Below are a series of writing exercises that deal with a touchy issue for many people: writing about conflict. Some of us have trouble allowing characters that we love or are invested in to engage in a true argument. Others of us use the reality TV or media approach which generally is great for the yelling and screaming part but short on motivation. It can also come across as very trite. The key to making conflict seem realistic in stories is to work with the characters. You may have noticed in real life that everyone has a unique approach to arguing and resolving conflict. This series of exercises requires you to discover your own character’s approach and beliefs. First, you’ll be asked to do some writing that is outside of the story. Then you will incorporate what you have learned into the scene itself.

**Step one:** Chose a classmate as a partner. Choose someone with whom you feel safe to share some wobbly, imperfect writing.

**Step Two:** If you did not bring in a scene to work on that includes conflict and you’re feeling adventurous, try one of these:
- Create a moment of tension between three people. One person has feelings they are not supposed to have, one doesn’t have the feeling expected of them and one person is confused. Write from one person’s point of view.
- Write an utterly silent conflict between two people that does not include violence. Show what is in each of their heads as they fight without exchanging a word. Share this with your partner. Underline strengths.

**Step Three:** One way conflict can seem unreal is when it’s not rooted in a physical place. You can use place to show non-verbal tensions and unspoken feelings. The landscape can “contain” the feelings.
- Choose the place where you want to site your conflict. Where does this specific interaction between your two characters take place? Free-write for 5-10 minutes. Include as many sensory details as you can. You will use them later.

**Step Four:** Now we get down to the hard part.
- Focus on one character in your conflict. You will now complete a series of 5-10 minute freewrites about how this character sees the problem. Describe:
1. What is the conflict for them? How do they see it? Write this in their voice if you can.
2. What does this character feel that the other person in the conflict just doesn’t understand?
3. What is this character most afraid of?
4. What is this character not allowing her/himself to acknowledge or express? 
   What’s the secret at the heart of their feelings? What are they censoring inside themselves?

**Step Five:** Now answer these same questions from the other person’s point of view. Write for 5-10 minutes on each question. This character probably doesn’t know much about the other person’s point of view. See if you can fully give them freedom to speak their truth.

**Step Six:** Now it gets harder.
- Go into the scene in your story in which your characters argue. Carefully rewrite the argument to incorporate the information that you learned in your free-writes. Don’t forget your physical description of the site. You may not be able to use all of it, but let it inform what your characters say, how they say it and what they do with their bodies. 
  Let it be deep and real. Take a good 30 minutes for this. Go as deep as you can.

**Step Seven:** This will take courage. The things that make conflict trite or melodramatic are technical, I think: not going deep enough to show the feelings, using too much repetition or not sounding true to the voice of your character. This exercise is to help with those worries.
- Read over the conflict you just wrote and underline lines that feel strong to you and lines that feel trite or silly.
- Exchange and share with your partner.
- Your partner’s job is to point out any place where you can go deeper with what is going on with each character. Your partner should a) discuss the lines that the you found questionable, b) find strengths that you can’t see, and c) urge you to go deeper by asking questions about the characters’ motivations.

**Step Eight** (if time permits): Revise the scene you just wrote based on the feedback you just got from your partner.