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“Is This Even Writing?”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Part of the difficulty of teaching writing to undergraduates is that many of them consider writing as monolithic and linked to school. Because writing is linked to school, it is often linked to grading and assessment, which means that students don’t think of writing as potentially fun. Freewriting helps students to reexamine their position towards writing. The instructor aids students in this process by emphasizing the differences between academic writing and freewriting.

In academic writing, the writer must engage with a prompt, so they must stay on topic and present an argument. In low stakes freewriting, the prompt is a springboard that inspires writing, but deviating from the prompt is encouraged if it allows the writer to write without editing. In composition studies, freewriting is usually associated with Peter Elbow, who has been writing on writing for over 40 years. Elbow is generally considered to be the most important figure in expressivist writing pedagogy, which claims that students are capable of writing only if they are in an environment in which they can thrive. This theoretical approach centers on students finding their own individual voices, and freewriting is a method of helping students do this.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Type of Writing | Editing | Use of quotations | Use of slang or dialect words | Argument | Graded | Feedback |
| Academic Writing | Required | Required | Not Allowed | Required  | Yes | Written |
| Freewriting | Not Allowed | Optional | Encouraged  | Optional | No | Oral |

The Freewriting Process

1. Write the prompt on the board and try to orally guide students toward how they could engage with the topic.
2. The instructor and students write nonstop for at least 5 to 10 minutes. While writing, I emphasize that students should not erase or edit their writing, even if they make mistakes.
3. After the time is up, tell the students to stop writing, and poll them on how much writing they produced. The more writing is produced, the better. Polling them on how much they wrote allows the instructor to assess the effectiveness of each prompt.
4. In small groups of 2-3, have students either read their own compositions or briefly summarize what they wrote about (use the latter option if you are pressed for time). You may find it useful to walk around the classroom and listen in on each group’s sharing session.
5. Reconvene as a class and ask students to share their work by reading their own composition to the class. If they are hesitant about doing so, share your composition to inspire them to share theirs.
6. Collect the compositions so that you can read them later, but resist the urge to give written feedback (because that is too similar to academic writing). You need not collect their compositions after every writing session. However, telling students that you will read their work later will encourage them to participate in the activity.

Benefits of Freewriting

Integrating low stakes freewriting allows students to see writing as potentially fun, and also shows them that some of these writing skills are transferrable to academic writing. Peter Elbow reminds us in *Writing With Power*, that with a writing project on the horizon, we spend a lot of time “*not* writing: wondering, worrying, crossing out, having second, third, and fourth thoughts” (Elbow 14)[[2]](#footnote-2). Freewriting lets the writer (no matter his or her experience in writing) write without being hindered by worries about correctness or quality (Elbow 14). According to Elbow, freewriting lets you “write without thinking about writing” (Elbow 15). In this way, freewriting is almost like speech, in that we can perform that act without the distraction of making sure our words are perfect or correct (Elbow 15). The whole point of this process is increasing confidence in one’s ability as a writer in order to improve. Or, as Elbow puts it, “freewriting improves your writing. It doesn’t always produce powerful writing itself, but it leads to powerful writing” (Elbow 15).

Freewriting allows students to express themselves on their own terms. The prompts give them license to write about themselves and their experiences, but they can still avoid doing so if they wish (without sacrificing their writing production). There is always a negotiation of how much students will reveal about themselves to their instructor and to their classmates. Freewriting prompts encourage personal details, but the process allows for students to avoid personal details if they wish.

Risks of Freewriting

Students may use the activity to espouse views that most of the class may disagree with. If this happens, try to restrict your comments to the form of their composition, instead of the content. It is possible to disagree with a student’s ideas while still pointing out interesting things about how they came to those ideas.

Responding to Freewriting

It is important to emphasize positive feedback in responding to student freewriting. In *Writing With Power*, Elbow argues that reading one’s freewriting aloud can help the writer, but he advises against “criticism or comment of any sort” (Elbow 17). Nevertheless, I find that providing oral feedback to a student who decides to share her freewriting can be beneficial. Some students may conceive of freewriting as easy and academic writing as difficult. Therefore, a lack of oral feedback from an instructor could cause a lack of confidence for the student who inevitably must produce academic writing in a first-year composition course, in order to get a grade.

List of Freewriting prompts

* Write about your perfect day
* Write a product review, including the price and amount of “stars”
* Write about a decision you struggled with but where you ultimately made the right choice
* Write about your hero[[3]](#footnote-3)
* Write a response to the Werner Herzog quote: “It has always seemed to me that almost everything you are forced to learn at school you forget in a couple of years. But the things you set out to learn yourself in order to quench a thirst, these are the things you never forget”[[4]](#footnote-4)
* Write about an object in this classroom
* In honor of national sibling day (10 April), write about your sibling(s). What activities do you do with them? If you don’t have any siblings do you want any? Why or why not? What would you do together?
* Write about what you did during spring break
* Write about an alternative career path to the one you’re on
* Write about what you would change about ENC 1101/1102
* Write about your favorite movie
* Write about your favorite book
* Write about a daily ritual
* Write about what it means to be truly alive[[5]](#footnote-5)
* Write about how you would feel after teaching ENC 1101/1102[[6]](#footnote-6)
* Write about words or expressions of your generation
* Write about something that overwhelms you
* Write about how you are doing
* Write about what Southwestern Louisiana means to you
* Write about your plans or thoughts about Mardi Gras
* Write about an object[[7]](#footnote-7)
* Write about a memorable meal[[8]](#footnote-8)
* Write about a meaningful photo[[9]](#footnote-9)
* Write about an online subculture that you follow
* Write about a memorable teacher (not me)
* Write about something you dislike (but not groups of people)
* Write about a daily ritual
* Write about a privilege that you earned
* Write about your favorite animal[[10]](#footnote-10)
* Write about a memorable vacation
* Write about something you want but can't afford
* Write about your feelings about the end of the semester
* Write about your favorite type of weather
* Write about your earliest memories of the internet
* Write about what you are afraid of
* Write about your dialect
* Write about your means of transportation
* Write about your feelings about sports
* Write about where you would go in the past if there was time travel
* Write about your feelings about drinking
* Write about your living quarters
* Write about your favorite food(s)
* Write about your hometown
* Write about your pet
* Write about your favorite holiday[[11]](#footnote-11)
* Write about how you chose your major[[12]](#footnote-12)
* Write about your feelings about Christmas[[13]](#footnote-13)
* Write about a difficult decision that you overcame
* Write about your style
* Write about a place you want to revisit
* Write about a place you want to visit for the first time
* Write about a possession that you could not live without
* Write about an online subculture you follow
* Write about something that you are passionate about[[14]](#footnote-14)
1. Quote taken from a freewrite by one of my Summer 2015 semester ENC 1102 students [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. All Elbow quotations come from

Elbow, Peter. *Writing With Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*. New York: Oxford UP, 1981. Print.

Some other useful sources for scholarship on low-stakes freewriting are:

Li, L. Y. “Exploring the Use of Focused Freewriting in Developing Academic Writing.” *Journal of University* *Teaching & Learning Practice* 4.2 (2007): 40-53.

McKinney, Fred. “Free Writing as Therapy.” *Psychotheraphy: Theory, Research and Practice* 13.2 (1976): 183-187.

Neff, J., McAuliffe, G.J., Whithaus, C., & Quinlan, N. P. “Low-Stakes, Reflective Writing: Moving Students into Their Professional Fields.” *Currents in Teaching and Learning* 4.2 (2012): 18-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Prompt suggested by student. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This quote comes from

Becker, David. “On Filmmaking: Werner Herzog.” *Row Three*. Row Three, 15 November 2008. Web.

< <http://www.rowthree.com/2008/11/15/on-filmmaking-werner-herzog/> >. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Prompt suggested by student. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Prompt suggested by student. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This prompt comes from the panel “Postcards from the CCCC: A Workshop for Your Writing,” organized by Dr. Kathleen Yancey of Florida State University, Dr. Nancy Sommers of Harvard University and Dr. Doug Hesse of the University of Denver. The panel took place on Friday 20 March 2015 during the 2015 Conference on College Composition and Communication in Tampa, Florida. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This prompt comes from the panel “Postcards from the CCCC: A Workshop for Your Writing,” organized by Dr. Kathleen Yancey of Florida State University, Dr. Nancy Sommers of Harvard University and Dr. Doug Hesse of the University of Denver. The panel took place on Friday 20 March 2015 during the 2015 Conference on College Composition and Communication in Tampa, Florida. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This prompt comes from the panel “Postcards from the CCCC: A Workshop for Your Writing,” organized by Dr. Kathleen Yancey of Florida State University, Dr. Nancy Sommers of Harvard University and Dr. Doug Hesse of the University of Denver. The panel took place on Friday 20 March 2015 during the 2015 Conference on College Composition and Communication in Tampa, Florida. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Prompt suggested by student. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Prompt suggested by student. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Prompt suggested by student. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Prompt suggested by student. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Prompt suggested by student. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)