

## Freewriting

*Peter Elbow*

Freewriting is the easiest way to get words on paper and the best all-around practice in writing that I know. To do a freewriting exercise, simply **force yourself to write without stopping for ten minutes**. Sometimes you will produce good writing, but that's not the goal. Sometimes you will produce garbage, but that's not the goal either. You may stay on one topic, you may flip repeatedly from one to another: it doesn't matter. Sometimes you will produce a good record of your stream of consciousness, but often you can't keep up. Speed is not the goal, though sometimes the process revs you up. If you can't think of anything to write, write about how that feels or repeat over and over "I have nothing to write" or "None" or "No." If you get stuck in the middle of a sentence or thought, just repeat the last word or phrase till something comes along. **The only point is to keep writing.**

Or rather, that's the first point. For there are lots of goals of freewriting, but they are best served if, while you are doing it, you accept this single, simple, mechanical goal of simply not stopping. When you produce an exciting piece of writing, it doesn't mean you did it better than the time before when you wrote one sentence over and over for ten minutes. Both times you freewrote perfectly. The goal of freewriting is in the process, not the product....

### The Benefits of Freewriting



Freewriting makes writing easier by helping you with the root psychological or existential difficulty in writing: **finding words in your head and putting them down on a blank piece of paper**. So much writing time and energy is [sic] spent *not* writing: wondering, worrying, crossing out, having second, third, and fourth thoughts. And it's easy to get stopped even in the middle of a piece. (This is why Hemingway made a rule for himself never to end one sheet and start a new one except in the middle of a sentence.) Frequent freewriting exercises help you learn simply to *get on with it* and not be held back by worries about whether these words are good words or the right words.

Thus, freewriting is the best way to learn—in practice, not just in theory—to **separate the producing process from the revising process**. Freewriting exercises are push-ups in withholding judgment as you produce so that afterwards you can judge better.

Freewriting for ten minutes is a good way to warm up when you sit down to write something. You won't waste so much time getting started when you turn to your real writing task and you won't have to struggle so hard to find words. Writing almost always goes better when you are already started: now you'll be able to start off already started.

Freewriting helps you learn to write when you don't feel like writing. It is practice in setting deadlines for yourself, taking charge of yourself, and learning gradually how to get that special energy that sometimes comes when you work fast under pressure.

Freewriting teaches you to write without thinking about writing. We can usually speak without thinking about speech—without thinking about how to

form words in the mouth and pronounce them and the rules of syntax we unconsciously obey—and as a result we can give undivided attention to what we say. Not so writing. Or at least most people are considerably distracted from their meaning by considerations of spelling, grammar, rules, errors. Most people experience an awkward and sometimes paralyzing *translating* process in writing: “Let’s see, how shall I say this.” Freewriting helps you learn to **just say it**. Regular freewriting helps make the writing process *transparent*.

Freewriting is a useful outlet. We have lots in our heads that makes it hard to think straight and write clearly: we are mad at someone, sad about something, depressed about everything. Perhaps even inconveniently happy. “How can I think about this report when I’m so in love?” Freewriting is a quick outlet for these feelings so they don’t get so much in your way when you are trying to write about something else. **Sometimes your mind is marvelously clear after ten minutes of telling someone on paper everything you need to tell him.** (In fact, if your feelings often keep you from functioning well in other areas of your life frequent freewriting can help: not only by providing a good arena for those feelings, but also by helping you understand them better and see them in perspective by seeing them on paper.)

Freewriting helps you to think of topics to write about. Just keep writing, follow threads where they lead and you will get to ideas, experiences, feelings, or people that are just asking to be written about.

Finally, and perhaps most important, freewriting improves your writing. It doesn’t always produce powerful writing itself, but it leads to powerful writing. The process by which it does so is a mysterious underground one. When people talk about the Zen of this or that I think they are referring to the peculiar increase in power and insight that comes from focusing your energy while at the same time putting aside your conscious controlling self. Freewriting gives practice in this special mode of focusing-but-not-trying; it helps you stand out of the way and let words be chosen by the sequence of the words themselves or the thought, not by the conscious self. In this way **freewriting gradually puts a deeper resonance or voice into your writing....**

Freewriting can be useful at any stage of the fieldwork process, but it is particularly helpful at the beginning of a research project when you are trying out ideas and thinking about yourself in different research sites and subcultures. One of our students, Aidan Vollmer, did some freewriting when he was considering a study of graffiti artists. Here are three excerpts from his in-class freewrites, written at different times, in which he explores his history with graffiti, anticipates ethical problems he might have studying this subculture, and expresses his continuing fascination with graffiti:

**Freewrite 1.** Graffiti has always fascinated me. I can remember when I was a very young person, perhaps 6 years old, my older cousin (my mother’s sister’s son), Brian, who I absolutely idolized, telling me he was “learning to tag.” I