

## Beginnings: A Syllabus

*“Whatever you think you can do or believe you can do, begin it. Action has magic, grace, and power in it.” —Goethe*

### Objective:

This is a syllabus for those who are stuck.

Sometimes, right before beginning, you’re in a nasty pit of mud. The mud is:

- procrastination
- resistance
- hopelessness

To get out, you need a magic ingredient: inspiration.

So, here is this list. It is:

- a map
- a constellation
- a matchbook
- a way out

Use it to begin.

1. Begin with the hapless dodo.

**Maira Kalman:** book: "[The Principles of Uncertainty](#)"

How CAN I TELL you EVERYTHING  
that is in my HEART. IMPOSSIBLE to BEGIN.  
Enough. No. BEGIN.



2. Begin at the very, very beginning.

**Jenny Hollowell:** short story\*: "[A History of Everything, Including You](#)"

\*Strongly recommended: Don't read it; [listen to it](#).

*Eyes opened and closed and opened again, we called it blinking.*

*Above us shone a star that we called the sun.*

*And we called the ground the earth.*

*So we named everything including ourselves.*

*We were man and woman and when we got lonely we figured out a way to make more of us.*

*We called it sex, and most people enjoyed it.*

*We fell in love.*

*We talked about god and banged stones together, made sparks and called them fire, we got warmer and the food got better.*

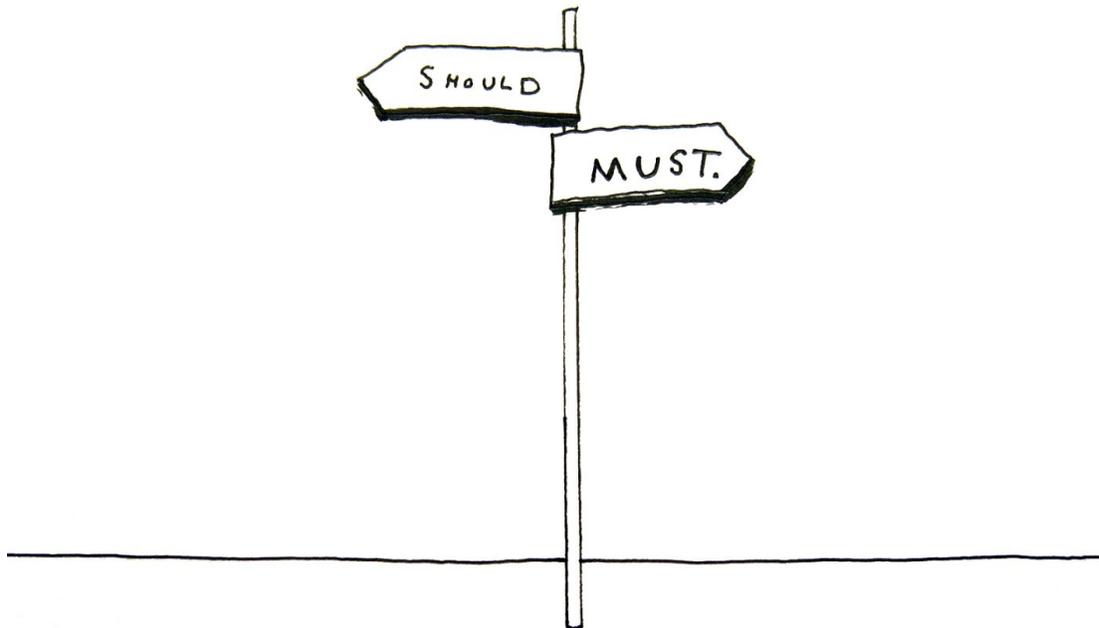
3. Begin by diving in.

**Adrienne Rich:** poem: "[Diving Into the Wreck](#)"

*I am having to do this  
not like Cousteau with his  
assiduous team  
aboard the sun-flooded schooner  
but here alone.*

4. Begin at a crossroads.

**Elle Luna:** essay: "[The Crossroads of Should and Must](#)"



5. Begin with memory.

**Frank O'Hara:** poem: "[Animals](#)"

## ANIMALS

Have you forgotten what we were like then  
when we were still first rate  
and the day came fat with an apple in its mouth

it's no use worrying about Time  
but we did have a few tricks up our sleeves  
and turned some sharp corners

the whole pasture looked like our meal  
we didn't need speedometers  
we could manage cocktails out of ice and water

I wouldn't want to be faster  
or greener than now if you were with me O you  
were the best of all my days

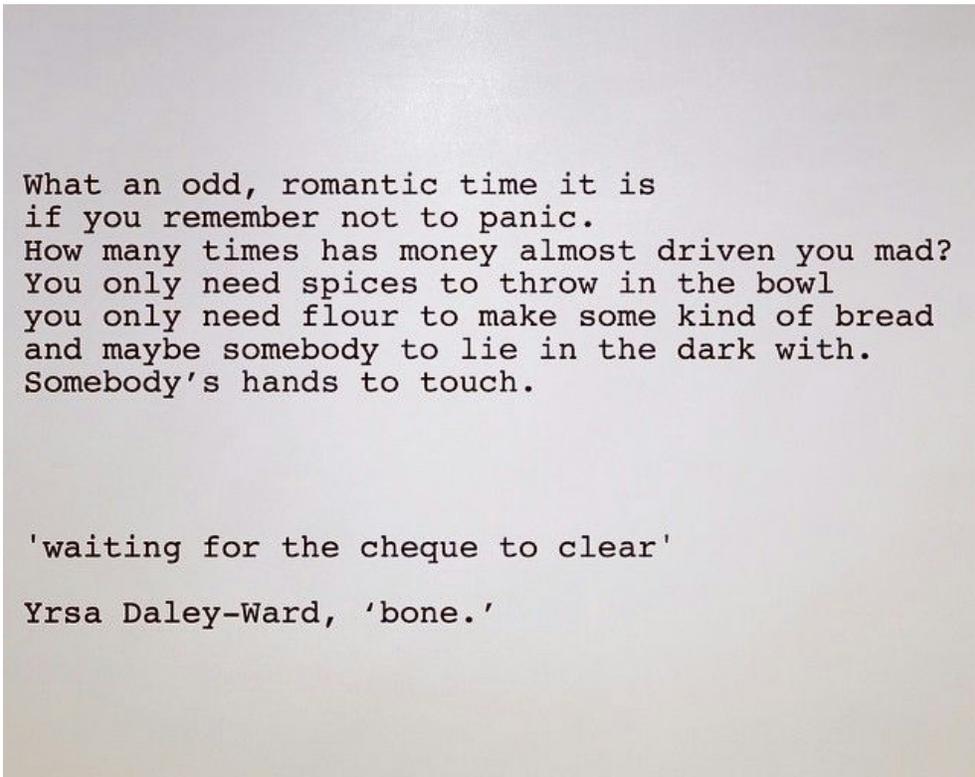
6. Begin with a mentor.

**Alexander Chee:** essay: "[Annie Dillard and the Writing Life](#)"

The class had a rhythm to it  
dictated by how she had  
quit smoking to please her  
new husband.

7. Begin without panic.

**Yrsa Daley-Ward:** poem: "[Waiting for the Cheque to Clear](#)"



What an odd, romantic time it is  
if you remember not to panic.  
How many times has money almost driven you mad?  
You only need spices to throw in the bowl  
you only need flour to make some kind of bread  
and maybe somebody to lie in the dark with.  
Somebody's hands to touch.

'waiting for the cheque to clear'

Yrsa Daley-Ward, 'bone.'

8. Begin with total shit.

**Anne Lamott:** essay: "[Shitty First Drafts](#)"

Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts. You need to start somewhere. Start by getting something -- anything -- down on paper. A friend of mine says that the first draft is the down draft -- you just get it down. The second draft is the up draft -- you fix it up. You try to say what you have to say more accurately. And the third draft is the dental draft, where you check every tooth, to see if it's loose or cramped or decayed, or even, God help us, healthy.

Just begin.