37 Unconventional Exercises for When AI Isn't Enough

Here's your Writer's Block Emergency Kit designed specifically for those moments when you're stuck and even AI assistance isn't breaking through the creative barrier.

Suggestions for How to Use This Emergency Kit:

1. Try these exercises away from your computer with a pen and paper
2. Approach each exercise with playfulness
3. Set a timer to maintain focus without overthinking

Remember that the purpose is to shift your perspective and get new ideas, not produce perfect prose.

Exercise 1: The Character Hijack

When your protagonist feels flat or predictable, have them "hijack" your story. Write a first-person letter from your character to you, complaining about how you're portraying them. ("Dear Author, I would NEVER say that. Let me tell you who I really am...")

Exercise 2: The Five Senses Challenge

For your current scene, write five separate paragraphs each focusing exclusively on one sense (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch). Then integrate the most surprising elements into your main draft.

Exercise 3: The Genre Transplant

Take your current scene and completely change the genre. If you're writing romance, rewrite it as horror. If it's literary fiction, make it a Western. The transplant often reveals core elements that transcend genre and revitalize your original.

Exercise 4: The Impossible Obstacle

Introduce the most absurd, impossible obstacle you can imagine into your current plot. A dinosaur appears. Gravity reverses. Your character suddenly speaks only in sonnets. Solve this ridiculous problem, then scale the solution back for your actual obstacle.

Exercise 5: The Antagonist's Victory Speech

Write the victory speech your antagonist would give if they completely defeated your protagonist. What would they gloat about? What insecurities would they reveal? Use these insights to strengthen your conflict.

Exercise 6: The Time Jump Method

Skip ahead ten years after your story ends. Write a scene where a minor character reflects on the main events, like Doctor Watson does in the original Sherlock Holmes noves. What seemed important then? What actually turned out to be important? Return to your manuscript with this perspective.

Exercise 7: The Object Biography

Choose an important object in your story (a ring, a weapon, a book). Write its complete biography from creation to destruction, including the parts that happened before and after your story. Objects often carry surprising narrative weight.

Exercise 8: The Method Writing Challenge

Spend one hour physically doing what your character does. If they're a baker, bake something. If they're running from zombies, go for a sprint. The physical experience often unblocks mental barriers.

Exercise 9: The Terrible Alternate Ending

Write the worst possible ending to your story. Make it melodramatic, clichéd, completely unsatisfying. Then write precisely why it fails. This negative definition often clarifies what a satisfying ending requires.

Exercise 10: The Three-Dialogue Breakthrough

Write a scene using ONLY dialogue. Have no tags, no description, and no internal thoughts. Do this with exactly three characters. Restrict each character to one-sentence exchanges. The constraint forces authentic, distinctive voices.

Exercise 11: The Supporting Character Spotlight

Write a complete short story featuring your most minor character as the protagonist. What matters to them? How do they view your main character? Incorporate these perspectives as subtle background elements.

Exercise 12: The Emotional Weather Report

Rewrite your stuck scene where the weather and environment perfectly mirror the emotional state you want to convey. Then gradually dial it back until it's subtle but still powerful.

Exercise 13: The Soundtrack Method

Create a soundtrack for your story. Gather 10 songs that capture different scenes or character emotions. Write a paragraph about why each song belongs. Then write one scene while listening to its corresponding music, letting the rhythm influence your prose.

Exercise 14: The Rule of Three Reversal

Identify three "rules" or assumptions you've established in your world or plot. Systematically break each one, asking, "What if the opposite were true?" or "What if the opposite were true?" The most interesting reversal often provides your breakthrough.

Exercise 15: The Worst-Best Advice

Write a scene where your protagonist receives completely contradictory advice from two people they trust equally. The character’s decision process often reveals their true character and values.

Exercise 16: The Second Person Perspective Shift

Rewrite a critical scene in second person ("You walk into the room..."). This perspective shift often reveals unconscious distancing or areas where deeper immersion is needed.

Exercise 17: The Childhood Backstory

Write a scene from your protagonist's childhood that will never appear in your book but explains a key fear or motivation. Focus on sensory details and emotions rather than exposition. Return to your manuscript with this deeper character understanding.

Exercise 18: The Voice Dictation Challenge

Record yourself narrating (don't write) a summary of your story as if explaining it to a friend at a coffee shop. Transcribe it, keeping all the informal language and tangents. Circle the parts where you become most animated. These are often your story's true heart.

Exercise 19: The Three-Act Structure Scramble

Take your current scene and write it three times: first as the opening to a story, then as a pivotal middle conflict, and finally as a resolution. The version that feels most energetic reveals where this scene might best serve your narrative.

Exercise 20: The Memory Palace Exercise

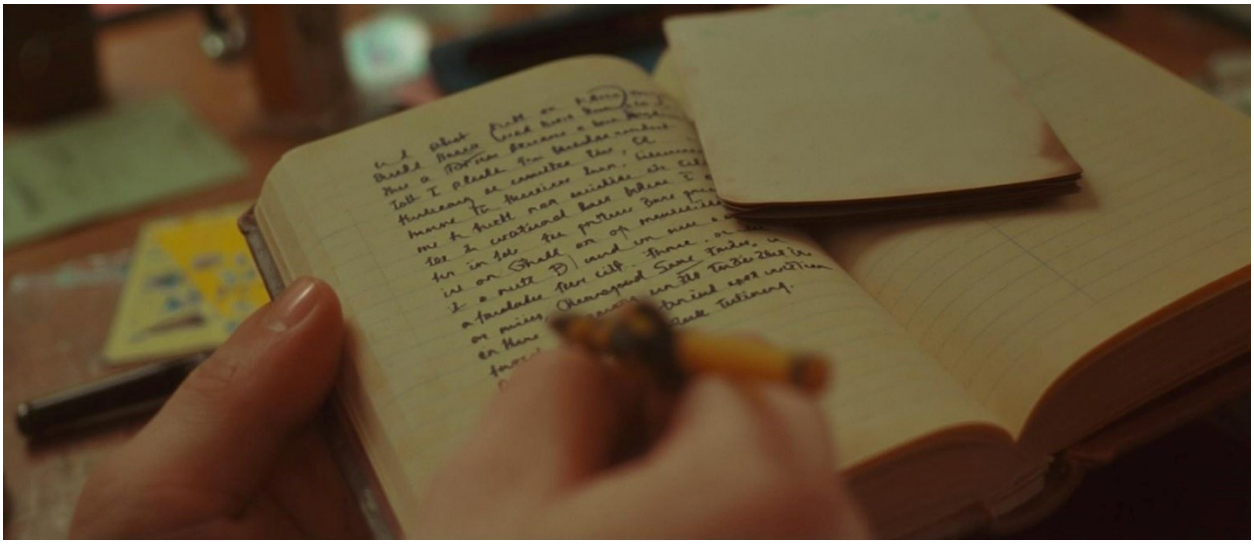
Physically walk through your house/apartment and assign one plot point or character to each room or object. Explain to yourself why that plot point belongs there. The spatial reasoning often reveals logical gaps or new connections in your story structure.

Exercise 21: The Visual Artist's Way

Draw a map, floor plan, or visual timeline of your story—no matter how crude. Physical visualization often reveals spatial or temporal problems that remain hidden in text. Photograph your drawing for reference.

Exercise 22: The One-Hour Character Interview

Conduct a real-time written interview with your character, asking difficult questions about their motives and fears. Set rules: you must ask the question in 30 seconds and they must answer in 2 minutes. The time pressure creates authenticity.



Exercise 23: The Diary Experiment

Write three brief documents that exist within your story world: a letter, a news article, an official report, a diary entry, etc. Creating these artifacts often reveals worldbuilding details and character voices you've been missing.

Exercise 24: The Fairy Tale Transformation

Rewrite your current story conflict as a fairy tale, complete with "once upon a time" language, magic, clear moral stakes, and archetypal characters. The simplification often clarifies the core conflict beneath plot complications.

Exercise 25: The Opposite Day Technique

Rewrite a pivotal scene with every character making the exact opposite choice they make in your manuscript. Explore the consequences. This often reveals whether your characters' decisions feel inevitable or arbitrary.

Exercise 26: The Secondary Character Conspiracy

Write a scene where two secondary characters discuss the protagonist when they're not present. What do they really think? What do they know that the protagonist doesn't? Their perspectives often reveal blind spots in characterization.

Exercise 27: The Sensory Deprivation Challenge

Rewrite a scene removing one critical sense from your protagonist (they temporarily lose vision, hearing, etc.). How do they compensate? This forces you to explore underutilized sensory descriptions and creative problem-solving.

Exercise 28: The Method Research Sprint

Identify one real-world element in your story you haven't researched deeply (a location, profession, historical period). Spend one hour researching only this element, taking detailed notes. Then immediately write a scene incorporating three specific details you discovered.

Exercise 29: The Three-Tense Technique

Write the same scene in past, present, and future tense. Which creates the most urgency? Which reveals the most character interiority? Use this insight to energize your primary manuscript.

Exercise 30: The Translation Challenge

Take a pivotal scene of dialogue and "translate" it three times: first into the most formal academic language possible, then into casual text-message speak, finally into poetic language full of metaphor. Each translation reveals subtext and intention.

Exercise 31: The Story Circle

Map your main character's journey onto Dan Harmon's Story Circle (a variation of the Hero's Journey): 1) Comfort zone 2) Desire 3) Unfamiliar situation 4) Adaptation 5) Getting what they want 6) Paying the price 7) Return to comfort zone 8) Change. Which sections feel underdeveloped?

Exercise 32: The Prop Master Challenge

List every significant object in your story. For each, write a sentence about: who made it, who owned it before your character, what will happen to it after your story ends. Objects with the richest histories often deserve more narrative attention.

Exercise 33: The Character Wardrobe Inventory

Create a detailed inventory of your protagonist's wardrobe, focusing on why they own each significant item. The choices reveal character history, socioeconomic status, self-image, and values—often suggesting character details you hadn't considered.

Exercise 34: The Opening Line Lottery

Write ten completely different opening lines for your story. Ask a friend to rank them without explanation. Rewrite your opening using elements from their top three choices, which often reveals what naturally hooks readers.

Exercise 35: The Scene Energy Map

Draw a simple line graph of your story's emotional energy or tension across scenes. Where does the line dip for too long? Where does it plateau when it should be climbing? Revise accordingly to create better rhythmic variation.

Exercise 36: The Two-Hour Voice Study

Select a favorite author whose writing voice you admire. Set a timer for two hours to read their work exclusively, taking notes on specific techniques. Immediately afterward, write 500 words in your own project, letting their rhythms influence but not override your voice.

Exercise 37: The Newspaper Headline Technique

Write five different newspaper headlines that might announce the central event of your story. Which catches attention? Which feels most accurate? Refine your concept based on the most compelling framing.

Need More Help?

If these exercises spark a breakthrough, I'd love to hear about it! Reply to any of my emails or write to Elaine@TheWrittenLink.com with your experience

If you're not receiving my weekly AI tips newsletter, *The Writer's AI Companion*, sign up for free at:

https://thewritersaicompanion.substack.com/subscribe

Let's keep writing!
-Elaine Foster
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