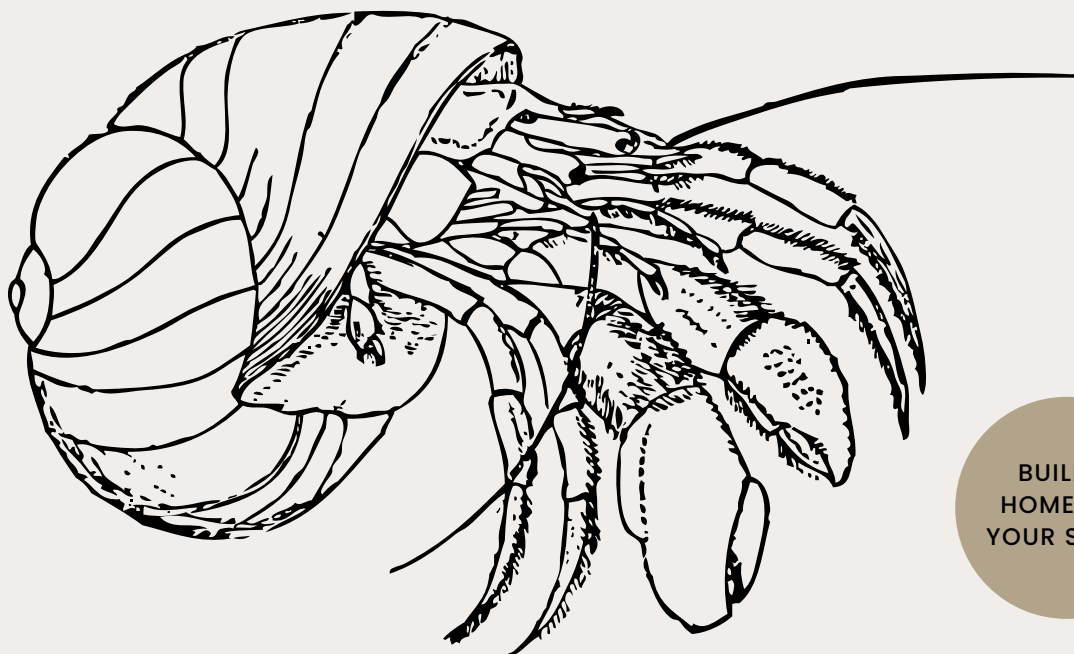

A GUIDED WRITING
PROMPT FOR WRITERS



★
BUILD A
HOME FOR
YOUR STORY

The Shell You Need

an introduction to the hermit crab essay form
and how to write one

SUMMER 2025

women who write

CREATED BY
JEN HYDE



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Introduction

One of the most popular essay forms that I teach in my Creative Nonfiction courses is undoubtedly the hermit crab essay. The hermit crab essay is a borrowed form (receipt, grocery list, instructions) you use to tell a story from your life. You may wonder, why not just tell the story in a more straightforward way? Well, sure you can, but if you've ever felt nervous about getting too vulnerable in a piece or unsure of how to encapsulate the entirety of your ideas within the story you're writing, the hermit crab can free you from these concerns and guide to to the emotional truth of your work in surprising and satisfying ways.

It may sound counterintuitive, but the constraints of a pre-existing form like a grocery list can unlock our creativity. That's because the form acts as a nontraditional enclosure for a story. Our brains feel relaxed by not having to think in "essay form" and challenged by thinking about our story in a new way. When we can think just about our story and not about both our story and how to tell it, the mental break we give ourselves can lead to a breakthrough.

Let's begin...



What is a hermit crab essay?

A hermit crab essay is a type of creative nonfiction that uses a borrowed form to tell a personal story. The term comes from the idea of the essay “finding a shell” in the form of something else—just like a hermit crab. These forms can include:

- A recipe
- A medical chart
- A quiz or questionnaire
- A resume or cover letter
- A user manual
- A set of instructions

Instead of writing a straightforward narrative, the writer uses this “shell” to explore memory, emotion, and truth in surprising ways. The shell of an essay (especially if it’s not an “essay” as a shell) can act as a safety net. This allows our writerly minds to focus on the story itself by engaging in poetic thinking, collaging, and meaning-making through metaphors. Separating form from content gives our brains a little break.

Why Write One

Hermit crab essays are especially useful when:

- The subject is emotionally difficult to write about directly
- You want to play with form and structure
- You're interested in blending genres
- You're looking for a new way to engage readers

The hermit crab essay allows writers to sidestep traditional storytelling and approach their topics at an angle—often yielding deeper resonance and unanticipated truths.

◆ Things To Think About

What's intriguing to you so far about the hermit crab essay? Do you have a story that you want to try writing in this form?

Some Examples

Here are some of my favorite Hermit Crab essays available online.

- A Few Math Problems for Mothers by Kate Tellers (an essay in word problems)
- The Heart as a Torn Muscle by Randon Billings Noble (an essay as a medical diagnosis)
- Mr. Pimpleton's Revenge by Dinty W. Moore (an essay told using Google Maps)

For more examples, check out The Shell Game an anthology of hermit crab essays edited by Kim Adrian! And if you're ready to try your hand at a hermit crab essay now, check out the prompts below:

◆ Taking Notes

Read one more more of the above examples. What surprises you or delights you as you read?

Finding Your Shell

Think about the story you're trying to write. Maybe you're working on a personal essay or a memoir, or perhaps you're just beginning to explore material. Are there any pre-existing forms that you encounter within that story? Your mother's recipes, an exam you studied hard for, a housing application or program intake form, instructions for assembling a speaker system?

If you can't conjure any forms readily, you may consider if there are important objects in your story that have a written record of their own: an encyclopedia entry on record players, an instruction manual for assembling a piece of furniture, a brief history of doryman fishing, you get the idea.

Let your instincts guide you, and feel free to take risks even if the relationship between the form and content of your story isn't clear. If yelp reviews come to mind, start thinking about your star ratings! If wall texts in a museum come up for you, that's great!

◆ Brainstorm

What forms come to mind for you?

Drafting Your Essay

Start filling out your shell with your story. You might start out by setting up the structure as you find it in the real world. If your shell is a menu, stick with the flow of the menu: appetizers, happy hour, desserts.

Then, go deeper into the structure with elements of your story. Think of the different sections of your form as an opportunity to zoom into aspects of your story. What sections or questions lend themselves to small details? Different perspectives? Jumps in time?

If and where it makes sense, push the limits of your structure. Where can you be more vulnerable? Where can you safely say what you mean? You don't have to do this everywhere or throughout the piece. Try picking one question, one line of instruction, one small aspect of your form to push. How does this augment your story? Does anything new come up for you that is surprising or exciting? Do your revelations belong in your hermit crab essay or another piece you've been working on?

Finally, let your piece be a standalone work if you want it to become one. Sometimes it's just enough to use the hermit crab form to get us where we want to go in a writing project we've been stuck on. But other times, the hermit crab becomes a standalone work we never expected to write. If the latter, read your piece aloud and revise it for rhythm, emotional insight and tone until the piece feels whole to you.

Use this page to draft your hermit crab essay

Revising and Sharing

When you have finished your hermit crab essay, ask yourself:

- What new layers did this form reveal?
- Is this a standalone piece?
- Is it a stepping stone toward the essay or memoir you're already drafting?

Often, it's nice to get that feedback from a reader. Share your piece with a friend or writing group for feedback!



Next Steps

Whether you want to get feedback on your hermit crab essay, write more hermit crab essays, or figure out how to apply your insights to a larger project, I'm here to help!

Drop me a line at jen.hyde@gmail.com to discuss!

Option 1:	Book a 1:1 consultation to discuss your revelations and answer your questions!
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Option 2:	Get written feedback on your essay with advice for next steps!
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Option 3:	Subscribe to my free newsletter for weekly inspiration and the occasional writing prompt! (jenhyde.substack.com)
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