



9408391 2278642 963222 7738 2660 847047 4387186 77873001937
74580124 761788 770715 7422468 728608 76074 248924899524 6
8084951451 20484252 2192851 7808841 1382091 31040130
4782442 788518 29092848281 14382984 1963421 148543435
85425860865 785524 98894 27098580 2385072 2406482938773
8584 78314 80577 7758482898 744462 4824885 79240395 851773
48828480280058 74079425184747891 642961 3824768443258
27429420832089481 3984254543372 1315 35948495048772468
2903818786798240818 24252257712954291429819306455377
39148273484328 752628889629958794757291746426357455
25487908145135711138941091193932539107482082520281
87988318877058429725916778131496990090192116971737
278476847268608490033778242429165130050051483223364
35038951702989392233451722013812806965011784408745
19601212285993716231301711444846409038906449544400
61986907548516026327505298349187407866808818338510
22833450850486082503930213321971551843063545500766
82829493041377655279397517546139539846833936383047
46119966538581538420568533862186725233402830871123
28278921250771262946322956398989893582116745627010
21835646220134967151881909730381198004973407239610
36854066431939509790190699639552453005450580685501
95673022921913933918568034490398205955100226353536
19204199474553859381023439554495977837790237421617
27111723643435439478221818528624085140066604433258
78569867054315470696574745855033232334210730154594
165537906866273337995851156257843229882737231989
71415957811196358330059408730681216028764962867
1774649159950549737425626901049037781986835938
12680492564879855614537234786733039046883834
3794986419270563872931748723320837601123029
26270894387993620162951541337142489283072
466847653576164773794675200490757155527
9264061601363581559074220202031872776
184255518792530343513984425322341576
975008656271095359194658975141310
63256916078154781811528436679570

Alexandra Chasin

Promptwise

Let's say there are two kinds of prompts. There are not two kinds – there are many many kinds, including hybrids of the two kinds in various proportions. But if there were two kinds of prompts, they might be classified as *form* and *content*. A *content prompt* is one in which the content is specified: write a dialogue between two famous historical personages; or, write a coming out letter to your parents; or, write a sequel to *The Divine Comedy*. Though the prompts include formal direction (dialogue, letter, epic terza rima), that direction remains very general; the prompt's focus is on the content, the subject matter, the so-called what, who, where, when. By contrast, *formal prompts* foreground formal parameters over content: write a limerick, a sestina, a flash-fiction. I'm here to make a case for formal prompts they can do much more than refer to inherited literary forms,

Among formal prompts, there are two kinds: *arbitrary* and *nonarbitrary*. An *arbitrary formal prompt* disregards content entirely. For example, erase every third letter. The prompt asks the writer to perform an operation on a text without any attention to the meaning of the text. Write a limerick is an *arbitrary formal prompt*.

To the contrary, a *nonarbitrary formal prompt*, also called *organic*, designs an operation that *does* attend to the meaning of the text. So, for example, the prompt to write something without pronouns is arbitrary. The writer could adhere to the rule and write a technical manual. The rule itself will present certain choices. Proper names could take the place of pronouns. Blank spaces could. In English, pronouns can carry or obscure gender; they can be ambiguous or not with respect to number (*you* and *they* being both singular and plural). So the prompt to write a love story without pronouns is *nonarbitrary* or *organic* (at least so long as it is between beings).

For prompt to become process, try toggling back and forth between form and content.

Suddenly, in the fourth paragraph I used an imperative. This followed a paragraph about erasing pronouns. The imperative is a special tense, distinguished in part by being conjugated with an implicit pronoun (in the order to Be quiet, the *you* who should be quiet is not indicated by pronoun). We say the pronoun is *understood*.

But the prompt is imperative and therefore, Fuck you.

I wanted to see a story arrayed on the page in a visual pattern. Kind of like concrete poetry, only prose. I had, as a high school student, sent away to the publisher of my math textbook to ask them to send me π to the 100,000th place. They kindly sent me π to the 10,000th place, which turned out to be long enough. Pi to the 10,000th place,

as represented by the mathbook company, filled several pages with digits, in batches of five at a time on each line, and a space break after each fifth line. Arrays of digits as good as forever. When I imagined a concrete story, it looked, on the page in my mind, like that π .

What would I have to do to make a story look like that? That vision, idea, question became a prompt. I would have to write a story where all the words had the same number of letters, and I would need to use a font in which each character has the same width. This second parameter is a fun reminder that language and writing are material. One of the few fonts that would work is Courier, whose *i* is the same size as its *m*. So that was settled.

Now comes the prompt I put to myself. Self, I commanded in the imperative, Write a story in which all the words have four letters. This is a very formal prompt, and it is utterly arbitrary, with no nod at content or meaning at all. This is one of the most formal and arbitrary prompts there could be.

I was standing on a train platform in Naples with a friend. We were waiting for a train to Pompeii. I told her about my prompt, but she needed no prompting. We began to play. We arrived very quickly at this: *They came from Mars.*

From the first word, then I could see how the prompt, formal as it was, would immediately go to content. *They* and *them* are the only personal pronouns with four letters in English (contemporary English, *thou* being a thing of the past). If *they* and *them* are my operative personal pronouns, I'm probably not writing a love story. In fact, what unspooled was a rant against the invasion of Martians, which soon revealed itself as an allegory for an all-too-Earthly xenophobic rant, where "Martians" stand in for immigrants.

And the words went marching across the pages, arrayed less like digits now than like a force of invading Others, human or alien, the fearsome spectre that animates the rant itself. Because the prompt was fundamentally visual, I realized I didn't have to use only four-letter words, I had choices. My rule, my actual textual operations, shifted, though I kept the prompt in play. I could have a six-letter word straddle a space break. I could have two two-letter words crammed together without space. So while the visual constraint still ruled – that is, while the array maintained its composure – the words, which is to say, the language began to break down, just exactly as the narrator, the speaker of the rant, began to break down, and his xenophobia reached its pitch, cracked, and finally revealed its twisted source.

To sum up. This is one possible way to think about prompts. I find it fruitful for me to play with the relation between form and content even before beginning to compose, and it's never too late to attend to those dynamics, until the composition is made public. You got your *content* prompts and your *formal* prompts, your *arbitrary* and *organic* formal prompts. Don't let anyone else tell you what to do.