

KEY PHRASES / Provocative Statements.

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Here are the ones I chose:

My mama died of a broken heart

I love him now (daddy)

I'd give up this whole movie star business if I could go back to our house and live with daddy

I'm scared my daddy is going to marry Mrs. Leighton

sometimes my old house looks so lonesome it tears at my heart

it's my house, it's all in this world that belongs to me

I can't remember mama's face anymore

it isn't only the house I wanted, it's the life in the house

Can you see how this process really brings us to the heart of the matter?

For instance, all of the harsh and negative things Wilma says about Mrs. Leighton, some of which are clearly a repeat of things she has heard from the mouth of Aunt Gert, are really about one thing:

I'm scared my daddy is going to marry Mrs. Leighton

Don't you think, knowing all the things we know about Wilma, that this is a potent line? It is a line filled with all the horrors for Wilma, of not only having lost her mama, but now, having her daddy taken away from her as well.

So, what do we do with these provocative statements? As I said earlier, it is absolutely essential that we find a way to personally and authentically connect with the point of view of the character. In order to do that, I have a powerful writing exercise for you. If you do this process consistently, in the ways I will show you here and in the following chapters of this book, you will discover a wonderful and effective means of crawling inside the skin and into the heart of the character.

In a moment, I am going to ask you to:

1. Choose one of your provocative statements and write it at the top of a page here in the book. (I will give you four pages here in the book for four statements. Do any other provocative statements in your own writing journal.)
2. Then,
 - a) As soon as you have written the statement down, I want you to close your eyes and say the statement to yourself (not out loud.) Say it to yourself over and over for a good few minutes and do so in a relaxed manner. Simply allow the words to work on you.
 - b) After saying the statement to yourself, open your eyes and, immediately, directly underneath the statement, I want you to write a free association. By free association, what I mean is – do not censor anything - write whatever comes out of you as a result of saying the provocative statement to yourself and allowing it to work on you.

Two important things:

1. Write the free association **in first person**. I am not asking you to write as “Wilma,” I am asking you to freely write your responses using the word “I” rather than “Wilma” or “she.”
2. Once you begin writing, **do not stop or pause**. Do not use punctuation marks. Write swiftly and keep your pen going until you have filled the entire page. As an example, I will do one for you right now:

Provocative statement: It's my house, it's all in the world that belongs to me

i have nothing much in this life but I have my house I don't really have a daddy even though I have one and I love him but does he love me I don't know I want him so bad to love me and to make a family with me but I don't think I can ever have a real family again I need a family I need my mommy I need my daddy I need someone to hold me and hug me and make it okay but I hurt my heart hurts and I am so sad and scared and worried that my life is over but I am so young and I have so much love in me and I want to give it all to my daddy but he doesn't really want it and he wants to get rid of my house and I am so alone but when I am in my house I feel my mama and I look at her picture and I know I am loved I still feel her love even though she's not here but I feel her near me when I am in my house and I see our swing and I imagine swinging with her still and that hurts so bad cause I miss my mama I miss her so much oh god I hurt I hurt god why did you take my mama away from me why did you abandon me and make my mama so sick I want my mama back I want to live in my house with my mama god I want to feel her hold me I want to hold her hand those long pretty fingers and walk out in the garden and smell the trees I want to be a child again and happy and without the dread I feel now god please don't let my daddy take my

house from me please don't let my daddy take my mama away I have nothing else but my house and my mama I want her back god and I want to live in my house oh please make our life whole please god please...

I could have continued writing, but I wanted to give you a brief example of what this process looks like. I can tell you that the more I wrote, the more I felt deeply in pain and very alone. And now, when I say that line to myself "*It's my house, it's all in the world that belongs to me*" I have a very personal understanding and connection to those words that is not merely intellectual. Just saying those words makes my heart feel like it's going to crack open and like I can't get quite enough air to breathe. And don't you think, way down, underneath all of her words, very similar things are going on inside of Wilma?

If you look at what I wrote, you see clearly that my relationship with the whole play (a result of my reading the play and writing the key phrases,) had a direct influence on my free association. This influence was out of my control. But did all the thoughts, feelings and images of my free association come from Wilma? Did they come from Horton? No, they came from somewhere down in me.

You see, both are at work here. We have the inspiration of Horton's text and the original spark of life that lives within that text, which came from deep down in Horton. And, we have the wisdom from the part of us that knows more about playing this part than anything we can cook up in our heads. That wisdom lives deep down in us. And, if we are going to have that mysterious and indefinable part of our instrument lead us effectively, we must nourish and nurture it. That is exactly what we are doing with these key phrases, provocative statements and the free association form of writing based on the provocative statements.

Don't forget. What we are working on here is **taking on the point of view of the character in an authentic and personal way**. All right, now I want you to do it. Here again is the assignment:

- a) Choose one of the provocative statements and write it at the top of a page here in the book.
- b) As soon as you have written the statement down, close your eyes and say the statement to yourself for a few minutes in a relaxed manner. Allow the words to work on you.
- c) Open your eyes and, immediately, write a free association underneath the statement:
- d) Write the free association in first person, using the word "I" rather than "Wilma" or "she."
- e) Once you begin writing, do not stop or pause. Do not use punctuation marks. Write swiftly and keep your pen going until you have filled the entire page.

On To The Key Facts...

The work we have done with “key phrases” was a first phase of “knowing what you are talking about” on stage and it was aimed at inhabiting the point of view of the character. But what about the personal history of the character and her relationship to the people and events in her life. Certainly, when the character speaks about these things, she knows what she is talking about. **But we don’t.** Do you see that?

For example, when the words “old lady Leighton” come out of Wilma’s mouth, she has an intimate connection with these words. She doesn’t have to stop and imagine what old lady Leighton looks like because she knows that. She doesn’t have to stop and consider what old lady Leighton means to her because she knows that too. And now, you are playing the part of Wilma and you have to say “old lady Leighton” and the thing is, you don’t know what you are talking about. Isn’t that true? Do you have a woman named “old lady Leighton” in your life who is about to marry your daddy? Probably not. Even if you did, she’s not Wilma’s old lady Leighton.

So how do you take the words spoken by the character and make them your own so that when you speak those words, you too, know what you are talking about? Well, in many acting classes, especially in the colleges, acting students are given an exercise to do which is, for the most part, useless. It is called, the character’s “biography.” *“Hey Smitty, do a biography on your character.”* So what does Smitty do? He goes home and makes up all kinds of intellectually appealing facts about the character’s past that the play doesn’t give him: the hospital the character was born in, what blood type the character is, if the character had a dog when he was five, etc... All of this is a tremendous waste of time. I mean, look, how is the blood type gonna help you act the part! Here’s a great quote which speaks to this:

*“Depend upon it, there comes a time when for every addition of knowledge
you forget something that you knew before.
It is of the highest importance, therefore,
not to have useless facts elbowing out the useful ones.”*

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

What we need then, is a way to work with the text which will result in a personal history for the character, which emerges from both you and the character. Why? So that when you speak the words of the script, you are speaking from what you truly know. Here’s your next assignment. I want you to read the play again. This time you will pull out a list of “key facts.”

The key facts are any person, place or thing that Wilma speaks about and which are significant to her.

For example, when Aunt Gert has the headache, Wilma says to Minna, *"If she wants any ice, I'll crack it."* Well, ice is a "thing" that Wilma mentions. But is it really significant in her life? Clearly it's not and I would not include "ice" in my list of key facts. How about Wilma's swing? Yes, obviously, that would be on my list of key facts. Enough talk, go ahead now and write down your key facts....

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Now that you have your list of key facts, the next thing you are to do, is put each key fact on the top of it's own page. When you write the key facts at the top of the pages in your journal, only use the front of each page. (You will need the blank space on the front and back of each page to do writing assignments based on each key fact.) Go ahead now and do that.

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The next thing you will do is take each key fact, one at a time, go back to the script, and find everything Wilma says about that key fact. As you find the things she says, you will write down everything that supports Wilma's "true point of view" towards that key fact. For instance, let's imagine that Wilma was very frustrated with Arabella for a moment and she said to Minna, *"That Arabella is a worthless little fool."* Would you write that down? No you wouldn't. Why? Because we know, from everything else we get in the script, that this line does not support Wilma's true point of view towards Arabella.

Here's an example of what I want you to do, using one of the key facts I chose:

Key Fact: the tenants

They were asked to leave because they were tearing it to pieces. They had weeds growing in the yards and had torn off wall paper. My Aunt Gert asked them to leave. I think I'll go over and see my house, look at how those tenants left it. I can't ever go over there when there's tenants living in it.

Do you see how, by picking out and writing down Wilma's words about the key fact directly underneath that fact, you now have a snapshot of Wilma's relationship with that key fact? Now, you do the work.

I want you to go back to your pages with the key facts and take the time to go through the play completely for each key fact that you chose. Work with one key fact at a time. As you do, write down everything Wilma says that supports her true point of view towards that key fact. Take whatever time you need to complete all of your key facts and then move on to the next, key fact assignment.

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Similar to the free association form of writing you did with the provocative statements in the previous chapter, in a moment, you are going to be writing free associations based on the key facts and, based on what Wilma has said about

each one. The way I want you to do this is to, first, go back to the page with the first key fact you chose. Then, read the key fact to yourself and read everything you wrote down beneath it. Then, I want you to allow that reading to kick you off into writing a free association. (Wherever Wilma's own words about the key fact end on your page, that's where I want you to begin writing your free association.) Again, write quickly, without punctuation's and without pausing. And, rather than filling the whole page, simply write a paragraph or so.

Before I have you begin writing, using the example of the key fact I used earlier, I will show you what this looks like:

Key Fact: the tenants

They were asked to leave because they were tearing it to pieces. They had weeds growing in the yards and had torn off wall paper. My Aunt Gert asked them to leave. I think I'll go over and see my house, look at how those tenants left it. I can't ever go over there when there's tenants living in it these last tenants were the worst that big fat man he couldn't even fit through the bathroom door and he put a crack in the wall that will need to be repaired and those bratty two daughters of his but i do feel sad for him all the same not having a wife and all but i still can't forgive the way those kids ripped up the wallpaper in my old room the lilacs that were so pretty to look at when i'd lay in bed and mama worked so hard to put up for me that her fingers hurt and even though they have been out of the house for a week the place still has the smell of whiskey that man sure drank a lot and I hope I never have to rent it again but i am afraid i will have to and we will fix the place up for them and they will wreck it just like these folks did

That's is my first installment of working with that particular key fact. Even after this initial bit of writing, I discovered some specific things about the tenants that I didn't know before. As I wrote in the form of a true, free association, information showed up on my page that is much more wonderful than any clever thing I could have come up with in my head. Did you hear what I just said? Let me highlight the crucial part: "**information showed up.**" Where did all this information come from. It came from somewhere in me that "knows."

Now, I have a relationship with the words "the tenants." I don't even have to go back and read what I wrote because I already know inside me that this extremely obese man, an alcoholic, lived there without a wife and with two daughters. And, I uncovered a number of specific things:

I know that the obese man put a crack in the wall because he had a hard time fitting through the bathroom door

I know that I had lilac wallpaper in my bedroom and it was this wallpaper that the two daughters destroyed.

I know that I have even felt bad for that family, not having a mom, but this does not diminish my anger about the wallpaper being torn up.

I know that my mother worked hard on the wallpaper in my room and I remember how her fingers ached when she put the wallpaper up.

I know I loved to look at the lilacs when I was in bed.

I know that the house still stinks from the man's whiskey.

My question to you now is, when I act the scene, what do I do with all these things I discovered about the tenants? The answer is:

**I don't do anything with them.  
I simply know them.**

Why? Because when I have to say those words, "the tenants," I really do know what I am talking about. Listen, the information about the tenants came from a non-intellectual place in me, rather than from any high-brow ideas I could have tried to make in my head, so the things I discovered about the tenants truly do live in me. And, when I have to speak the words, "the tenants" in the scene, these words will come from that place of meaning in me; meaning which will have it's own, organic impact on my behavior. Most importantly:

**As I act,  
authentic human behavior, rich in personal meaning,  
will occur with no effort on my part.**

These free associations are a powerful tool and the more you work with them, the more you will find yourself getting out of your own way. One more thing.

Another nice pay-off of the writing I did on this key fact is that I made clear for myself what Wilma means when she says "*I think I'll go over and see my house, look at how those tenants left it.*" At first, I might think after reading that line that she has not seen the house since the tenants have moved out. But Wilma also says, "*They had weeds growing in the yards and had torn off wall paper.*" So I wonder, did Wilma hear about what happened at the house from Aunt Gert or has Wilma been in the house herself? From my writing, Wilma has clearly been in the house and witnessed all these things. So now, the meaning of the line, "*I think I'll go over and see my house, look at how those tenants left it.*" does not

mean that Wilma hasn't been in the house, it means something like *"I feel so rotten about my poor house. I simply have to get back over there and look at it again. I just need to be there right now."*

What incredible gifts that one bit of writing gave to me. Don't you think?

What would I do next?

I would do the writing exercise I just did with the key fact, "the tenants," with all of the key facts. And, I would do it at one sitting. Then, tomorrow, I would do the same. I would read each key fact to myself, read everything written underneath that key fact, and then I would allow the words to kick me off into another paragraph of free associating. Then, the next day, I would do the same thing again. I would do this process until I had filled up the front and back of every key fact page in my journal. In this way, over time, I would establish a very specific and personal relationship with all the people, places and things that are significant in Wilma's life. I'm telling you, this work is dynamic and persuasive!

Here's your assignment:

Work with each key fact, one at a time.

Read the key fact to yourself, read everything you wrote down beneath it and then allow that to kick you off into a writing a free association.

Wherever Wilma's words about the key fact end on your page, that's where I want you to begin writing your free association.

Write quickly, without punctuation's and without pausing.

Rather than filling the whole page, simply write a paragraph or so for each key fact at this writing session. And do all the key facts, in this manner, at this sitting.

Each day, have a writing session for all the key facts. Do this until you have filled the entire front and back of each page. Simply read the key fact and everything previously written under the key fact and allow it to get you started on a new free association.