

Writing Prompt for the Hungry

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Objective:

In this exercise you will use **concrete details**, or language that appeals to the reader's five senses (sight, smell, hearing, touch, or taste), to learn how to make an **abstract idea**—hunger—tangible.

Introduction:

Before we can begin to understand hunger, we must define it. Real hunger is a biological drive to replenish missing key nutrients. Cravings, often mistaken for hunger, are psychological urges to eat for reasons other than nourishment. Real hunger cannot wait for a few hours. It demands to be fed.

Often hunger is associated with trying times and speaks to more than just the need for sustenance. Some writers have described this sensation as something reaching far into their bones. Others have labeled it as a black hole within the stomach—an overwhelming feeling that completely distracts one from anything other than finding food to fill in that gap.

Examples:

In the 1996 heartbreaking memoir, *Angela's Ashes*, Frank McCourt suffers continually from hunger as he grows up in Limerick, a city on the west coast of Ireland. In the sixth chapter, McCourt describes his memory from geometry class while watching his teacher peel an apple. He writes,

It is torture to watch Mr. O'Neill peel the apple every day, to see the length of it, red or green, and if you're up near him to catch the freshness of it in your nose. If you're the good boy for that day and you answer the questions he gives it to you and lets you eat it there at your desk so that you can eat it in peace with no one to bother you the way they would if you took it into the yard. Then they'd torment you, Gimme a piece, gimme a piece, and you'd be lucky to have an inch left for yourself. (154)

Similarly, the 1845 memoir, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, describes Frederick Douglass's suffering of hunger. This famous orator and former slave tells his readers he is:

...perfectly helpless both as to the means of defence and means of escape, —in the midst of plenty, yet suffering the terrible gnawings of hunger, —in the midst of houses, yet having no home, —among fellow-men, yet feeling as if in the midst of wild beasts, whose greediness to swallow up the trembling and half-famished fugitive is only equalled by that with which the monsters of the deep swallow up the helpless fish upon which they subsist, —I say... (111)

Douglass describes his own hunger as a “terrible gnawing” and a feeling of “trembling.” He is a “helpless fish” and a “half-famished fugitive,” vulnerable in the midst of wild beasts.

Exercise:

Using the sample excerpts as a model, write a one-page first-person description of a time when you felt hungry. Perhaps this was a time when you had forgotten to eat entirely or remained stuck in traffic between class and dinner. Perhaps hunger might have been something more—not knowing when you would consume your next meal. Use language that appeals to the senses of your reader. Describe not only the physical, but also the psychological effects of hunger. Use the following questions to guide you in your writing.

Can you describe your hunger through the traditional five senses (sight, hearing, taste, smell, or touch)?

- Is your hunger a rumbling? A deafening roar? Complete silence?
- Does your stomach feel like it's caving in? Pressing up against your back?
- Is there a sense that something is missing? That something didn't quite hit the spot?
- Does it feel hot? Cold?
- Does it taste like your favorite meal?
- Is it a physical sensation (shaking, stirring, stillness)?
- Through color?
- Through thoughts? (Does it make you angry? Irritated? Want to whine?)