

PRODUCING A FINISHED PIECE OF WRITING

Keep your topic in mind—or what you think your topic is—and do one or two freewriting exercises. If you are strict with yourself about never stopping for anything, which you must be, then you are likely to wander away from your subject sometimes. This is fine. **You will waste energy and weaken your writing if you try to prevent digressions before they happen. Let them happen.** After they happen, simply find an opportunity to put yourself back on the original subject. But in some cases you will realize that the digression is sufficiently engrossing or important that you should stick with it. Do so.

In either case, after the exercise take a few moments or more to rest and think about what you wrote. Think, too, about the digressions you started and perhaps continued. Notice when they occurred and where they took you. Think about their connections. Consider them as paths you should explore.

Then do another exercise and let these reflections enrich what you are writing. Do this three or more times. Each time you will thus be plowing more and more back into the new exercise. They will become richer. **You may well find that your real subject turns out to be something quite different from what you originally thought your subject was. Fine.**

After you have done three or four exercises that are more or less “on” what your subject turns out to be, you will have piles of rubble, but you will probably also have a lot of words, phrases, and sentences that seem important. Pick out these good bits. Strip away the rubble. *Now* use as much careful thought and editorial discrimination as possible in order to see what they add up to: decide how much you believe them,

how true they are, in what senses they are true; **arrange them somehow so they make sense, and write new and connecting parts when necessary.**

This may seem a wasteful method. You usually throw away much more than you keep. But for many people, it is really a *quicker, easier* way to produce a *better* short piece of writing.

This method is not foolproof. Sometimes you can only produce rubble—no good bits. This is particularly likely when you first start doing freewriting or during some period of your life in which you are in retreat. Don't be anxious to get something good every time. The main usefulness of the exercises is not in their immediate product but in their gradual effect on future writing.