basketball is more than a basketball.

Example 3: **the blue Bible my grandma gave me when I was seven.** This represents my having been raised in the Presbyterian Church. And my parents were missionaries, so a lot of who I am today has been shaped by the my early religious upbringing. So this Bible is more than a Bible.

You get the idea.



I want you to make a list of 20 objects. (Don't complain—you're infinitely complex and creative and could come up with a thousand—I'm just asking for 20.)

Important: Don't write what the objects mean to you as I've just done, just write the objects. Like this:

- * green Precise v5 extra fine rolling ball pen
- * worn-down, rubber North Carolina basketball
- * blue Bible with my name stitched on it in gold lettering
- * bbq sauce
- * annotated copy of The Brothers Karamazov
- * friendship bracelet
- * black and white composition notebook
- * Amelie DVD
- * Evanston Hockey t-shirt

If it helps, put on some music. Let your mind wander.

Begin now.



MY ESSENCE OBJECTS

Use your imagination.

(If you get stuck, you'll find questions on the other side to inspire you.)



The big amazing list of brainstorming questions

- What's something you never leave home without?
- What's a snack you crave?
- A food that reminds you of your family?
- A food that reminds you of home?
- A tradition that reminds you of home?
- What else reminds you of home?
- An object that represents your best friend?
- An object that represents your father? Your mother?
- Your grandparents, or lack thereof?
- Something you loved and lost?
- A toy you used to play with as a kid?
- Something that makes you laugh?
- A book you love?
- Best movie ever?
- Favorite guilty pleasure movie?
- An object that represents something abstract that you broke (a heart, a promise)?
- An object that represents a regret?
- A favorite gift you received?
- A favorite gift you gave?
- An object that represents a secret? (Don't worry, this stays between us.)
- Something about you no one else knows?
- A dream?
- Something you stole?
- Something you found?
- Something that makes you feel safe?
- The worst thing that ever happened to you?
- The best thing?
- The logo on your imaginary business card?
- The image you'd like carved into your tombstone?
- An object that represents: a smell you love, a smell you hate, a taste you love, a taste you hate, the sweetest sound in the world?
- The coolest thing about science?
- Something you forgot?
- Something old?
- Something new?
- Something borrowed?
- Something blue?
- An accident?
- Best thing you ever found in the street?
- Best money you ever spent?
- Your life lie?
- Your favorite object?
- Something from another country?
- Your favorite sentence?
- You'd cry if you lost this?
- An object that represents someone you'd like to know more about?
- Something you'll never get rid of?
- A bad habit?
- A perfect moment?
- A time you laughed so hard you cried?
- A time you cried so hard you laughed?
- An image you'll never forget?
- What they'd put in the museum of your life?
- A tattoo?
- The cover image on your first self-titled album?
- Three objects from your room?
- A near-death experience?
- A moment when you were so embarrassed you wanted to disappear?
- Recurring dream?
- Worst (actual) nightmare?
- When were you most afraid?
- If you had a clone, what would you have the clone do?
- First love?
- A time you were speechless?
- Heaven?
- Hell?
- The moment you left childhood behind?
- A quote you love?
- Your favorite photo?



What's your story?

Finding the Right Clay

Think of essay writing as sculpting. You're working to sculpt an essay that reflects something true about who you are. The purpose of the essence objects exercise is to help you find the right clay. How can you be absolutely sure you're sculpting with the right clay? You can't. Writing is an art, after all, not a science. But here's a tip:

Tell your deepest story.

I was part of a story circle once in which we were asked to tell our deepest story. How can you tell when you've found it? You'll feel it in your gut. And if the writing sounds superficial or like it could have been written by any number of high school students, it's probably not your deepest story. So what's your deepest story?

Spend three minutes jotting down answers to these questions:

What's the toughest lesson you've ever had to learn?

What was the hardest thing you ever had to overcome?

What is your life question?

I wouldn't be who I am today without _____.

If you have a specific career/major in mind, answer, Why am I a [writer/doctor/teacher]?

When did things change for you? In other words: you were one way. Then [this thing] happened. Then you were another way.



What do I value?

Here's my other favorite brainstorming exercise and it'll help you figure out the second half of your essay in about five minutes. To begin, pick your top 10 values from the list below.

- community
- inspiration
- money
- intellect
- status
- financial gain
- laughter
- serenity
- physical challenge
- responsibility
- competition
- career
- fame
- working with others
- freedom
- security
- strength
- self-control
- hunger
- personal development
- trust
- faith
- involvement
- adventure
- vulnerability
- adaptability
- friendship
- excellence
- job tranquility
- power
- passion
- cooperation
- affection
- wisdom
- knowledge
- growth
- expertise
- order
- privacy
- self expression
- stability
- art
- autonomy
- risk
- balance
- self-discipline
- courage
- family
- empathy
- working alone
- humility
- efficiency
- intensity
- health and fitness
- meaningful work
- my country
- music
- truth
- resourcefulness
- challenges
- commitment
- leadership
- helping others
- influence
- wit
- success
- patience
- listening
- diversity
- love
- fast-paced work
- nutrition
- competence
- practicality
- creativity
- excitement
- collaboration
- social change
- beauty
- ecological awareness
- quality relationships
- travel
- decisiveness
- curiosity
- spirituality
- loyalty
- honesty
- independence
- supervising others
- recognition
- accountability
- democracy
- close relationships
- religion
- respect
- bravery
- communication
- change and variety
- compassion
- nature
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____



Brainstorming: THE VALUES EXERCISE

Now pick your Top 5.

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Once you have those, pick your Top 3.

- _____
- _____
- _____

And then, yes, pick your #1 value. Remember that you're not losing any of the others, you're just picking the most important value for you today.

- _____

