

How to Write Something GOOD from a Prompt

[By Holly Lisle](#)

So today I got this email from a 9th-grade student working on an assignment who was stuck.

This student wondered if I had any tips for writing from a prompt. And I do. So here's my reply.

First, there are good prompts and bad prompts, and I have no idea what this student's prompt is, or whether the teacher knows how to create good prompts, or has given the student something like "sapient cheese." (A VERY bad prompt.)

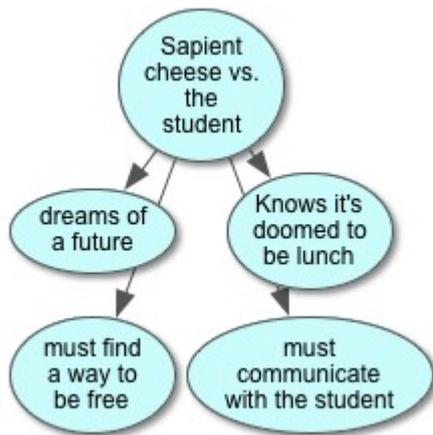
A good prompt contains a subject and conflict.

- **SUBJECT**> Sapient cheese **CONFLICT**> versus the student
- **SUBJECT**> An old woman **CONFLICT**> versus winter
- **SUBJECT**> Little kid **CONFLICT**> versus closet monster

If you have a good conflict, you do a little idea map like the one below, in which you imagine your subject dealing with its conflict.

You ask yourself these three questions:

- What does your subject need?
- What obstacle does the conflict create?
- What actions can your subject take?



And once you have your ideas, you write them out as a vignette.

The blue cheese listened to the crinkle of the paper bag in which he rested. He was being carried to the dining room, and he knew that he only had moments before he ceased to exist... because the kid whose lunch he was destined to be loved blue cheese...

And so on.

A bad prompt contains just a subject, or just conflict.

- The long, dark winter
- Solitude
- War

With a bad prompt, you may be tempted to stream-of-consciousness writing:

(The long, dark winter.)

"Grey in the cold of my heart, with the blood of the night running bitter through the icy streets, and all around the bleak of snow, the bite of wind, the skeletons of trees, and the wind, the wind, the wind it cuts through my bones and straight into my heart and makes me think that there will

never again be light, or warmth, or laughter.”

And there are teachers who will grade pretty highly for this, because this is what they were taught “real” writing was when they were in college.

If you know the person grading your work is an admirer of such writing, simply put yourself into the place where you have experienced the topic, or where you can imagine the topic, and start slinging whatever words pop to mind onto your page.

If you want to write something good, though, first create your own SUBJECT VERSUS CONFLICT extension to the prompt you’ve been given.

For example:

SUBJECT> A hiker **CONFLICT**> lost outdoors in winter. (The long, dark winter)

SUBJECT> A man **CONFLICT**> caught alone without supplies or transportation. (Solitude)

SUBJECT> A child who **CONFLICT**> wanders onto a battlefield during battle. (War)

Then ask yourself the same three questions:

- What does your subject need?
- What obstacle does the conflict create?
- What actions can your subject take?

And write from that.

NOTE: If you’re sixteen or older, and you want to meet other writers who share your passion and who are working in a friendly, supportive environment, [come hang out with us and](#)

[make progress on your writing in my free writing community.](#)

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