



MAKING THE MOST OF RANDOMNESS

(CUT-UPS and the 'RANDOM LEAP-FROG' method)

AIMS. Create a 'cut-up'. Show how mathematical randomness can generate fruitful ideas & new material.

Suitable for: Year 12 +; creative writing courses & MAs; adult writers. Younger users may need guidance.

The standard way to make a 'cut-up' is to divide a text into its individual words or phrases using scissors, then pull the pieces at random from a bag, one at a time, to compile it. Here's a less fiddly way to randomise the words of a text...

[A] CHOOSE A SOURCE TEXT.

This can be anything: a newspaper clipping, a travel brochure, a poem. Just make sure it has some vivid language in it and isn't too long (you can use an excerpt). Ten lines to half a page is plenty. If you have in mind a specific theme or place, ensure your starting text is *obviously* about that chosen subject. Make a photocopy of your source text to work on: you don't want to scribble over the original!

[B] THE 'RANDOM LEAP-FROG' METHOD.

(see **SHEET B** for a full example)

- To get a random number, close your eyes and stick a pencil in the **Random Number Box (Sheet B)**. Let's say you hit a 'six'. That means the sixth word in the source text is the first word of your cut-up. **Write that word down** on a separate sheet, then **cross it out** in the source text – it is now 'used up'.
- **Repeat the procedure.** Say you score 'nine' this time. Count nine words *from the one you've just crossed out*. That's the second word of your cut-up. Add it to the separate sheet, remembering to cross it out in the source text. Carry on, word by word, to build up your cut-up.
- Put in the **punctuation** as you go, wherever you wish. If you want a **poem** out of this, put in line breaks and stanza breaks too. Use **form** or **structure** to take full advantage of any happy accidents.
- When you reach **the end of the source text**, count *through* its last word and back to the beginning as though it were a continuous loop. This time round, 'leap-frog' (i.e. ignore) words already crossed out. If your source text is very short, go round and round until you've used it all up. With a longer text, stop when the cut-up has done something interesting or reaches a good ending all by itself.

If you're unsure about any part of the procedure, refer to the example on **Sheet B**. But please don't worry if you miscount or make mistakes. The process matters more than the rules. The secret is to nurture a curious, playful eye rather than to get hung up on the technicalities. Just enjoy watching your word-creature evolve.

[C] OUTCOMES.

Occasionally, a cut-up will work (in some weird way) exactly as it is. More often, you'll get a mess, but with some sparky bits in it. Home in on one of those. It might be something funny, startling, surreal, or quite serious. It could be a wild opening line, an irresistible image, a surprising connection. Snap up anything that strikes you as a point of departure for a new piece of writing. If you're working in a group, share ideas on how these bits might be worked on. If you can't see a way forward, ask for help.

Don't be devastated if you get nothing spectacular at your first attempt. This is, after all, a game of chance. Be prepared to **repeat the exercise** several times to get one good idea or unexpected phrase. Or try using different source texts to see what happens. It's usually worth the effort!

NOTE for tutors. If we're going to shake language up like this, it helps – from the outset – to establish an alert, open-minded ambience. Even so, there might be an occasional grumble that the cut-up 'doesn't make sense'. Encourage students to persist and bolster their confidence by providing concrete examples of how cut-ups can lead to good writing ideas (see *Sheet B*).

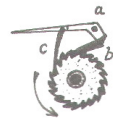


Activity 5. SHEET B: STUDENT SUPPORT

RANDOM NUMBER BOX

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HOW TO USE THE RANDOM LEAP-FROG METHOD: an EXAMPLE ...



Source text: a short extract from ‘The Tenth Parallel’ (a play by Mario Petrucci).

“... She tells him all about it in her next letter. She tells him everything. About school. The other girls. How cruel they can be. The time her ma let her down. Even the way she loves to go out at night and watch the clouds. Says she can’t bear all that fuss about the moon and stars when we have clouds. (pause) Maybe ...”

Random Number Box gives (say): **6 9 5 7 2 6 6 5 1 8 4 6 7 8 1 ... etc.**
(first time through the source text...) (second pass...)

Using these numbers, the first word of the cut-up is ‘it’, the second is ‘About’, and so on, as shown below:

“... She tells him all about ~~it~~ [6] in her next letter. She tells him everything. **About** [9] school. The other girls. **How** [5] cruel they can be. The time ~~her~~ [7] ma ~~let~~ [2] her down. Even the way ~~she~~ [6] loves to go out at **night** [6] and watch the clouds. **Says** [5] ~~she~~ [1] can’t bear all that fuss about the ~~moon~~ [8] and stars when ~~we~~ [4] have clouds. (pause) Maybe ...”

At the end of the source text, you loop back to the start for a second pass. So, the six at ‘we’ means the next word is ‘tells’. As you go round again, leap-frog words that are already crossed out.

Try the cut-up now, using the above numbers, to check you agree with what I get below. In this case, I’ve organised it as a poem. Notice how I’ve altered some words to suit my purpose (e.g. ‘says’ becomes ‘say’). I’ve also decided where punctuation and line breaks go. Of course, you could do that very differently.

It. About. How her
let she. Night say she
moon. We
tell letter – girls
cruel ...

It’s hardly an earth-shattering poem. Have I wasted my time? I don’t think so. Already, I like the voice in this piece: it’s strange and uneasy. Maybe I’ve found a way of speaking, one I wouldn’t normally use? And I’ve only just started. I could run the exercise for longer, or begin all over again. It’s important to keep at it.

The most valuable result is to see that the gobbledegook often has brilliant stuff lurking in it, if you know how to look. It’s great to develop that knack of teasing out a half-hidden idea, or spot how a tiny shift in what you have can lead to something really exciting. For instance, looking at ‘Night say she/ moon’, you might ask ‘Night’ what she thinks of you, or turn yourself into a planet and describe what it’s like. Or you could quiz those girls. Who are they? Why are they cruel? What, exactly, is in that letter? Who is it for...?