



Source: Isabel Kershner, 'Fatah militants lay down arms to bolster Abbas', *New York Times online*, 22/07/07.

Tags: [literature](#), [storytelling](#)

Writer/s: [Mark Greenwood](#), [Helen Idle](#), [Claudia Jefferies](#), [Mary Paterson](#), [Simon Porter](#), [Derville Quigley](#), [Theron Schmidt](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

This is the beginning. Something starts here. A blank page, a blank screen. But nothing is ever blank. This space has a history, a movement, a longing. Something missing, or something missing it. An event no one could forget. An event no one could have foreseen. Something you wish would happen to you. Something you wouldn't wish on anyone.

Put your shoes on the table.  
Don't rub your nettle sting with a dock leaf. Let it hurt a while longer.  
Drink a glass of ferret's milk. It might just cure you or make you sick.  
Strike a match and let it burn to the end until you are in darkness then strike another.  
Rub a sliver of streaky bacon on your warts and bury it in your garden.  
Make a sailor cry.  
Go for a swim in a ballgown then parade yourself through the streets of New York.  
Visit your grandmother with your hair still wet.  
Remember the smell of the towel she gives you.  
Open your umbrella in the kitchen.  
Apologise to the man sitting beside you for the rain. Take his advice and buy a bag of chips.  
And then, when you feel full, sit alone in a dry sheltered hut with a pen and paper in hand and write.

Any story needs characters. Here is an exercise to help you get started. Write a list of ten objects. Your character is carrying all these things on their person. What might these objects tell us about their life? How old are they? Where might they be going? What's their favourite food? Are they travelling alone? Do they have brothers and sisters? When did they last have sex? Do they have any pets? Or any children? Have they ever been involved in an international drug-smuggling ring? Where did they go to school? Did they go to school? What's their favourite TV program? Do they have any hobbies? Did they pack their bag themselves? What type of music do they listen to? Do they follow a football team? How many cups of tea do they drink a day? Who is their idol? What is their proudest achievement? How often do they floss their teeth? What's their favourite colour? Are they superstitious? Have they got any piercings? What are their views on immigration? Have they ever seen a dead body? Are they religious? What do they want for Christmas?

Do not write notes to yourself in CAPS—they will only confuse you. Some gaps are never meant to be filled.

The characters must reveal themselves through action and the language that they use. Objects must be functional and not ornamental. An ashtray and a bottle of red wine must be omnipresent. The radio must be on. The green light must be on. There must be a relationship between the writer and his subjects and objects.

Inspiration comes to those who help themselves by setting regular hours and targets.

Take a pen. Take a pencil. Okay, take your laptop but you have to promise not to delete the words every time you get frustrated. Take a deep breath.

Start with a title. Start with a first line. Start with a character you've felt inside you since you first knew how to read. Start with a relationship. Start with a conflict. Start with an argument, build a dynamic, reach a climax, don't disappoint.

Write a synopsis, write a character bio. Write a family tree and a family history. Write a description. Write a line. Write a word. Write what you know.

Take a cup of tea. Take a sandwich: just one sandwich, stop wasting time. Take a moment. Take a book, another book. Take some inspiration.

Give it some time. Give it some space. Give it some room to breathe and a life of its own. Give it a break. Give it some credit. Give it a go, go on, what have you got to lose?

Make it clever. Make it honest. Don't make it clever, just make it honest. Make it funny, humour can be profound, you know. Make it darkly funny. Make it a satire. Make it up. Make it snappy. Make it end.

Find a focus. Find a resolution. Reach into it and snap it back by the breeches. Find an exit. Find a window. Find a door. Find a marriage. Find a funeral. Find an epilogue. If you must, find a sequel. Find a full-stop.

Find your way towards an ending. Each word takes you closer. Takes you further from where you started, from your home, from the city where you come from. Each night the stars change; the sun falls earlier; the moon reflects the day. And each day there are more words, moving towards the final page, the last breath, the nothing-left-to-say.

But it goes both ways. It's a palindrome, a reverse of itself. One, zero. Zero, one. The man and woman marry and have a baby. The baby grows to be a writer. The bomb finally goes off. The survivors seek their justice. The gentle man lives his last day. The journey begins to remember him. The stories are all written down. Someone begins to read them aloud. The woman finds what she is looking for. Someone learns that he has been sought. Like the sun has the day, these words have a voice. Listen. Write it down. Put it in an envelope. And give it to a stranger.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from stories by Mark Greenwood, Helen Idle, Claudia Jefferies, Mary Paterson, Simon Porter, Derville Quigley and Theron Schmidt.*