

## “Where I’m From” Exercise

George Ella Lyon, the 2015-16 Kentucky poet laureate, is the originator of the “Where I’m From” poem. Don’t let the words “poem” or “poetry” scare you. I don’t write poetry, and yet, this exercise has been tremendously helpful in exploring and developing my fictional characters—not the intent of Lyon’s original poem, but a testament to the creative versatility of this exercise.

To give you some context, Lyon wrote her “Where I’m From” poem as a response to an entry in the book *Stories I Ain’t Told Nobody Yet* (Orchard Books, 1989; Theater Communications Group, 1991). For this book, Tennessee writer Jo Carson had written what she called “People Pieces,” based on things people had told her.

Number 22 caught George Ella Lyon’s attention. The speaker in that entry didn’t feel he had roots. It begins, “I want to know when you get to be from a place.” He goes on to say, “I am from Interstate 40” and “I am from the work my father did.” After reading this, Lyon was inspired to make her own “where I’m from” lists.

She found the process so rich and fun she didn’t want to stop at one poem, so she tried it as an exercise with other writers. Since then, the writing prompt has been used in many ways all over the world, including my adaptation for use in character development.

My version of this exercise came about when I was having difficulty getting to know one of the characters in my novel. I didn’t particularly like him, but to write him believably, I had to know him better. So I wrote a “Where I’m From” poem in his voice. Afterwards, I still didn’t like him, but writing the poem tapped into my compassion for him and helped me understand him better.

Writing a “Where I’m From” poem can also be helpful if you’re writing memoir or if you simply want to know yourself better.

Attached is Lyon’s poem for reference, along with instructions for developing your “Where I’m From” lists, and a worksheet to guide you in creating your own piece. Read more about the “Where I’m From” project on [the Kentucky Arts Council’s website](#) and on [George Ella Lyon’s site](#), where there’s also a link to hear her read her poem aloud.

Enjoy!

*Gina*

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# Where I'm From

*By George Ella Lyon*

I am from clothespins,  
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.  
I am from the dirt under the back porch.  
(Black, glistening,  
it tasted like beets.)  
I am from the forsythia bush  
the Dutch elm  
whose long-gone limbs I remember  
as if they were my own.

I'm from fudge and eyeglasses,  
from Imogene and Alafair.  
I'm from the know-it-alls  
and the pass-it-ons,  
from Perk up! and Pipe down!  
I'm from He restoreth my soul  
with a cottonball lamb  
and ten verses I can say myself.

I'm from Artemus and Billie's Branch,  
fried corn and strong coffee.  
From the finger my grandfather lost  
to the auger,  
the eye my father shut to keep his sight.

Under my bed was a dress box  
spilling old pictures,  
a sift of lost faces  
to drift beneath my dreams.  
I am from those moments—  
snapped before I budded—  
leaf-fall from the family tree.

# “Where I’m From” Exercise

## Getting to Know Your Character



Use one of these techniques to learn more about your character as you respond to the prompts below:

- The acting technique of “inhabiting,” channeling, or becoming your character.
- The interviewing technique of asking questions of your character as if you are a news reporter or talk show host.

### Step 1: Record at least 3 entries for each of the five senses.

**VISION/SEEING:** What would your character see in his/her world? Think large and small, things and people, near and far.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**SMELL:** What scents and smells would be in your character’s world, good and bad?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**HEARING:** What sorts of things would your character hear? Consider soft sounds and loud noises, as well as things said to him and around him within his hearing distance.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**TOUCH/FEELING:** In his/her world, what does your character touch and feel? Include both sensory and emotions.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**TASTE:** What would your main character taste? Consider both literal and metaphorical tastes.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

## **Step 2: Gather Additional Information**

What is a memory or a flashback that your character experiences? \_\_\_\_\_

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Describe any important information about your character’s family. \_\_\_\_\_

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What is your character’s favorite hobby or special interest? Describe it. \_\_\_\_\_

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What is something people ALWAYS say ABOUT your character? \_\_\_\_\_

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What is something (good or bad) that people often say TO your character? \_\_\_\_\_

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Write down any interesting or important details from your character’s past. \_\_\_\_\_

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Does your character go by a name other than his/her biological name? \_\_\_\_\_

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### **Step 3: Your Character’s “Where I’m From” Poem**

Using the information you’ve gathered, write a “Where I’m From” poem as your character would write it.

To use the same structure as George Ella Lyon’s poem, fill in the following worksheet. If you follow her structure, you likely won’t use all three items for each of the senses. But no words are wasted—each item you listed will help you know your character better whether you use it in the poem or not.

If you prefer, write in a less structured or free-form way—whatever feels right for your character.

For more examples of poems that follow Lyon’s structure, visit the [Kentucky Arts Council’s collection of “Where I’m From” poems](#).

# “Where I’m From”

By \_\_\_\_\_ (name of your character)

I am from \_\_\_\_\_

from \_\_\_\_\_

I am from \_\_\_\_\_

( \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ )

I am from \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

I am from \_\_\_\_\_

from \_\_\_\_\_

I’m from \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
from \_\_\_\_\_

I’m from \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

I’m from \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
from \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

I am from those moments

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

BY \_\_\_\_\_ (your name)

*Inspired by George Ella Lyon’s poem “Where I’m From”*