

Free Writing

Free writing is intended as a way of allowing the writer to write freely and spontaneously – to get over a writing block, to discover what we might have to say, to get rid of ideas that might be interfering with our work. Images, feelings, one-word sentences – anything is allowed. Freewriting was developed for student writing by Peter Elbow (1998, 2000), who elaborated the basic idea extensively. Countless people have found it a most useful and liberating way of starting to write.

Freewriting has some fundamental rules:

- Write for a limited time (usually from 2 –5 minutes);
- Keep writing: don't stop. If you don't know what to say then just repeat the last word or just write 'I don't know';
- Write about anything at all or a given topic;
- Don't think about the reader.

In fact, these rules can of course be broken, but are worth trying out to get the feel of freewriting. One useful distinction that Elbow makes is between 'private' freewriting and a variation, 'public' freewriting, when participants are asked to write with the possibility of sharing it in mind (though they should also be assured that they will be allowed to 'pass' if they wish).

One way of using freewriting with students

- Take a topic you are exploring
- Write down its title at the top of the page
- Freewrite for three minutes about it. Don't take your pen off the page!
- Now choose one word or phrase from what you have written
- Write this at the top of the page and write again for three minutes.
- Now spend around ten minutes making a statement about the topic that you can read out to the group.

This demonstrates the difference between the generative aspect of writing and the critical, editing part. The idea of freewriting is to make writing more manageable by separating these two activities.

Elbow, P. (1998) *Writing without Teachers*, 2nd edition, New York: Oxford University Press (1st edition 1971).
(2000) *Everyone Can Write* New York: Oxford University Press.