

A Guide to the Personal Retreat

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About this Guide

This document was created to assist you in creating and filling space for personal reflection. The structure and activities are designed to apply to both work and home life. You are encouraged to approach your retreat time with both in mind, or you can pick just one to focus on for the day. There are many ideas presented here, choose the ones that appeal to you or challenge you the most. Save the ones you don't do for another retreat, or a rainy day.

The ideas and activities presented here are a collection of experiences I've discovered through my own contemplative practice. Most everything you'll see comes from someone else and you can learn more about them by following the links in the footnotes.

Set aside a minimum of **seven consecutive hours** for your personal retreat. I recommend you reserve a full 24-hour day (or more, if you are able).

You will need:

- A place where you can be alone
- Abundant and nourishing food
- A good night's rest
- Walking shoes* and appropriate clothes
- A watch or clock to keep the time (best if not your mobile device)
- A book** or two you've been wanting to read
- A sketchbook or plenty of blank paper
- Paper with lines (or a grid) on which you can write at length
- A pen you enjoy using
- A drawing pen (*optional*)
- Other drawing supplies you enjoy (*optional*)

* Or gear for running, or swimming, or hiking, if you prefer

** Could be pleasurable or edifying

Plan to **turn off your phone and computer** for the day. If for some reason this is truly impossible, turn off all notifications¹ except for the ones you cannot ignore.

¹ <http://techguylabs.com/blog/disable-app-notifications-your-mobile-device>

Structuring Your Day

R.E.D. + R.W.R.²

An example agenda for your day is provided on the next page, but I encourage you to design your own. To do so, use the following guidelines:

Guideline 1: Rest

Get a good night's sleep. If you do not manage to do so, schedule a nap.

Guideline 2: Exercise

Move your body throughout the day. Stretch, take a walk, dance to music, etc. Get outside.

Guideline 3: Diet

Eat exceptionally well. This does not mean to eat lightly or to restrict, rather it means to nourish your body with foods that make it feel good, energetic, and grateful.

Guideline 4: Read

Bring a book or several books that you've been reading or wanting to read. They can be for pleasure or for edification or a mix of both. Plan several reading breaks throughout the day.

Guideline 5: Write

Schedule several blocks of time to write and draw throughout the day. Any writing and drawing should be stream-of-consciousness style. You may use a prompt or decide not to. Whichever you chose, remember: no masterpieces, no manuscripts, no erasing.

Guideline 6: Reflect

Do everything you do today with the intention of reflection.

² "Rest, Exercise, Diet + Read, Write, Reflect" is a philosophy that was shared with me by Anton Zuiker. <http://zuiker.com/>

A Sample 7-Hour Retreat Agenda

Before you begin, take a moment to sit and focus your attention. You might consider a 10 minute meditation or simply sitting for several minutes to decompress from wherever you were before you arrived and to focus on your intentions for the day. Jot down a quick bulleted list of the things you want to think about or accomplish with your time today. Make a cup of tea or coffee. Consider a simple stretching routine to wake your body. Consider reading [this post on Uncertainty](#)³ as an invocation for the day.

- Hour 1 **Write** morning pages.
- Hour 2 Go on a long **walk**.
- Hour 3 Make lunch, **eat**, clean up.
- Hour 4 Spend some time **reading** a book.
- Hour 5 Spend time doing the **drawing** activities described in this guide.
- Hour 6 Do **nothing** and see where it leads. (Outside? A nap? Cooking? Reading?)
- Hour 7 End the day **reading** or **writing**, whichever resonates most with your energy.

At the end of your retreat, revisit your morning intentions and reflect on where you are now. Jot down your thoughts if you like. Take another moment to sit and prepare for your transition back into normal life.

Note: If you've scheduled more than seven hours, hour 8 is a good time to start making supper. A short walk, then reading or writing (whichever you did not do in hour 7) are good activities to do after supper. If your retreat is multiple days, it's a fine idea to use the same schedule for each day.

³ <http://www.becktench.com/blog/2016/5/19/uncertainty>

Writing Exercise

Morning Pages⁴

Morning pages are 1) a form of unfiltered, stream-of-consciousness writing; 2) written from a thoughtful and open mental space; 3) within an agreed upon set of conditions. The following guidelines will inform the conditions of your practice today:

Guideline 1: Nonjudgmental

Write whatever comes to your mind. Don't hold back, don't erase, and don't judge.

Guideline 2: Bounded

Create a boundary for your writing. Two common boundaries are time (number of minutes spent writing) and length (number of pages). **For today, we'll use time and write for 45 minutes.**

Guideline 3: Free

While you can have a prompt (like a question or idea you'd like to explore, or a task you need to start), **today's exercise has no prompt.** Anything goes. If you get stuck, write about getting stuck. You can write the alphabet over and over for 45 minutes, you can be emotional, or task-oriented, or whatever you like. It can be oriented towards your personal life or your professional life, or first one and then the other. There is no wrong way to do this activity.

Tips for making this practice a habit:

- Establish a ritual⁵ leading up to your writing time.
- Wait a while before re-reading. Consider sealing in an envelope or even throwing away.
- Use tools you enjoy, like a pen that writes well and paper that doesn't smear or bleed.
- Write by hand. The extra time you spend has its own value.

⁴ *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron: <http://juliacameronlive.com/basic-tools/>

⁵ *The Creative Habit* by Twyla Tharp: <https://amzn.com/1480589837>

Writing Exercise

Letter from Your 80-year-old Self ⁶

It can be hard to get and keep perspective, especially in challenging times or in times when you have to make a big decision. One way I've found to do this is to write myself a note of advice from the 80-year-old me.

You can write the letter without a prompt and ask the 80-year-old you to reflect on her or his life. Or you can write with a prompt, specifically requesting advice about a certain issue or decision.

Plan to spend about an hour on this. It may not that long, but give yourself plenty of time.

Ideas for your letter:

- What interests and hobbies does she or he encourage you to pursue?
- What worries might he or she advise you to let go of?
- What have you accomplished so far in your life?
- What was your retirement party like?
- How do your current projects and relationships fit into the larger story of your life?
- What's it like to be 80 years old?

Note: If you are close to 80 years old, consider writing a letter to yourself from a younger you. Some good years to revisit may be 8, 18, 35, or 50.

⁶ *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron: <http://juliacameronlive.com/>

Walking Exercise

The walk today is a chance to spend time outside without any sort of goal in mind. It will take about an hour. You may consider walking with someone, if you'd like.

Guideline 1: Aimless

Have no destination or particular thought or task at mind when you begin.

Guideline 2: Intuitive

Follow your instincts when needing to turn right or left or to continue on or turn back. Go where you want to go at any given moment.

Guideline 3: Slow

Walk at a slow pace and notice things around you. It often pays to look up.

Optional walking partner instructions:

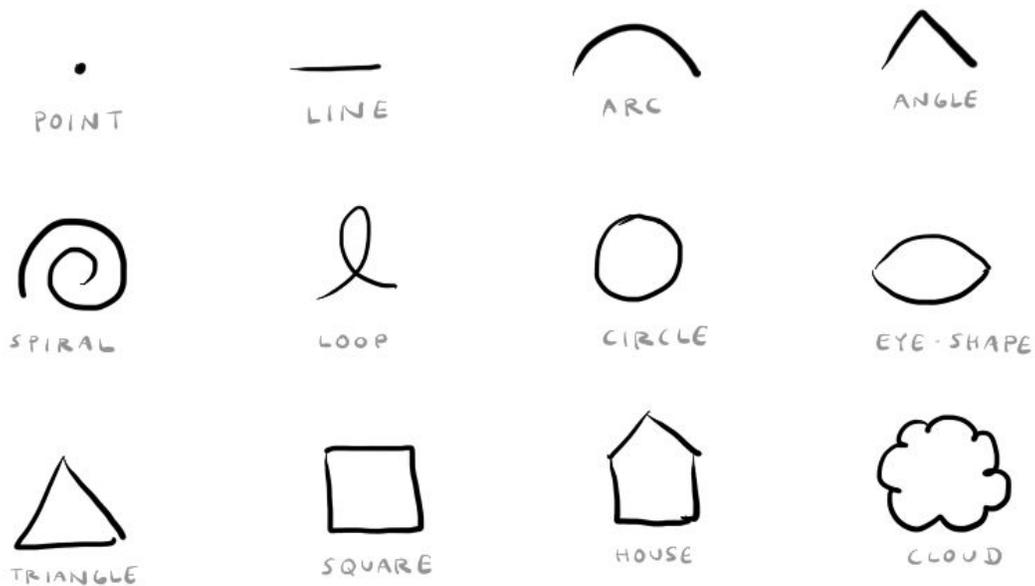
- If you chose to walk with someone you know, a good way to spend an hour walking is to ask your partner the question "So, how are you?" and really care about the answer.
- Listening intently, and in turn, be heard when it's your time to be the focus of attention. You do not need to fix or solve or understand your partner, simply listen to her or him.
- When you reach the halfway point, switch the focus of conversation to the other person, regardless of where you are in your discussion.
- Decide at the beginning of the walk if what you share will be treated confidentially.

Drawing Exercise

Visual Vocabulary⁷

Drawing is a simple series of shapes that when put together make up pictures that have meaning. Just like the alphabet, also a series of shapes that when drawn together make words and sentences. The 12 shapes below can be practiced and used to draw most anything.

Practice drawing them in your sketchbook. Fill three pages with these shapes.



⁷ *Visual Thinking School* by Dave Gray: <http://xplaner.com/visual-thinking-school/>

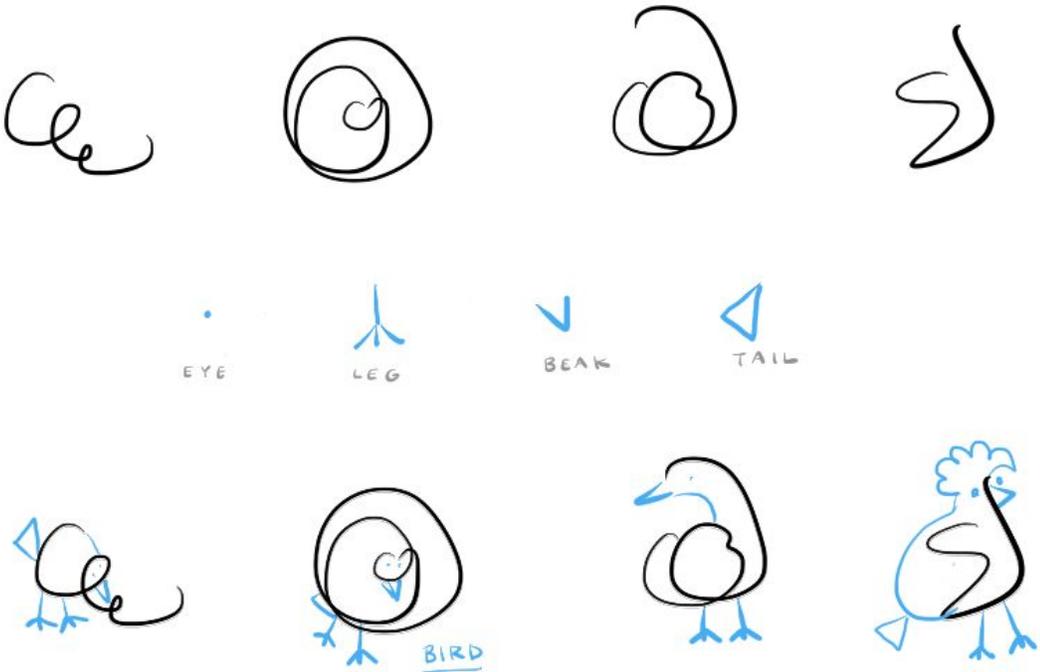
Drawing Exercise

Squiggle Birds⁸

This activity helps you turn a few of the shapes from the **Visual Vocabulary** — the dot, the angle, the line, and the triangle — into pictures with meaning.

Draw a series of squiggles on a page in your sketchbook. Make them no bigger than the size of a quarter and draw lots of them (fill at least one page).

Next, add dot(s) for eye(s), an angle for a beak, lines for feet, and a triangle for the tail feather to turn each of your squiggles into birds. If your squiggle doesn't look like a bird after adding those shapes, labeling it with the word "bird" will do the trick.



⁸ Exercise created by Chris Glenn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/chrisglenn>

Drawing Exercise

Stories Without Words⁹

This activity helps you think and communicate without words using the five simple shapes below. Practice drawing them in your sketchbook (no need to label):



Now, using only those five shapes and their meanings, combine them to tell a story. This will be your first draft:

- Tell the story of your life or just the last year.
- Tell the story of your career or a major project.
- Tell the story of an accomplishment or change or challenge you faced.

Next, create a second draft by refining your story. Dramatize the size and placement of the symbols as you see fit. Feel free to tell many stories, drawing the first draft and then the second. Remember, do not use any words. Limit yourself to these five shapes.

⁹ *The Surprising Power of Liberating Structures* by Keith McCandless and Henri Lipmanowicz
<http://www.liberatingstructures.com/20-drawing-together/>

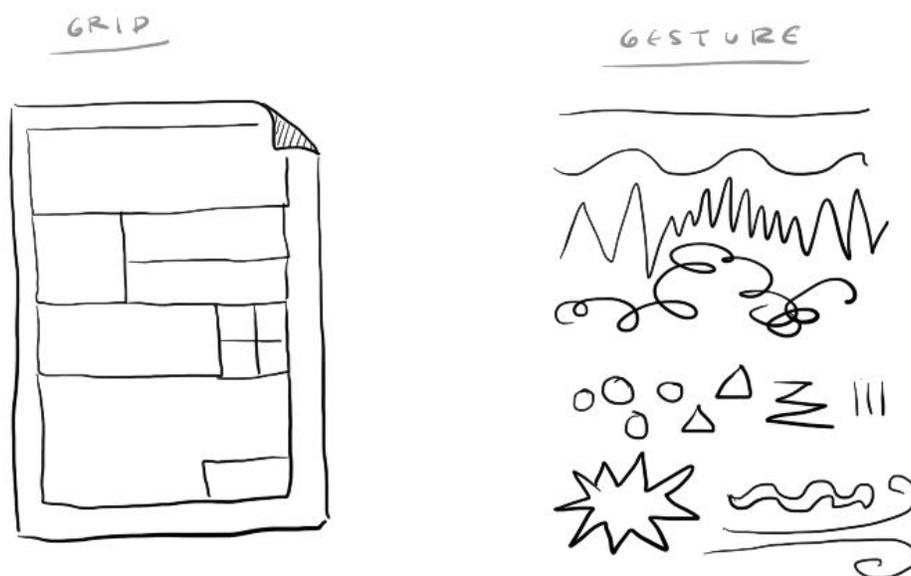
Drawing Exercise

Grids and Gestures¹⁰

This activity invites us to come up with our own vocabulary for telling a story without words. We are bounded by using only grids and gestures, but otherwise are free to draw whatever we like to convey events and/or emotions that happen over the course of a day.

Take a sheet of paper and carve it up to represent the shape of **a day in your life** in grid-like fashion. Your grid does not have to be square. It also does not have to fill the page, but use the entire sheet giving any empty spaces significance. The day you pick can be today or yesterday or a day you want to remember or a day you wish you could forget. Any day will do.

Next, fill the grid you created with gestural lines (some examples are below, but you are by no means limited to them). These marks should represent your physical and/or emotional activity within and across the frames of time you made with your grid. Try not to draw things.



¹⁰ *Grids and Gestures* by Nick Sousanis: <http://spinweaveandcut.com/grids-and-gestures/>

Drawing Exercise

Drawing to See¹¹

This activity helps you experience drawing as a way to notice the world. You will use your pen and paper as tools to record what you see without caring about what you actually draw.

Find something to notice. Spend several minutes sitting quietly in the presence of what you've chosen. You can choose to look at it directly, or just be near it with your eyes closed.

Next, using your pen and sketchbook, begin to draw what you see **without looking at the paper**. If your pen goes off the page, simply pick it up and put it back down without looking. Draw every detail you notice. With your eyes, zoom in to the finest detail and/or zoom out to observe the object in relation to its environment.

Feel free to use multiple pieces of paper for this activity, and to draw what you've chosen several times. It can be especially fruitful to choose something that moves.



¹¹ *The Zen of Seeing* by Frederick Franck: <https://amzn.com/0394719689>