

## Breaking Writer's Block with the Power of Found Poetry by Romaine Washington [Press Enterprise](#)

The worst thing about writer's block is not knowing when it will end. The "block" doesn't mean that you cannot physically write, at least it doesn't mean that for me; it just means that you are not satisfied with what you have written. Writing is how many of us come to understand our individuality, the world around us, and our place in it. The search for meaning is no easy thing, but it is a powerful motivator for writing and pushing through a block.

The old adage is when you don't know what to write – read and research. With so many stellar writers, so much technology, and AI dancing on the keyboards, you might find yourself wondering if you have anything unique to say. Lately for me, the answer has been, [there is nothing new under the sun](#). Who can argue with that? My favorite writer, Octavia Butler, doesn't deny it, she leans into it. *There is nothing new under the sun, but there are new suns.*

I begin my journey for a *new sun* by reading and rereading poems that I enjoy, new and old favorites. Usually there is a visual or a line that inspires me and I can begin connecting lines and words with memories and emotions. The ideas percolate and writing, and focused research begins. I have many false starts. The spark that usually inspires now leaves me in awe of what I am reading and no closer to writing. My inner critic is on steroids, and I need to reboot.

Some of my best ideas are stirred while walking in the park, [there is science behind this activity](#) and well worth the effort. I feel invigorated, sit down, and am overpowered by the desire to scroll on social media. My mind is in a techno loop and activities are only providing brief respites for creativity.

Maybe my *new sun* will be discovered in found poetry. I spend more than a few days in frustration with erasure or blackout poetry. But I am nonplussed and decide to search for examples of successful erasures and read this stunning work by former U.S. Poet Laureate, Tracy K. Smith's [Declaration](#). Smith took the text from the [Declaration of Independence](#) and erased several lines. The poem is whittled down to key phrasing and is a haunting indictment of a system that perpetuates the injustice it has fought to escape. In this erasure we also have an implied call to action. I have thought volumes about what she so brilliantly accomplished through erasure. Another term that is rarely used for this type of poem is reductive poetry. That word is so empowering. I have never been able to successfully create an erasure poem that I felt was anything more than play, but if I am redacting, I am strategic in the text I choose and what I decide to omit.

A few years ago, I was able to attend a writing workshop facilitated by the Los Angeles [Poet Laureate Lynne Thompson](#). She introduced us to the cento (pronounced "chen-tow") which comes from the Latin word for "patchwork." the [cento](#) (or collage poem) is a poetic form composed entirely of lines from poems by other poets. To refresh my memory I look up a couple of examples, [The Dong with the Luminous Nose](#) by John

Ashbery and [The Wolf Cento](#) by Simone Muench. A *Duplex Cento* is in [The Tradition](#) by Jericho Brown.

Since underlining phrases in poems I enjoy comes naturally for me this found poem format feels like it might be the key to breaking this writer's block. The cento is a great way to pay homage to other poets and writers. The perfect opportunity arose for me to create a cento.

I was invited to interview the co-Poet Laureate for Altadena, [Carla Sameth](#) at her book launch for *Secondary Inspections*. She graciously gave me time to read a few poems. I wanted to write a poem to celebrate her powerful writing and I thought the best way to do that would be to write a cento from my favorite lines from her book. While it is still a work in editing process it was well-received and because it was a found poem – as I knit the favorite phrases together to make meaning I was gifted with part of the emotional seed of my most recent writer's "block".

David Burkus declares [Writer's block is the biggest myth out there](#). *You're not missing the words; you're missing the research*. I can hear Octavia Butler say: *It's amazing what we can do if we simply refuse to give up*. The best thing about writer's block is knowing you are the only person who can make it end. Keep searching, don't give up.

Romaine Washington is the editor of *These Black Bodies Are... A Blacklandia Anthology*, author of *Purgatory Has an Address* and is the San Bernardino County Poetry Out Loud Coordinator.