

# A Field Guide To Your Imagination

For living writers

*by* eva deverell

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## **PART 2: YOUR IMAGINATION & YOUR WRITING**

*How to improve your writing using your imagination*

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## INTRODUCTION

Dictionaries define "imagination" as the ability to create ideas that aren't directly available to the senses. Two components generally feed into imagination-work:

- ★ Memories of sensations / ideas
- ★ Combinations of ideas & memories

The mental calisthenics in this ebook will hopefully feed both of these components.

In the first part, we will practice some exercises to use our imagination to improve ourselves as human beings. We'll look at:

- ★ developing empathy for people we dislike or disagree with;
- ★ re-imagining experiences in our past, and giving ourselves opportunities we feel we've missed out on;
- ★ developing empathy for people we envy, and overcoming that envy;
- ★ and cultivating empathy for our future selves so that we can make better decisions in the present.

The second part will be focused on our work as writers, and how we can hone the use of our imagination. In this section we will:

- ★ create an inner landscape for problem-solving;
- ★ write a checklist for our inner journeying;
- ★ practice turning boring chores into mental playdates;
- ★ do a few impossible things.

# Ready?



# PART 1

Imagination  
is the great  
leveller.



## IMAGINATION IS THE GREAT LEVELLER

Gunpowder has been called the "great leveller", but I would argue that the imagination is a far more explosive and productive force. Gunpowder is often a means of dealing death - the original "great leveller" - but it was imagination that created gunpowder. This may be a good time to mention that like everything else, the imagination can be used for good or for ill. You can use it to envision all kinds of bad things about a person standing at a bus stop, and find yourself disliking or even fearing someone who might, for all you know, have become your new best friend. Or you can use it to envision all the good things that you can do for your environment and your fellow human beings, and come up with novel ways to do so. One of the most powerful facets of the imagination is its facilitation of empathy. Let's practice that, shall we?

# EXERCISE

## empathy

I know it feels dangerous, taking on ideas and feelings that are foreign to you. What if you never come back to your own identity? What if you lose your convictions, or your opinions, or even your tastes? **This is a danger that writers must face.** Whatever genre or style you write in, you will eventually run into a character who opposes your main character. For them to feel like real human beings, and for you to have a varied cast of characters who aren't simplistic clones of yourself, you must be able to describe their emotions, and ways of thinking and behaving in a convincing way. And to do this, you must inhabit their minds.

- ★Make a list of human stereotypes that you dislike or look down upon. For example, football hooligans, politicians, estate agents, Nazis, bankers, barflies, critics, etc.



# EXERCISE (cont.)

- ★ Pick one stereotype and spend at least 5 minutes imagining their daily life in as much detail as you possibly can.
  - ★ What's the first thing they think about when they wake up?
  - ★ What do they eat for breakfast?
  - ★ How do their co-workers treat them?
  - ★ What chore do they hate doing?
  - ★ What do they find really difficult?
  - ★ Why do they do what they do?
  - ★ How do they defy your stereotypical vision of them?
  - ★ Who do they love?
  - ★ Who loves them?
- ★ If you find yourself taken up with this vision, keep going and turn the character into an antagonist, or hey, even a protagonist in your story!





## YOU'RE A GENIUS ALL THE TIME

So, your imagination can help you level out differences between you and people you look down upon, but it can also work the other way. We live in societies that emphasise our differences and relegate the task of looking for similarities of experience to spiritual teachings. We find ourselves envying people who are wealthier, more attractive, more intelligent than we are, and we don't always recognise that at the bottom of these desires is a wish to have experiences that we feel aren't available to us. Perhaps we think that we were born into the wrong family, the wrong country, the wrong neighbourhood, the wrong era, the wrong body, the wrong mind. Or if they aren't wrong, well, they could be better. We didn't have an opportunity to become child prodigies, or the body to go bungee-jumping in Australia, or enough money to attend a top university, or the knowledge that we could have been happier pursuing art instead of money. Human beings are capable of many things, of greater magnitude and multitude than we realise, but turning back time isn't one of them. Nor is immortality.\* Or even if it is, we should probably plan for death, *just in case*.

The thing is, we *are* capable of these **in our imagination**. We spend hours, sometimes years of our lives (in standard non-time-travel time) creating backstories for our characters, but we somehow feel that our own histories are set in stone. They aren't, not unless you've already had your gravestone made, or you've commissioned a statue of yourself. The truth is that our former selves are as malleable as any character we invent. I would be amazed to find anyone who has a true sense of how they thought and felt when they were a child, or even as near as a year ago. If you kept a diary, you'll find just how much your daily preoccupations have changed, but only your imagination can help you recreate the feeling of being your past self - not your memories.

*\*In a slightly circuitous aside, did you know that gunpowder was invented by Chinese alchemists searching for the elixir of immortality?*

# EXERCISE

## equal opportunities

★What is one thing you wish you could change about your childhood?

Your family, your friends, your teachers? Pick one.

★Write down ten alternatives you would have preferred.

1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	
7	
8	
9	
10	

★Now, pick the most appealing of those alternatives and let yourself imagine what it would have felt like.

- ★What repercussions would this change have in your life?
- ★What would it feel like to have grown up in this way?
- ★What would be made easier through this alternative scenario?
- ★What other problems might stem from this alternative?

Reality  
can be beaten  
with enough  
imagination.

- Mark Twain

## THE APPEAL OF REAL

There are a few things that all imagineers need to remember about reality:

1. "Reality" is subjective.
2. There is no ONE true "reality."
3. "Reality" is not necessarily true.
4. There are an infinite number of "realities."

Philosophers, scientists, writers and other thinkers have been debating the nature of reality for aeons (about two or three aeons, depending on your source). Their conclusion? There is no sound proof that the world is not just a shared illusion and that we aren't all just brains in vats. It's our brain that interprets the stimulus that we use to construct our idea of "reality", and our brain is tricky. It's good at filling in missing information, making up some, and ignoring others. We can't trust our senses while our brain is in charge. It's also excellent at simulating experiences that we may not be physically participating in; for example, studies suggest that mental rehearsal fires the same muscles as "real"-life physical exercise. I don't think anyone would suggest that you can become an olympic athlete merely by imagining yourself as one, but equally, you certainly can't become an olympic athlete *unless* you imagine yourself as one. Without the ability to imagine ourselves participating in experiences we might like to have, our lives would be a good deal poorer.

At the same time, of course, we need to remember to use our imagination for good, not ill. When we see people we envy in some respect, we need to stop and really imagine into the reasons why we envy them. Tony Robbins often makes the point in his books and speeches that what people seek isn't an experience (e.g. having lots of money) but a feeling (e.g. freedom). To work towards attaining the former without an awareness of the latter is a clear **failure of the imagination**. We can imagine the life of a rich person and know that money isn't a magical solution for all problems. We can also imagine experiences which will make us feel free and realise that they don't really require us to be rich.



# EXERCISE

## social media envy

If we're not careful, envy can become an automatic response to certain stimuli, especially exacerbated by the ease of digital sharing. We rarely stop to question EXACTLY what it is that we envy in another person. We may see someone with a beautiful body and wish to look like them, but why? How would their body benefit us? What would we do differently if we looked like them? What would our lives be like? If the only result is that other people would envy US in turn, then do we want to be part of that vapid cycle?

- ★ Choose one person whose social media feed you envy and write down the reason. Why do you REALLY envy them? Remember, follower counts are just numbers, and photography rarely tells the whole story.
- ★ Next, ask yourself, "why"? And then ask it again and again, until you reach the "real" reason. WHY?



WHY?

WHY?

WHY?

WHY?

WHY?

WHY?





## DISCONTINUITY ERROR

You've let your imagination knead and prime your past like putty (with the result, I hope, that you realise you are not past your prime); and you've dealt with people you like and dislike. Now it's time for yet another person separated from you by the wibbly-wobbly discontinuity of time and space: your future self.

In *Maximum Willpower*, Kelly McGonigal cites a research study that found that people interacting with believable, aged mirror-images of themselves were likelier to put more money in their retirement fund. Let's fill up our imagination fund!

The idea isn't to have a conversation with your future self; this is quite a common exercise and it's a good one, considering our difficulty in maintaining a continuous identity, but if the research is correct, then we need to get better at imagining how it *feels* like to be our ~~older~~ future selves, and to develop some sense that they *are* us.

# EXERCISE

## future me

Take up one of your possessions, preferably something that isn't too important, so that you don't get lost in sentimental nostalgia. Hold it in your hands and concentrate on sensing it with all of your senses. Now, imagine that the object you hold is actually a time machine, and it will transport you ten years into the future. In 3... 2... 1... Woosh!

Keep your eyes closed for a minute and rest. You've just travelled ten years into the future; you probably need a breather! Take a few deep breaths in and out and visualise what you'll see when you open your eyes. How have things changed? How are they the same? What are you doing with the object in your hand? Other than time-travelling, that is. What changes do you sense in your body, if at all? Does it feel older, or do you feel like you haven't changed at all?

When you return to the present, don't forget to write some notes about your trip.

### MY TIME TRAVEL NOTES

CURRENT DATE: \_\_/\_\_/\_\_

TRAVELLED TO: \_\_/\_\_/\_\_

### THINGS TO REMEMBER TO BRING ON NEXT VISIT



# IMAGINARY SPACE

A black and white photograph of a typewriter keyboard. The keys are arranged in a grid, and the lighting creates a strong sense of depth, with the keys in the foreground being sharp and the ones in the background being blurred. The text "PART 2" is overlaid in the center of the image in a large, white, sans-serif font.

# PART 2

*imagine  
that!*



## THE WRITER'S ADVANTAGE

Writers have an even greater advantage over the regular imagineer because the time spent writing about an experience, in choosing the right words to convey the thoughts and sensations and placing the experience in the larger context of our life or of a story, makes it far more real and memorable. How many times have you become so involved in a story you're writing that you've had to remind yourself that the characters aren't real? Many times, I hope!

I feel we have an artistic obligation to use our imagination to show people how to use their imagination. As such, we need to hone our thinking-processes as much as as our technical wordsmithery. We need to become practiced trekkers, travellers and traversers of our internal landscapes, and finally carry the elixir back to the known world.

a  
trek  
through  
your  
imagination



## **JOURNEYING THROUGH YOUR IMAGINATION**

Albert Einstein famously said, "logic will get you from A to B, imagination will get you everywhere." The English language characterises this journey as a "leap". Pedestrian logic may prove the theory, but it's the imagination that posits the theory in the first place.

Neurologists now think that the brain works best when it oscillates between two modes - a focused, conscious mode in which information is taken in and compartmentalised with relation to other data, and a "disengaged", subconscious mode, in which connections are made between pieces of information, seemingly without conscious effort. Imagination does its best work in the latter state, but it's often easier to set the wheel rolling when the bearings have been greased by some initial preparation in the former state.

Let's imagine the sort of terrain we will be facing, and then put together a travel checklist for our next journey!

# EXERCISE

## imagining your imagination

What does your imagination look like? Is it just the inside-out clutter of your abstract thoughts, or is there a whole, colourful kingdom that you retreat into when the "real" world isn't intruding? Do you pop into your mind palace when you need to look up something? Is there a librarian or a mental mentor? Who do you talk to in there?

Describe your imagination.

Invent one new place or person to dwell in your imagination.



# EXERCISE

## the imagineer's travel checklist

3 ways I can prepare for an  
imaginary journey:

- ★ \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- ★ \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- ★ \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3 imaginary power objects I can  
take along with me:

- ★ \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- ★ \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- ★ \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3 vehicles or methods I can use to  
travel:

- ★ \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- ★ \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- ★ \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3 people who can guide me on my  
way:

- ★ \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- ★ \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- ★ \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3 things I can do if I get trapped:

- ★ \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- ★ \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- ★ \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3 \_\_\_\_\_:

- ★ \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- ★ \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- ★ \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## SLEEP

We are often advised to "sleep on it," and assured that "things will look better in the morning." It's true, they often do! The night-time is not a good time to think. I had always assumed that this was because of my natural propensity towards the light; is it a coincidence that we use "light" in two different meanings? Light-heartedness, lightness of spirit, when our spirits are buoyed and rise, like the sun in the morning. Nowadays I also suspect that the dark existential night-crises of the soul are caused in part by mental weariness, and the struggle to sustain a conscious focus on life when our minds want to soothe it over with the quieting subconscious processes of sleep.

Sleep is the epitome of the "disengaged" state we discussed earlier, and as such, it's a magnanimous process for invention and problem-solving. There are those whose dreams, lucid or otherwise have spawned whole novels. In the case of Stephanie Meyer, it's also made her a rich woman. In 1958, one German teenager called Bianca Passarge spent eight hours a day practicing dancing on wine bottles, dressed as a cat, to recreate a dream she had had. And then there are the artists who used the act of falling asleep as a process for idea generation. Salvador Dali and Nikola Tesla would hold onto objects that they dropped as they relaxed into sleep. The noise would wake them up, and they would (hopefully) glean the benefit of those clear flashes of genius that sometimes come to us in the state between dream and wakefulness. I urge you to try this, if you can do so without driving your neighbours batty.

# EXERCISE

asleep  
awake

Near your usual bedtime, spend at least half an hour reading and thinking about a problem you want to solve. It could be a knot in your plot, or a dissatisfaction in your daily life. Sit in a chair, holding a heavy object like a bunch of keys (in an episode of *Elementary*, Sherlock uses several pans tied to a rope and looped around a hook on the ceiling, but I wouldn't recommend anything so drastic) and relax. If you're anything like me, it's best not to lie down in bed; even if the sound wakes you, you'll probably just drift back to sleep. When you wake up, write down whatever comes into your mind as a solution. If you have the will power, try the exercise a couple more times and see what else your mind turns up.

Record your results.

## SLEEP EXPERIMENT LAB REPORT

Date: \_\_ / \_\_ / \_\_

Subject: \_\_\_\_\_

Hypothesis: \_\_\_\_\_

Methodology:

Results:

Conclusion:

a  
level  
playing  
field

## A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

Lucid dreaming gives people the ability to take part in immersive experiences that may be difficult or impossible in real life, such as flying, or possessing new kinaesthetic senses like smelling colour. Unfortunately, for those of us uninitiated into its mysteries, it's a discipline that requires a lot of practice and planning. For example, it's necessary to get into the habit of doing regular "reality checks", by looking at your hands, a clock, or a piece of text. These items are prone to shift in dream-space, and since it's important to be aware that you're dreaming in order for you to make full use of your dream-capacity, looking down at your hands and seeing eleven fingers, or being unable to read a clock are key indicators. Look down at your hands; are you dreaming? What if you're only really meant to have nine fingers, only you don't know the signs of this dream-space?

"I can't believe THAT!" said Alice.  
"Can't you?" the Queen said in a pitying tone. "Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes."  
Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said: "one CAN'T believe impossible things."  
"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

*From Through the Looking Glass by Lewis Carroll*

We can't know whether we're awake or dreaming, so we can't know what's possible or impossible. Let's play!



# EXERCISE

## 6 impossible things before breakfast

★Make a list of experiences that aren't possible in the physical realm, and a list of experiences that are possible in the physical realm but you feel aren't possible for you.

Physically Impossible	Impossible for Me

# EXERCISE

## 6 impossible things before breakfast

★Take each item on these lists and spend at least one minute imagining them in detail. You may ask yourself some of these questions:

- ★Where would I need to be/go to have this experience?
- ★What would this experience look/taste/touch/smell/sound/feel like before I experienced it?
- ★What would this experience look/taste/touch/smell/sound/feel like while I was experiencing it?
- ★What would this experience look/taste/touch/smell/sound/feel like after I had experienced it?
- ★Would I feel that it had been worthwhile?
- ★What are the risks to myself or others in this experience?
- ★What are some of the things that could go wrong?
- ★Would I want to repeat the experience? If so, how many times and how often?

★Put a star next to the ones you find particularly enjoyable to imagine, and return to them as often as you like.



the  
Possibles  
slow fuse  
is lit by the  
Imagination

- Emily Dickinson



## LIVING IN YOUR HEAD

We experience things mostly in our minds. Most of our senses are concentrated in our head: sight, sound, smell, and taste. So we already live mostly in our head. Imagination doesn't mean abandoning the rest of the body, but it does allow us to live a richer life in our minds, and some would have it, even beyond our minds.

Imagine with your whole body. Centuries of thinkers have found that thinking happens best, not necessarily when we're sitting doing nothing - staring out of the window, daydreaming - but when our bodies are engaged in simple exercise, such as walking, running, showering, cleaning or swimming. The human body was made to move, not to sit at desks. One of the best things you can do for your writer's lifestyle is to start going on daily walks. Get a dog if you need an excuse! Agatha Christie famously said that the best time for working out her plots was when she was doing the dishes. I've never been able to picture Ms. Christie doing dishes - surely she had servants? - but the fact remains that turning mindless, menial tasks into opportunities for your imagination is a great way to make them less soul-crushingly tedious. It's another testament to the magnificent power of our minds that we can do things without consciously concentrating on them.

# EXERCISE

a mental playdate

## PLAYDATE #1

★Pretend you are a character in your story, engaged in the same chore you're currently doing. There can be very few characters who aren't obliged to do chores at some point in their existence, either on or off the page! Feel your way into that character's mind and body. What are their concerns? How are they reacting to doing this chore? How do they move and breathe and feel? Bonus points for being sneaky enough that no one else around your notices what you're up to!

## PLAYDATE #2

★Pick an object you're using, or one that's lying near you and blow it up so that it's much bigger than you. It could be the scourer you're using to wash the dishes, the soft, undulating surface of the bed you're making, or the wet nose of the dog you're walking. Explore its surface. What do the textures look like when they're 1000 times larger? Is it a natural landscape? What would a character do if you dropped him/her into this topography? How would they travel? What would they sense? Traverse your microcosm.

## PLAYDATE #3

★Put on some music; that always helps chores go easier! Try for something that your character might listen to, or that might be playing in the background in a particular setting, or that's evocative of the action of a scene. Avoid sing-alongs. I find songs with sudden crescendos usually get me inspired, whatever style they're in. Play the song on repeat and concentrate on visualising your story.



keep  
your  
head  
in the  
clouds  
not  
in the  
crowds

# IMAGINARY SPACE

Please be sure to share with a friend, if you think they could use a little imagineering!

A Field Guide to Your Imagination - a beautiful free ebook for life & #writing. | <http://eadeverell.com/imagination-ebook/> via @EvaDeverell

CLICK TO TWEET



Or, you could just quote Emily Dickinson...

The Possible's slow fuse is lit by the imagination.  
- Emily Dickinson | <http://eadeverell.com/imagination-ebook> via @EvaDeverell  
#amwriting

CLICK TO TWEET



*Thank you!*  
*Love, Eva.*

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our  
imagination  
flies -  
we are its  
shadow  
on the earth.

- Vladimir Nabokov