

DEFINITION

Freewriting is an exercise. Write for ten minutes without stopping. No topic. Write whatever comes to mind. It is a space for exploring the mind and language--but it must be also be a space for triviality, nonsense, garbage. Thus it must be private. You can't ask people to freewrite if they have to let someone else read it. And it must be frequent. No exercise gives full benefits without repetition (even if a door sometimes opens right away).

Thus real freewriting isn't "practical." It's not a way to write a draft of an essay. Nor is it an attempt at magic, authenticity, or a full record of the mind. You've done it perfectly if you've kept writing for ten minutes--even if it's just one word or one sentence over and over.

Freewriting exploits what the mind can do with language and thinking when you can't plan or rehearse your words in your head before you write them--when you have to take what comes--especially *after* you feel you have run out. It invites blurting or being unguarded. It exploits the mind's ability to come up with unexpected thoughts and syntax with energy and life.

After people do plenty of freewriting exercises, they can learn to apply what I call the "freewriting muscle": the ability to *come up with unplanned language and thinking* for pragmatic goals--for example for exploring a particular topic or starting an essay. Thus:

- Focused freewriting:** try to stay on one topic. When you wander off, pull yourself back.
- Public freewriting:** write with the understand that you'll share what you write (perhaps letting yourself briefly pause or plan now and then).

GOALS AND BENEFITS

Freewriting could be called a "non-goal-oriented" activity, yet we seldom put work into exercises unless we have goals in mind.

Process goals. Regular freewriting often helps students become:

- More confident about writing in general--more trusting that they have lots of words and thoughts available to them.
- Better able to pay full attention to their thoughts while writing--less distracted by concerns about mistakes and criticism. More able to keep writing rather than always pausing, wondering, and staring into space.
- More likely to experience themselves as "writer" rather than just as "student" or assignment-doer or question-answerer.
- More able to pursue a train of thinking on their own--with no one else to talk to. Is not the the mark of a wise and educated person?

Product Goals. Regular freewriting often fosters many writing strengths. At first they turn up only in freewriting. Often they seep gradually into in students' more careful revised writing:

- More flexible syntax.** more energy and liveliness; more sentence variety; fewer stiff, repetitive, or timid "Dick and Jane" sentences.

--**More flexible vocabulary.** In freewriting about personal matters, students will tend to stick to the everyday colloquial language or slang that comes most easily to mouth and mind. But when they do focused freewriting exercises on academic topics and learn to use their freewriting muscle on early drafts of essays, they are more likely to use everyday words and metaphors for processing academic concepts. This leads to clearer livelier academic writing and helps them internalize these concepts.

--**Stronger voice.** "Voice" is a fuzzy word. Meaning comes clearer if we break it down:

-**Audible voice.** Language that give us the *sound* of a voice--usually with some rhythm, energy, vitality. (Audible voice isn't necessarily talky" or colloquial. Formal and "correct" language can be audibly voiced. C. S. Lewis's literary criticism, for example, is often rich this way.)

-**Dramatic voice.** Language that sounds like a *person*--that give you a strong sense of a character or consciousness in the text. You feel "somebody at home" in the writing.

-**Voice with authority.** Passages or pieces where the writer *takes authority, trusts herself, gets behind* her words or her thinking: the writer shows the conviction to speak out.

-**Distinctive or recognizable voice.** The writer has a recognizable style or voice. Perhaps it "sounds just like her," but perhaps it's a distinctive different persona.

--**More active thinking.** Here again, I'll break it down:

--**Perplexity.** Passages or pieces that show questioning and inquiry. The writer is able to explore an issue that actually interests and bothers her--instead of just summarizing unquestioned conclusions.

--**Movement.** Passages or pieces where the writing actually *goes* or *gets* somewhere. The writing enacts a mind engaged in working out a train of thought. This contrasts with static writing that merely records completed or past thinking.

FREEWITING IN THE CLASSROOM

I try to have at least 8-10 minutes of freewriting in every class. *At the start:* freewriting can help students clear their minds or bring their homework to mind; I might announce a topic for the day's class. *At mid class:* freewriting helps when things go dead--or it helps students think about an important question that has come up. *At the end:* I might ask them to write about what was going on for them in class or what the main idea was that they learned. Occasionally I ask them to help me teach better by sharing these with me.

FREEWITING FOR HIGH STAKES TESTS. Teachers sometimes say, "We can't do low stakes freewriting because we have to concentrate on high stakes timed writing exams." But freewriting is an ideal preparation for high stakes tests. After students are well practiced with regular private no-topic freewriting, we can use freewriting as direct practice for exams. We can set test-like topics; we can give them longer and longer sessions to match exam times. In short we can give them practice with *all* the exam conditions. *Except* for the danger and risk. Practicing in these conditions, they can learn to think on their feet and explore different ways of handling topics and organization. When they hit the real exams, they will be more comfortable and more confident.